

Field notes: contemporary art history as historiography

Review of:

Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019, 456 pp., 84 b. & w. illus., £92.00 hdbk, £25.99 pbk ISBN 9781478001942.

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Terry Smith's latest volume anthologizes several of his previously published texts together with a handful of new essays. Taken as an ensemble, the book's eleven chapters propose a historiography of contemporary art. At first, the historiographic intent of *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art* appears limited to Part II of the book, with its three chapters gathered under the heading 'Art Historiography: Conjectures and Refutations.' Smith corrects this assumption in the book's introduction: 'All the essays in this book...are art historiographical; that is, they are studies of aspects of contemporary art and architecture that explicitly highlight pertinent questions of art-historical method' (7). One might argue that such a generous definition of historiography effectively erases the distinction between rigorous art historical scholarship and historiography. But the intent of this review is not to police boundaries between genres of art writing but to engage with Smith's project on its own terms. And there is no question that Smith's book is of historiographic interest. Indeed, his invitation to understand *Art to Come* as historiography introduces the intriguing possibility that the history of contemporary art scholarship is enmeshed with the historiographic turn that has informed the discipline since the 1980s.¹

¹ By 'historiographic turn', here I am referring to the energetic embrace of historiographic practice within the discipline of art history that was heralded by such publications as Udo Kultermann's *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte: Der Weg einer Wissenschaft* (Vienna and Dusseldorf: Econ-Verlag, 1966), Heinrich Dilly's *Kunstgeschichte als Institution: Studien zur Geschichte einer Disziplin* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), Michael Podro's *Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), Michael Ann Holly's *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), and Germain Bazin's *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art de Vasari à nos jours* (Paris: A. Michel, 1986); confirmed by the appearance of the English translation of Kultermann's book as *History of Art History* (New York: Prestel, 1993), David Carrier's *Principles of Art History Writing* (University Park: Penn

An acute and prolific commentator on contemporary art, Terry Smith has long advocated for a global approach to the study of late 20th- and 21st-century visual culture. This commitment is rehearsed in Part I of *Art to Come*. Here, under the heading 'Thinking Contemporary Art', chapters on such topics as global trends in recent architecture, Chinese art of the past few decades, and Aboriginal arts of Australia are representative of Smith's understanding of what is at stake for artists working in a globalized milieu. All of the texts presented in *Art to Come* were written between 2000 and 2018, and they collectively point to the impact of post-Cold War political and economic conditions on the global arts scene. More narrowly, Smith offers 1989 as the approximate date when the cultural conditions required for contemporary art coalesced.

A world-historical transformation occurred in the years around 1989, and ... history in its modern self-understanding "ended" at that time. For art, the consequence was that it became ahistorical from that moment forward. Since then, contemporary art remains what it became at that moment when history disappeared. It has not evolved in historical ways; it simply diversifies or repeats different versions of itself (317).

Thus temporally circumscribed, the multifarious artistic expressions of contemporaneity that emerged as the Cold War waned nevertheless defy periodization in Smith's view, and much of *Art to Come* is a record of his efforts to apply or describe alternative analytic procedures.

One of the procedures applied by Smith involves schematization, often following the rule of three. As diverse as the forms of art that Smith writes about are, he nevertheless discerns three main 'currents' guiding arts production around the world today. The first current encompasses ongoing negotiations and renegotiations of European modernism. Constitutive of the second current are the varying artistic responses to postcolonial conditions, responses that Smith describes collectively as 'transitional transnationalism.' As a third current, Smith identifies the hyper-connectivity that has arisen alongside globalization, what he refers to as a 'networked' trend. This triadic organization of contemporary visual arts production is applied throughout *Art to Come*. In addition to the three currents, Smith discerns three 'distinctive concerns' among artists working today: 'placemaking, world picturing, and connectivity' (19), and he attributes the social conditions of contemporaneity to the triumvirate of globalization, inequity, and the 'infoscape'

State University Press, 1991), and Margaret Iversen's *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); and which continues to preoccupy art historians to a degree unique among humanities disciplines. The term 'historiographic turn' has also been used to describe contemporary artists' interest in the past, an unintended connotation on my part but perhaps apposite given the intersection between contemporary art history and art historiography that *Art to Come* brings to light. On this usage, see Dieter Roelstraete, 'After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings,' *e-flux Journal*, no. 6, (May 2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/06/61402/after-the-historiographic-turn-current-findings/>.

(58). He also charts three phases in his own career as a historian of contemporary art (242), puts forth three reasons to 'commit to contemporary art to come' (49), and maps out three ways to go about defining contemporary art (28-29).

Smith's tendency to structure his arguments and observations in this way is undoubtedly pragmatic. His three-currents model, for instance, provides Smith with a helpful structure for analyzing 'the sheer scale, the overwhelming quantity, and the global propinquity of contemporary art' (2). It is, in fact, the amount of art that has been produced and presented in the past few decades that explains why, in Smith's view, 'historical approaches to understanding it have been rare, especially when compared to records of first reactions, attempts at neutral description, and promotional hype' (2). Not only is keeping up with the global arts scene impossible, but gaining the historical understanding that Smith sees as 'necessary for achieving critical distance' is likewise frustrated when attention must remain fixed on the horizon so as not to lose sight of contemporaneity's endlessly advancing fleet (6). So Smith cannot be faulted for taking recourse to strategies of systematization, despite his general wariness of 'schematisms' and a priori explanations.²

Smith's ambivalence toward methodologies that would systematize and periodize lends rhetorical tension to his writing in *Art to Come* as he alternately seeks to accommodate contemporary art within ready structures and counsels his readers to embrace irresolution. This dynamic is similar to what Smith observes in the art world today, generally. 'Dichotomy, antinomy, and paradox animate all our relations today, not least in the discursive worlds in which contemporary art is produced and circulated' (6). Smith explains further that,

art theory, architecture, art criticism, general art history, art historiography...curating, museum work, marketing and collecting art...all the institutional and social settings in which each of these worlds is embedded, continuously challenging the habitus that incessantly seeks to structure them as worlds. Differencing and repetition: the dynamic interaction between these two deep impulses is what constantly constitutes our contemporaneity. It calls us to articulate it, most seductively in its own, relatively easy terms. Instead, I believe, we must acknowledge the salience of these terms for those who use them, but then rub them hard, against their grain (7).

Smith's determination to write 'against the grain' is evident, for instance, in his approach to and retreat from a settled definition of contemporary art. He

² For instance, in his discussion of Jean-Luc Nancy, Smith distinguishes between explanatory schematisms such as 'globalization, decolonization, fundamentalism' and 'compositional forms that are distinctively contemporary.' Schematisms are modernist holdovers and, therefore, not appropriate or effective when applied to contemporary art. Compositional forms, on the other hand, may be observed empirically and can be analyzed without slipping into generalizations about contemporaneity. (287)

explains that his first attempt at an explicit definition was made in a 2001 lecture delivered at the University of Sydney where he was concluding his tenure as the Power Professor of Contemporary Art and preparing to start his current post as Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh. The text of this lecture serves as the first chapter of *Art to Come*. Here, putting to use the triadic structure apparent throughout *Art to Come*, Smith offers three different answers to the question, 'What is contemporary art?' First is the response he describes as the 'most obvious': 'contemporary art is the institutionalized network through which the art of today presents itself to itself and to its interested audiences all over the world' (28). Smith's second essay yields 'the kind of answer a philosopher might give': 'contemporary art is art infused with the multiple modes of contemporaneity and the open-ended energies of art to come' (28). Lastly, Smith suggests that contemporary art is in fact a kind of art history, a working through of 'internalities of style' (29). In other words, 'artists cannot overlook the fact that they make art within the cultures of modernity and postmodernity that are predominantly visual...artists who turn their backs on...the problems and possibilities of [this legacy] cease to be contemporary artists' (29). What all three definitions have in common is the presumption that contemporary art demands historical awareness, whether of the 'stasis and change' of arts institutions, the 'multiverse' of the increasingly intersecting temporalities that constitute contemporaneity, or the intellectual as well as social and commercial legacies of modernism.

For Smith, some of the most misguided attempts to define contemporary art are those that seek to decouple contemporaneity from history. Collapsing contemporary art into fashion is one example of such misapprehension.

A banal yet also hysterical...view is to insist that contemporary art is like fashion, always changing, always refreshing itself, so it should be accepted for what it is, in all its brilliant dazzling instanteity [sic]...it does not need historians (316).

Slightly less egregious in Smith's view is the assertion that contemporary art is 'posthistorical' (317). He cites Arthur Danto's theorization of the end of art as representative of this approach.³ 'This view may be less hysterical than the fashion analogy, but it is also nonsense' (317). Achieving the kind of critical distance and historical perspective that Smith deems essential to the project of interpreting contemporary art seems to elude all but a small handful of scholars.⁴

³ Smith cites specifically Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁴ Smith repeatedly acknowledges the curatorial work and writings of the late Okwui Enwezor as particularly illustrative of the approach he finds most conducive to historical engagement with contemporary art, citing Okwui Enwezor, 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition', 207 – 234 in Terry Smith, Okwui

Smith readily acknowledges the difficulty of accounting for contemporary visual culture as an art historian rather than as a critic or journalist. 'Is art-historical methodology...adequate to the task of tracing the extraordinarily complex shifts from modern to contemporary art, and from modern to contemporary regimes of visibility' (21)? If historians of contemporary art persist in relying on conventional methods of analysis, then, for Smith, the answer is no. But Smith is not a defeatist. Far from it, in fact. The book is buoyed by Smith's optimistic pronouncements about recent art as well as the as-yet unseen 'art to come.' Global social and environmental conditions elicit similarly reparative analysis. Exemplary of Smith's hopeful outlook is an excerpt from his chapter 'Aboriginal Australian Art', where he asks his readers to consider the

global idea of contemporaneity as the setting in which, I believe, we should see [Indigenous art practices] operating: the worldwide coexistence of major cultural differences, our accelerated awareness of these differences, along with an emerging sense that we all need to work much harder at creating a mutuality in which coequality rather than divisive difference or abstract unity becomes the basis for our world community (174).

The hopeful mood is sustained throughout *Art to Come*, and it is not irrelevant to Smith's discussion of the practice of art history in relation to contemporary art. He even declares in the book's Conclusion that current 'travesties of good governance and prescient economic management' are 'accelerating the coming into being of a world that, whatever forms it may take, will no longer be ruled by the priorities of capitalism' (354). Historians of contemporary art can and should engage with the emergent world community envisioned by Smith, but to do so they will need to adopt 'new discursive forms' (22). Conventional models of art historical analysis are, according to Smith, largely unsuitable for the task at hand. Specifically, what Smith finds incompatible with the historical study of contemporary art are methodologies steeped in 'modern assumptions that history unfolds through successions and ruptures' or achieves 'epochal states' (21). In place of such seemingly inevitable and triumphalist accounts, Smith commends instead 'a watchful inquiry into history as it is actually happening, while remaining always open to its unpredictable yet constrained futurity' (23).

'Watchful inquiry' is a curious turn of phrase. On the one hand, it evokes the 'watchful waiting' advised by physicians when a potentially serious medical condition warrants monitoring but does not pose an immediate threat. Being watchful suggests keeping an eye on things without judging or acting hastily. On the other hand, 'inquiry' connotes something much more active and directed, a deep investigation. Smith's suggestive turn of phrase calls to mind at once the

Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009) [originally published in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Winter, 2003): 57-82].

observational habits of the disinterested flâneur and the hyper-focused detective, archetypes of the art historian from the discipline's formative decades in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵ Yet, neither of these archetypes lends itself to the kind of communitarian outlook that Smith commends; both the flâneur and the detective are too self-involved and disengaged from society. Perhaps Smith's watchful inquiry is better understood as the work of a field agent: observe and document everything, follow all leads, and avoid jumping to conclusions. Smith in fact explicitly charges historians of contemporary art to direct their energies toward producing 'detailed empirical work on contemporary art and artists...and on the histories of the multiple platforms that together constitute the contemporary visual arts exhibitionary practices' (23). He admonishes 'professional art historians' who 'see themselves in embattled retreat from potential invasion by a younger generation dazzled by the art of their own times' to 'stop interfering' (5).

Smith's call for interpretive restraint arises out of a concern that most historians of art working today are not, in fact, equipped to engage historically with contemporary visual culture. The quotation just cited continues by asking,

What gives you the right, in conscience, to speak on these matters, as a white male academic based in institutions in the United States, Australia, and Europe--in states, economies, and regimes whose developments have been based on exploiting the resources of their own Indigenous peoples and those of the rest of the world? (5)

As is the case of much of *Art to Come*, Smith's pointed query is directed as much at himself as it is to others. "An implicated participant and a contrarian stranger in several art worlds, I constantly ask myself these kinds of questions" (5). Yet, leaving the work to others is not an option for Smith. To do so would permit "the vast nonsense of promotional art babble to fill the available discursive space" (6). Instead, Smith resolves to "write the essays and books...deliver the lectures...teach the courses...face up to the test of critical accountability" (6). But this work is to be done with a light hand.

Turning to those who have written or contributed to textbooks on contemporary art, Smith states that, 'current strategies adopted by most of those confronted with having to think about contemporary art amounts to a litany of evasion, confusion, and wishful thinking' (317). Again, Smith does not spare himself in this regard.

I have argued throughout this book that contemporary life, thought, and art are structured by the operations of three currents and by the antinomic

⁵ That these archetypes might inform Smith's thinking on the practice art history seems reasonable given his sustained engagement with the writings of Walter Benjamin. Smith discusses the significance of Benjamin (and other Marxist writers) for his formation in 'Contemporary Art: World Currents in Transition beyond Globalization,' *Contemporaneity*, vol. 3 (2014): 163-174, esp. 161-171.

interaction between the currents within and between each of these spheres [of life, though, and art]. A more adequate hypothesis about how the parts join into 'an articulated whole' has yet to be proposed. It remains, however, an incomplete explanation--indeed, it is, in principle, impossible to complete. We can, nevertheless, hope to add further precision to it, each time we take up its challenge (355).

Even at moments of frustration with current practices of contemporary art history, Smith's optimism leads him immediately to acknowledge 'glimmers of insight and some brilliant suggestions' that are 'enough to build on' (317). And it is toward the art historians of the future who will be building on the scholarship of those working today that Smith's mind not infrequently turns in *Art to Come*. Those 'whose minds bend toward thinking historically, synthetically, and critically about *their* art, that is, about art to come' are the ones that Smith seems to believe are needed on the scene before the study of contemporary art can truly be practiced as art history (24).

If Smith is right, and the best an informed and conscientious historian of contemporary art can achieve at present is to document judiciously the art world in all its diverse, global manifestations, then *Art to Come* may be understood as something of a demonstration piece. The book's topical chapters--those devoted to Aboriginal Australian art, recent architecture and design, contemporary Chinese art, and the historiography of contemporary art--are brimming with examples. So assiduously does Smith attend to the documentary aspect of his writing that some sections suggest the form of an art world gazetteer or encyclopedia. Around these illustrative passages, annotations and asides abound. Especially in the chapters not previously published, Smith permits himself the roles of both dispassionate reporter and partisan commentator. For example, a chapter titled 'Writing Histories of Contemporary Art' surveys publications in a host of genres, from textbooks to monographs and from exhibition catalogues to short treatises by no fewer than 50 scholars and curators. Many works are acknowledged in a single sentence, and a handful are given substantive treatment. Descriptions of books and arguments often conclude with a summary gloss. A short essay by Patrick Flores is 'a brilliant evocation of the nature of worldly contemporaneity' (340); a book by Caroline Jones elicits Smith's ruling that, 'few would dispute these characterizations and value judgments, and if they did, they would be wrong' (336).⁶ Pithy assessments are peppered throughout the book: 'my sentiments exactly' or 'I strongly endorse this' or simply 'Right on!' (292, 298, 335). Smith's engagement with contemporary art scholars shows the same breadth of curiosity that he brings to his encounters with visual culture. Along with the works of such prominent scholars as Danto, Flores,

⁶ Smith is referring to Patrick Flores, 'Errant in Form', An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary: Part I, Asia Art Archive (28 January 2012), <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas-journal/ideas-journal/an-expanded-questionnaire-on-the-contemporary-part-i>; and Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

and Jones (to name a tiny fraction of those discussed in the book), Smith cites published and unpublished writings by students, including at least one by an undergraduate.⁷ The horizontal sensibility that Smith brings to his analysis of the literature on contemporary art along with his frank, often conversational commentary endows *Art to Come* with an unusual immediacy and intimacy.

These qualities set *Art to Come* apart from most of the literature on contemporary art that Smith discusses. Like field notes prepared over many years of attentive observation, Smith's responses to the visual culture of contemporaneity and the historiography of contemporary art are alternately hurried and reflective, diaristic and declamatory. Representative of the latter are those chapters that reprise a lecture or previously published essay where Smith appeals to a particular audience, such as his 2001 Power Institute address recast as the book's first chapter or the historiographic 'State of Art History: Contemporary Art', originally published as an article in *Art Bulletin*.⁸ Where the diaristic mode is especially present is in the texts not previously published, which include the Introduction and Conclusion and the two chapters that join the *Art Bulletin* article to complete Part 2 of the book. In these chapters, Smith's writing is at its most self-reflexive. Sometimes breezy and confidential and at other times rushed with urgency, Smith's mode of address supports the project he set out for himself with *Art to Come*. As Smith explains, the book's chapters

profile how I have canvassed and continuously revisited a set of ideas about contemporary art, attempting to track its abrupt yet protracted birthing from within modern art; its fraught, uneven yet pervasive globality; and its complex multiplicitous contemporaneity. Gathering these texts in this volume has enabled me to demonstrate this tracking as a work-in-progress, to reflect further on why and how I went about the work, and to suggest something about what will always remain to be done (3).

At once retrospective and anticipatory, Smith's description of his intent with *Art to Come* suggests that the book is as much for himself and 'those to come' as it is for art historians and other observers of contemporary art working today (24). For Smith, contemporary art history is historiography. By writing contemporary art history as personal historiography, Smith models for his readers--present and future--an ethics as much as a methodology for the study of the visual culture today.

⁷ For instance, in his discussion of literature about recent Chinese art, Smith cites Elizabeth Lee, 'Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Art Criticism,' *Journal of Undergraduate Research*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2007-08). *Journal of Undergraduate Research* is managed by undergraduate students at the University of Notre Dame and features papers written by Notre Dame students.

⁸ This is the only previously published essay that was not revised for in *Art to Come*.

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