

The Contemporary and the Historical: More at Odds than Ever

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It has become excruciatingly difficult and even impossible to write a history of contemporary art—a history that will do justice to all the art that is considered contemporary: that is the lesson of postmodernism. If writing history is something like putting the pieces of a puzzle together, as Donald Spence suggests, then contemporary art is a puzzle whose pieces do not come together. There is no narrative fit between them, to use Spence's term, suggesting just how puzzling contemporary art is, however much its individual pieces can be understood. The "contemporary" by definition is not necessarily the "historical", that is, the contemporary is a quantity of events associated in a specious present rather than a consistent narrative integrating some of these events in a system or pattern that simultaneously qualifies and transcends them by giving them some sort of purposiveness, appropriateness, and meaning, thus making them seem fated. In postmodernism what André Malraux called the global "museum without walls" has been realized, resulting in the unlimited expansion of the contemporary. The radical pluralism that prevails in the museum without walls has made a mockery of the belief that there is one art that is more "historical" than any other. Thus history has become as absurd and idiosyncratic as the contemporary.

There may be a history of modern art and a history of traditional art, but there can be no history of postmodern art, for the radically contemporary can ever be delimited by any single historical reading. Even if one was a Gibbon one could not fit all the pieces of contemporary art together in a unified narrative. In postmodernity there is no longer any such thing as the judgment of history, only an incomplete record of the contemporary. If every piece of art is contemporary, no one piece can be valued more highly than any other, except from a certain psycho-social perspective. But every perspective turns out to be procrustean because it shuts out art that contradicts its premises. The interpretative perspective is always relative, pragmatic, and informed with an ulterior motive. It is concerned to legitimate what would otherwise seem illegitimate, that is, contemporary. In place of the infinitely open system of contemporary art it offers a closed historical system of self-satisfied understanding and secured value, but there is always more of the contemporary. Either the hermetic historical system collapses under the pressure of the contemporary or breaks down because of its own pretentious weight. Writing history can be compared to claiming land from the sea of the contemporary, but the sea always rises up to reclaim it. Or if one wants, art history has become an Atlantis that has sunk into the sea because of the volcanic eruption of contemporary art. History may be a creative construction, as Spence says, but it can never be a definitive construction—just as no artistic construction can be definitive of art, at least from a contemporary point of view—because there is always more contemporary evidence to undermine it.

History is no longer possible in postmodernism because of modernism itself: at its most vital, it is a history of self-questioning and self-doubt, leading artists to look far a field for their identity. Wherever they are seems false compared to the truth of elsewhere—of the alien, exotic, marginal—whatever one wants to call what seems outside some institutional inside. Indeed, defiance of and/or indifference to institutional judgment—to the approval or disapproval of the super egoistic authority system—is the major

means of so-called avant-garde advance. The more “enlightened” the authority system, that is, the more accepting of “strange”, “alternative” art, the more it has to be outfoxed by the absurd that lies outside it. There is no longer any trustworthy art establishment, perhaps because there are established institutions that privilege certain modes of art by presenting them in a manner that makes them seem inevitable, that is, decisive details in an ideal narrative, or rather an establishment narrative that ironically turns the art into a shallow spectacle.

There has always been more contemporary than historical art—or, to put it more broadly, there has always been more contemporaneity than historicity—but this fact only became emphatically explicit in modernity. Art history’s attempt to control contemporaneity—and with that the temporal flow of art events—by stripping certain art event of their idiosyncrasy and incidentalness in the name of some absolute system of value, was overwhelmed by the abundance of contemporary art evidence that proposed alternative and often radically contrary ideas of value. I think the point was made very clearly and precisely by Lawrence Alloway in his book *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (1968). Alloway notes that in 1966 the Biennale showed 2,785 works by artists from thirty-seven countries; attendance was 181,383, with eight hundred art critics, journalists, and free-wheelers in addition. These figures indicate “the magnitude of the exhibition” and “the new scale and speed of international communications.” Alloway ironically comments: “Those who gravitate to an elitist view regard the Biennale’s abundance as a dilution of art’s neat essence. On the other hand, left-wing critics oppose the show too, because of the preponderance of international styles without manifest social usefulness.” Alloway perhaps goes too ironically far in asserting that “the orgy of contact and communication” the 1968 Venice Biennale generated puts it on a par with the “one hundred and twelve other official exhibitions and (commercial) fairs” held in Italy that year, but he does seem on target in arguing that the extreme competitiveness and diversity of the Biennale, and above all the changing character of the works exhibited in it over the years, undermines the conception of “works of art as symbols of permanence.” Instead, for Alloway, they are “complex structures subject to numerous interpretations.” That is, “because art is physically and conceptually mobile... it can be seen in various contexts,” and often looks different and changes meaning in each context. For Alloway, the so-called “work of art” is not exactly an “object”, but rather “part of communication system.”

One might say this “postmodernization” of the work of art completes the destabilization and desacralization of the work of art that began in modernity. Alloway sees an intellectual advantage or interpretative opportunity in this destabilization. That is, as the work of art becomes less secure in its identity, it becomes more open to interpretation, and with that more communicatively significant and less “objectively” the case. This enhances its contemporaneity, that is, the more communication about and interpretation of it, the more contemporary it seems, that is, the more alive in the present, as it were, and thus in less and even no need of permanence. In a sense, the turbulent pluralism of conflicting interpretations and valuations

confirms the turbulent pluralism of modern art which seems to have increased exponentially in the post-modern situation. The development of such institutions as the Venice Biennale acknowledges this pluralism, if with no interpretive contexts. The interpretive follow-up completes the pluralism, very much in the way Duchamp said the critic completes the work of art, or, as I would prefer to say, the pluralism of critical interpretations keeps it in contemporary play. Without that it would fade into oblivion, or else be reified into some historical milestone on the road of a predetermined narrative of artistic progress. That is no doubt academically satisfying, but it is far from the complex reality.

But something strange has happened to the Venice Biennale: the balance between the attempt to show as many samples as possible of the abundance of contemporary art and, on the other hand, to assert what will be historically important to the future and so must be especially precious in the present, has tilted towards the latter and away from the former. To me this is a sign of an attempt to weed the uncertainty out of the contemporary by predetermining art history. That is, despite the continued competitive diversity between national pavilions, individual nations have tried to put their best art historical foot forward, thus pre-empting the so-called judgment of history, however problematic it may be. Individual nations have narrowed their choice of contemporary artists to be exhibited—become more selective, as it were. But this brings with a good deal of selective inattention to other contemporary artists, and with that a certain loss of critical consciousness. This premature attempt to weed out and devalue the overwhelming Many so that the happy few or One and Only truly and absolutely significant artist can be put on glorious display, thus bringing a superficial and repressive clarity, conciseness, and conclusiveness to an inconclusive and unmanageable abundance—which is more deeply significant than any other artist who informs it—can be made transparently clear by a quantitative comparison of the artists shown in the German Pavilion in 1926 and in 1966.

There were three categories of works: painting, sculpture, graphics, each year. In 1926 the Germans showed 35 painters, 19 sculptors, and 37 graphic artists. I hope you have the patience to listen to the list of German painters: Max Beckman, Charlotte Berend, Maria Caspar-Filser, Johann Vincenz Cissarz, Max Clarenbach, Lovis Corinth, Ludwig Dettmann, Otto Dix, Max Feldhauser, Otto Gussmann, Julius Hess, Ludwig von Hofmann, Ulrich Hübner, Willy Jaeckel, Inbra, Alexander Kanoldt, Oskar Kokoschka, Wilhelm Leibl, Max Lieberman, Felix Meseck, Oskar Moll, Franz Naager, Emil Orlik, Bernhard Pankok, Richard Pietzsch, Paul Rössler, Julius Wolfgang Schülein, Richard Seewald, Max Slevogt, Robert Sterl, Franz von Stuck, Walter Tiemann, Hans Unger, Herman Urban, Hugo Vogel. I will spare you the lists of the 19 sculptors and 37 graphic artists, which is not to diminish their importance. But I won't spare you the list of painters, sculptors, and graphic artists exhibited in 1966. There was only one painter: Horst Antes. There were two sculptors: Günter Haese and Günter Ferdinand Ris. And there were also two graphic artists: Horst Antes again, and Günter Ferdinand Ris again. It was almost a clean sweep for Antes and Ris. Haese seems like a token difference. Not much shuffling of the cards to organize the 1966 exhibition. Or rather, to mix my

metaphors, out of the rich abundance of German art production in 1966 the magic trick was performed of producing two frontrunners, with a third placing in the horse race. Thus exclusivity triumphs over abundance, which is a triumph of manufactured historical permanence over ephemeral contemporary spontaneity. Such a triumph falsifies both.

The paradox of any contemporary attempt to assert what art will be of permanent value for the future, or at least to give some artists a leg up on historical permanence—which is what is attempted by the pseudo-pluralistic lists of best artists of the year that have proliferated in would-be trendy magazines, that is magazines that believe they have the power to make an art permanent by prominently featuring it, as though their imprimatur was some kind of *deus ex machina*—is that it has an entropic effect on the art it chooses to be the important One out of the unimportant Many. That is, prematurely declaring an art historically and thus permanently important—as though its media reception was the arbiter of its importance and meaningfulness—deadens it by displacing it into a remote future.

It also guarantees nothing: once officially successful and presumably permanent artists, for example, Bonheur and Meissonier, to name two from nineteenth-century France, often end up on the proverbial dust heap of history—and I think this way of conceiving history is quite telling—until rescued by some curious graduate student. Even the canon or pantheon of so-called greats—those artists who belong to what William Gass calls the permanent avant-garde, as distinct from the liberal and conservative avant-gardes—is often ignored or side-stepped by contemporary artists. Necessarily so, if they are to find their way to their own creativity: the historically significant permanent past can be as much of a hindrance, burden, and inhibition as an inspiration, foundation, and catalyst. Why bow one's creative knee to an idol that has feet of clay? Blindness, indifference, rebellion against historically reified greatness is a way of maintaining the vitality of one's contemporaneity. Nothing is sacred to artists who insist on their contemporaneity, because the contemporary is always profane.

To be ephemeral, then, may be preferable to being an epigone. One's own passing narcissistic glory may be preferable to letting some of the glory of the sociohistorically sanctioned past rub off on one. I am suggesting that the fetishization of art into historical permanence may be compensatory for the contemporary creative inadequacy. Worse yet, it may deprive the contemporary artist who takes such history seriously of the insecurity that comes with being contemporary, which has its own creative potential. The power of the contemporary comes from the insecurity of being ephemeral rather than from building on some illusory historical foundation—a hypothetical but always crumbling permanence—as though that will make one's art automatically meaningful and of enduring value. No art is historically important forever: the historical staying power of past art depends on contemporary creative needs—on contemporary emotional and cognitive necessity. It is permanent and necessary only because the contemporary creates the temporary illusion that it is.

In short, while the difference between the ephemeral contemporary and the historically permanent may be the difference between the Many and the One, there is in fact no contemporary way of determining

what will be the One in the future. And it really doesn't matter, for once an art is chosen as the historically right one it withers on the contemporary vine, losing its creative resonance, or, as Duchamp said, its aura. The contemporary is always heterogeneous and fertile; the historical fantasizes the One and Only, thus reducing contemporaneity to sterile homogeneity.

Recall that by 1966 Beuys was already hard at work—he had to wait until 1976 to appear in the Venice Biennale, together with Jochen Gertz and Reiner Ruthenbeck. Sculpture/installation was the only category, as though there were no paintings and graphic works being made. So were Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer, who appeared together in 1980. It is worth noting that in 1972 Gerhard Richter and the German Pavilion all to himself—the only category was painting/installation—and, in 1986, so did Sigmar Polke, also in painting/installation, again the only category. When Hans Haacke and Nam Jun Paik, who alone shared the German Pavilion in 1993—installation was the category for the former video installation the category for the latter-German nationals? Haacke is, but Paik never was. Over the course of time, not only have the categories been narrowed—as though in an effort to say that some modes of art-making are more important than others, thus establishing an elitist categorization of mediums—and the number of artists sharply reduced, but what Alloway called the “local particularity of art” has been pre-empted by a generalized internationalism, as though only transnational art had a place in the art historical narrative.

“Be mistrustful of history,” the Spanish poet Pere Quart wrote in his poem “Ode to Barcelona”, and he is right.” “Dream it and rewrite it,” he said, because it is only a dream—a wish fulfillment- and thus never true to reality. History is an attempt to find consistency in—to read consistency into- the inconsistent contemporary. Replacing the healthy flexibility of the contemporary with the rigidity of history is an attempt to channel creativity in a certain direction and finally to control and even censor it.

Writing history, as distinct from interpreting contemporaneity, involves narrowing one's sights, indeed, keeping certain things out of sight. A recent good example of the way historical significance is manufactured and can be a deliberate falsification is the elevation of Ana Mendieta to the pantheon of art, or at least the suffering feminist part, by way of the retrospective exhibition of her rather thin if intriguing body of work at the Hirschhorn and Whitney museums. Tucked away in one small exhibition case in the Whitney exhibition were a number of photographs by Hans Breder, the inventor of intermedia and a very complex artist—much more complex than Mendieta. This is all the credit he is given for inventing her, even though, at the post-opening dinner, the director of the Hirschhorn acknowledged that we were seeing Mendieta through Breder's eyes.

Breder's body performance-sculpture photographs are well known, particularly in Germany, and he has also made important paintings and videos, some of which have been exhibited at the Whitney. Mendieta was Breder's student at the University of Iowa and became his lover. They worked together for some ten years. Indeed, he taught her virtually all she knew. Breder made a fair number of the photographs in the Whitney exhibition. Many show her exhibiting herself in performances conceived by

Breder. Her famous Mexican performances—her naked body is laid out in an earth grave—were all set up by Breder and photographed by him. The idolization of Mendieta, for commercial and ideological reasons—her estate is handled by Galerie LeLong—all but writes Breder out of her art and life, becomes a historical figure; her art seems to exist on its own, as though it stood above the contemporary complexity of its development. The “making of history” always involves what Henry Krysal calls an “idolatrous transference”—indeed, I think Mendieta idolized herself, as though she intuitively knew how to make history—and Mendieta has been idolized beyond belief.

Despite the ironical contemporary attempt to describe history as it is happening, that is, to sell the insecure contemporary short by declaring it history-in-the-making, I want to conclude by suggesting a number of reasons why, if one is truly aware and open to all that one’s interpretive preferences are not exclusive—one cannot help but recognize that contemporary art has ousted and even destroyed historical meaning, despite contemporary efforts to make history by writing it as it supposedly happens, thus blurring the boundary between the contemporary and the historical. The reasons include the crosspollination and interbreeding of culturally, cognitively, and emotionally discrepant—not simply routinely different-kinds of art; the endless proliferation of contemporary art and artists, bringing with it a new definition of the contemporary (since it can never be domesticated by history, the contemporary has a self-imposed ephemerality, suggesting that it is an ever changing communication construction); and, perhaps more speculatively, the increasing speciousness of art, confirmed by the pseudo-philosophical notion that whatever anyone calls art is art, according to the “anything goes” postmodern motto of a commercial crowd culture. Indeed, it seems that the more artists there are—as evidenced by the new crop of MFAs produced every year, each with his or her own portfolio of works and supposed uniqueness—and the more power over artistic significance money and popularity have, the less clear it is what we are talking about when we talk about art.

The power of money and popularity to make history—thus suggesting the speciousness of history—is the overriding sociological truth about contemporary art. As Walter Robinson says, today they are not art movements, only market movements. This seems confirmed by an article, titled “Through the Roof,” in December 27, 2004 issue of *Forbes Magazine*. It begins with the following paragraph: “Scenes from a frenzy: Just two years after Italian artist and notorious prankster Maurizio Cattelan made ‘The Ninth Hour’ in 1999, Geneva dealer Pierre Huber bought the life-size wax sculpture of Pope John Paul II being felled by a meteorite for \$886,000. On November 18 he flipped it at a Phillips auction in New York for three million.” Presumably this makes Cattelan, or at least his work, historically important, that is, automatically guarantees it a place in art history. Art history has become ridiculous—up for grabs—at least when it is not a chronicle of the contemporary. The same article quotes Larry Walsh, “founder of *Museums Magazine* and an early collector of 1980s art stars like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring” (it seems worth noting that both are dead, and died young, the former of a drug overdose, the latter of AIDS): “The real problem? ... Too much money trickling down to material that’s not historically tested. History has a tight sieve.” But only the

art that money pours through it passes into history. “Greatness, experts agree, usually settles in after at least 20 years of interest in an artist,” Missy Sullivan, the article’s author, writes. Only then is the artist “kissed by posterity.” Which experts? Whose interest? And what exactly is posterity? Re-sale value? Value for yet unborn artists? Cultural celebrity? Installation in the so-called permanent collection of a museum? Which museum? Walsh and Sullivan raise more questions than they answer.

Another sociological truth is the competitive proliferation of interpretive perspectives, and with that the struggle for intellectual as well as historical supremacy. Contemporary art becomes historical when a particular perspective achieves authoritarian success by imposing an ideological reading on it, thus giving it a certain reputation and representative significance. In attempting to establish certain art as more legitimate and necessary than other art, history writing implicitly privileges some art as more legitimate and necessary than other art, however much writing history itself may be a creative and interpretive and as such artistic act, and also an ideological act, as Spence and many other thinkers have argued. Thus Mendieta is supposedly more creative and ideologically correct than Breder, for, after all, she was a feminist, and has had, if posthumously, major museum exhibitions to prove that she is creatively innovative. (I venture to say that her function as a symbol of an ideology takes precedence over her creativity. That is, she has come to have a more important place in an ideological narrative than in the history of artistic creativity.) I am suggesting that the art historian is less interested in the creative process—and its interdependence with other human processes, at once physical, psychic, and social—than in the fact of whether he or she is in a finished institutionally sanctioned art product.

History writing thus often involves what Alfred North Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. The object is concretized art, that is, established as being art—I am thinking of Whitehead’s theory of concrescence as the primary ontological process—when it is misplaced into some institution, indicating that the process that brought it into being is complete. It is now a fetishized product, as though the creative process that brought it into being is beside its point. In fact, the process is completed by its creative interpretation, which is ongoing—a perpetual re-becoming and thus de-reification and disestablishing of the art product. Only when there is nothing left to interpret and communicate is the object complete, that is, resoundingly concrete, which means that it is a product that has lost the vital resonance or aura it had when in process—a resonance or aura that can be restored by a rejuvenating injection of dynamic interpretation. It is perhaps inevitable that art history misplaces the concreteness of the work process that is art, for art history is subliminally concerned with the legitimacy of objects, and only reified objects are legitimate from the perspective of history. History writing, then, is necessarily an act of reification, and reification goes hand in hand with idolization—the antithesis of critical consciousness.

It should also be noted that, ironically, the celebration of creativity in our society—scientific and technological creativity more than artistic creativity, which looks less insightful and useful at first glance—is also responsible for the fact that contemporary art seems more vital than historically reified art. At the

same time, the indiscriminate adulation of creativity—virtually any kind of creativity, leading to the labeling of any kind of activity as creative if it is performed “differently”—is responsible for the overcrowding of contemporary art. It is paradoxically the loss of standards of creative excellence that makes art vulnerable to market and populist forces. They alone can make an art “historical” and “meaningful” when it is no longer clear what the value of art is. In other words, money and popularity are meaningful in capitalist mass society, so that without their imprimatur art is socially meaningless, however creative. I believe it is also because making art has become a way of making money and becoming popular—Warhol and Koons are the exemplary cases here—that the art world is overpopulated, to the extent that it is in a Malthusian crisis.

Let me return to the beginning of my talk for a final word. Spence writes:

If we are putting together a jigsaw puzzle in which each piece has one and only one final resting place, we can use what might be called the narrative fit to establish the correct position of each of the pieces. But...as soon as we admit that, for example, a given account might have a number of different endings, all equally satisfying, we begin to see that establishing narrative fit may be a less definitive outcome than we might have wished for and, as a consequence, a rather shaky basis for making claims about truth value... A narrative, in short, is almost infinitely elastic, accommodating almost any new evidence that happens to come along.

I suggest that the only way a narrative history of contemporary art can avoid apotheosizing one artist at the expense of another—the way Mendieta was apotheosized at the expense of Breder— and thus becoming a kind of delusion of grandeur, is by becoming infinitely elastic and accommodating. But then it would no longer be a narrative; it would be perpetually contemporary unsolvable puzzle. Nonetheless, since, when one is writing history, one is writing about particulars however tempting the wish to generalize, and since the particular is radically contemporary—I would in fact argue that the contemporary is a sum of incommensurate particulars that can never be made commensurate in a whole (integrated completeness is a meaningless notion in the contemporary)—I suggest that by definition the history of any particular art is a case history. That is, it makes an interpretive case for a particular art’s interestingness by tracking its environmental development in the context of the observer-interpreter’s phenomenological articulation of his or her complex experience of it.

Only by approaching and regarding the work of art as an affective-communicational-educational experience can one preclude the pre-emption and even foreclosure of its meaning and value by money and popularity, which, in the contemporary situation, speak in the name of history. Such idolatrous reification removes the cognitive challenge and human interest from the work, which makes it less contemporary and stimulating, that is, less likely to be experienced with any degree of freshness. That is, less

likely to be an affective—communicational-educational experience—less likely to involve the discovery, demonstration, and exemplification of a certain kind of attitude, consciousness, and relationality- and thus not worth the human and intellectual trouble. Paradoxically, once an art is historically reified-over determined, as it were—“holy curiosity” about it tends to disappear, to use Einstein’s phrase. Unless, of course, it can be made contemporary, again by critical interpretation, which means, to again quote Einstein, “not to stop questioning” it.