

Keith Moxey— What Time Is Tomorrow?

Familiar with the idea that time is a construction, an invention, which depends on human ingenuity for its various definitions, what we often forget is that it is also a concept shaped by power relations. In the wake of modernism, and in the context of a post-colonial awareness that time does not flow at the same speed in all places, the location of time's occurrence has become much more problematic. Where is time taking place, in New York, say, or in Nairobi? This talk explores the dilemmas offered to historical writing by the current difficulty in determining where time might be taking place.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in conceiving the historical nature of the contemporary, let alone the future, lies not so much in the ever-increasing speed of events and the instantaneity of communication in the age of the Internet, as in the difficulty of coming to terms with asynchrony, the non-synchronous nature of temporal developments.¹ In this post-colonial world, if we recognize that time has different values in different locations, it is difficult to select one dimension or another of that multiplicity as that whose characteristics define a period —say, the “contemporary”. On what grounds can diverse temporal schemes be reduced to an account that privileges only one of them?² Can synchrony be reconciled with asynchrony —one idea of time with many— or does this maneuver result in contradiction, an insurmountable obstacle to any future prospect for what we call “universal” history? To be more direct, the non-synchronic quality of the passage of time cannot be squared with the ongoing need for a historical narrative.

A rising awareness of time's multiplicity has absorbed the attention of a number of historians and art critics, as well as an exhibition at the Tate Modern.³ Nicolas Bourriaud, the curator of the “Altermodern” exhibition, argues that the postmodern is over and that we find ourselves in a moment he dubs “Altermodern”, a term to be understood as a moment rather than a period, for it bears no relation to the past.

A characteristic of the now is its heterochrony, “a vision of human history as constituted by multiple temporalities.”⁴ Bourriaud's position seeks to avoid the teleological implications that have so often marked past efforts at periodization, as well as the necessarily essentialist connotations associated with any attempt at definition and narrativization. Rather than envision a proliferation of histories, one for each of time's distinct manifestations, Bourriaud assumes that contemporaneity is “ahistorical”. Heterochronicity translates as achronicity. The multitude of time's rivers, its many forms and the potential difficulty of fording them, is interpreted as evidence of time's absence. Evading the lure of “universal” time, this strategy nevertheless fails to recognize the possibility that time possesses many dimensions and textures. The heterochronous trajectories traversed by different cultures are rejected in favor of a “non-time” that flattens and obliterates the specificities of geographical and cultural location.⁵

The heterochronic nature of the world's cultures, including their incoherencies and incommensurabilities, however, can only be articulated through reference to some common denominator. In the present context, it would be disingenuous not to recognize the presence of a dominant time system—that was put in place during the colonial period. The distinction between the colonizers and the colonized, so often marked by race, served to reinforce the sense of superiority of the white adventurers whose economic and military might ruled the world. Such attitudes were further confirmed by the philosophical ideas of the late 18th century, the age of Enlightenment, when an epistemological system based on ideas of rigorous objectivity guaranteed an insatiable desire to know (and thus control) the world and everything in it. It has, as a consequence, proven easy until relatively recently for European and American scholars involved in the study of modern and contemporary art to ignore art produced in cultures outside the West.⁶ The suppressed narratives that fell out of time as a consequence of the institutionalization of colonial time offer boundless possibilities for future historians. Not only are many of these histories still to be written, but their relation to one another, as well as to the dominant story of modernity, must still be told. Writing about contemporary art of Eastern Europe, Piotr Piotrowski describes the situation as follows:

The center provides the canons, the hierarchy of values and the stylistic norms; it is the role of the periphery to adopt them in the process of reception. It may happen, of course, that the periphery has its own outstanding artists, but their recognition, their consecration in art history, depends on the center; on the exhibitions organized in the West and the books published in western countries.⁷

Terry Smith's recent book, *What Is Contemporary Art?*,⁸ is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to date to think through the historical issues raised for contemporary art by the discreditation of teleological conceptions of historical time. Smith's views agree with those articulated by Bourriaud in doubting whether the contemporary can or should be treated like a period:

No longer does it feel like "our time," because "our" cannot stretch to encompass its contrariness. Nor, indeed, is it "a time", because if the modern was inclined above all to define itself as a period, and sort the past into periods, in contemporaneity periodization is impossible. The only potentially permanent thing about this state of affairs is that it may last for an unspecified amount of time: the present may become, perversely, "eternal".⁹

Like Bourriaud, Smith wishes to avoid what he perceives as the “essentializing” dangers inherent in the project of periodization by arguing that contemporary art is just too diverse to describe or categorize in any way. Contemporaneity is marked by the impossibility of its definition—a historical moment that is identified by irreconcilable antinomies. The unconscious irony of this position is that it replaces one essentialism for another: if periodization depends on the identification and definition of particular temporal characteristics, so does the idea of an atemporal void, a “non-time”.

While Smith’s argument constitutes a dramatic challenge to an evolutionary theory of history and expresses a widespread and legitimate dissatisfaction with its failure to do justice to historical experience, it also asserts that history has come to an end and that the narrative structure on which the attribution of meaning to the past has depended is no longer relevant. An attack on the inherent essentialism of narrativity, however, appears to cut both ways. In negating the legitimacy of a hegemonic concept of time, the argument also denies meaning to all systems of time and their attendant narratives, many of which have traditionally been marginalized. In eliminating “universal” time, this perspective not only eliminates differences among moments in time but also the possibility that there might be other ways of telling time. A featureless contemporaneity registers neither differences in time nor culture.

In contrast to the desire to marshal the contemporary to dispense with the necessity for periodization altogether, an enduring compulsion to understand the contemporary as a period—as an art historical moment, for example, that succeeds modernism and postmodernism—remains. If the contemporary as a period is incorporated into an evolutionary narrative identified with modernism, however, then it simply becomes another stage in a familiar but discredited story. Privileging the present and that of the cultures that dominate the international scene as the place at the end of time from which all other moments can be calibrated and evaluated, extends the historicist structure of an understanding of the past by implying that the present fulfills a historical development. Like historical writing of the 19th or 20th centuries, the contemporary becomes the latest place from whose exalted perspective it is possible to discern the workings of the Hegelian “spirit”. Narrative, the rhetorical form to which historical writing belongs, seems to insist that the present cannot be conceived as a period without being incorporated into a teleological narrative. If chronology relies on ideological agendas, then the power relations on which they depend cannot be overlooked. No longer believing that Western contemporaneity enjoys a privileged position in the progressive sequence of historical periods, its postmodern condition nevertheless searches for some way to understand its own situation.¹⁰ *So now what?* Perhaps the very materiality of culture, the physical vestiges of time’s passage with their demand for a perceptual and cognitive response from the viewer, prompts

another way of thinking about the issue of periodization. George Kubler, the most poetic art historian to address the riddle of time, once wrote: "The cultural clock...runs mainly upon ruined fragments of matter recovered from refuse heaps and graveyards, from abandoned cities and buried villages."¹¹ For any study of the visual, the traces and tracks of time's existence are located in artifacts. Many, if not all such objects, of course, have long been ascribed an aesthetic and ontological presence that prevents them from nestling securely within epistemological systems. They intimate something in excess of the entirely comprehensible, something that language cannot capture. Even if images serve as records of the time and place of their creation, they also appeal to the senses and possess an affective force that allows them to attract attention in temporal and cultural locations far from the horizons in which they were created.

The phenomenological dimension of art history has always insisted that a visual artifact can create its own history. Arguing that images call for attention and demand interpretation, several recent thinkers have developed the concept of "anachronism" as a means of describing the process of mediation that goes on between artifacts that both solicit an affective response and invite the desire of the contemporary historian or critic to make meaning.¹² By emphasizing the contemporaneity of their response to images, by folding the historicity of their own temporal locations within accounts of historical horizons, such scholars effectively disrupt any absolute distinction between past and present. In weaving what has been with what is, they often offer us a different conception of time no longer dominated by the linear progression with which art history is so familiar, but one that instead erases the distinction between the observer on one side of time and the age in which the work was created on the other. The texture of the past is threaded through an account of the work's reception in the present. History is recognized as an attempt to grasp the otherness of temporal distance in full recognition of the impossibility of ever doing so. Disabused of any pretension of offering an "objective" account of the past, historical writing of this kind affirms the presence of the present in the past, as well as of the past in the present.

If the work of art carries its own time or has the power to create time in the response of those who receive it, then how is it to be narrativized? How is a physical object which appears to escape the bonds of language to be made subject to its power? How can anachrony be reconciled with chronology? Constructing a period and defining the temporal as well as the ontological value of objects is clearly as fraught with difficulty as subscribing to the "end of history". Periodization involves negotiating the non-synchronous nature of temporality, the need to relate multiple streams of time to one another in a narrative that does not do any one of them undue violence. The compromise of translating multiple forms of time into a singular narrative in order to ascribe them meaning will always be subject to revision. While it seems

imperative to distinguish the otherness of distinct moments in order to construct the idea of a period, be it in the past or the present, it is also necessary to admit that these distinctions are never permanent and that their differences depend upon the interests of the now. As Lydia Liu points out in discussing the problems of translation in the age of “globalization”, the concept of “difference” depends on the context in which it is uttered.¹³ Periodization—time’s categorization—is as crucial to historical writing as the continual renegotiation of what is to count as a period’s identifying characteristics. Historians find themselves in the paradoxical situation of insisting that distinctions between historical moments matter, while at the same time acknowledging that the qualities of such differences can never be fixed. What counts either as past or present may well be a fabrication, yet the distinction is there to provide a structure with which to deal with the trajectory from a shadowy past through the bright intensity of the present and on into a dim and unrecognizable future.

If we are never fully aware, however, of what it is to be “contemporary”, historical writing must take place in circumstances of uncertainty and even in a kind of blindness. If history inevitably betrays the nature of the present in which it is written, those who engage in it have nevertheless only an indistinct idea of the qualities of their own temporal location. The present seems to be filled with both the presence of the past and the anticipation of the future. Does it have an identity we can call its own? It is Kubler who manages to articulate the difficulty of these circumstances most effectively:

Actuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between the ticks of the watch: it is a void interval slipping forever through time: the rupture between past and future: the gaps at the poles of the revolving magnetic field, infinitesimally small but ultimately real. It is the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events.¹⁴

That past time is defined in terms of present time is by now a truism, but it is one whose meaning is changed if the anachronic encounter with other historical horizons—an interaction mediated through artifacts, be they images or books—is taken into consideration. Visual objects are fully historical not because they have been mortified and forced to become part of a lifeless epistemology, but precisely because they cannot be captured, frozen or embalmed. Artifacts of all kinds, whether or not they have been accorded the privileged status of “art”, call forth their own interpretations. If history’s clock runs on Kubler’s fragments of matter, these fragments are as much a part of the present as of the past. The idea that contemporaneity is so distinct that it cannot be placed in historical perspective seems to be a product of the darkness of actuality, of “the void between events”, of the impossibility of discerning what is happening

around us now. Whether we like it or not, “this too shall pass,” and the contemporary seems likely to be periodized and re-periodized in future contexts in ways that might seem currently unexpected and improbable. In the full realization of the difficulty of saying anything conclusive about the elusive topic of time, let me try to bring this talk to an end. Rather than obliterate the necessity to characterize something as fleeting and ephemeral as time, an awareness of heterochronicity —time’s varied significance in different cultural contexts— adds urgency to the search for ideas adequate to the understanding of its multiplicity. The idea that contemporaneity is a form of “non-time”, one in which history no longer operates, threatens to impoverish not only a sense of the alterity of the past but an appreciation of the differences between cultures.