A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945

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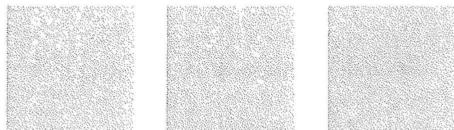

A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945

Edited by

Amelia Jones

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to contemporary art since 1945 / edited by Amelia Jones.
p. cm. — (Blackwell companions in art history)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-0794-5 (hardback : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 1-4051-0794-4 (hardback : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-3542-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 1-4051-3542-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Art, Modern—20th century—History.
2. Art, Modern—21st century—History. I. Jones, Amelia. II. Series.

N6490.C65615 2006
709.04'5—dc22
2005034704

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10.5/13pt Galliard
by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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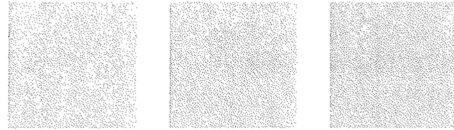

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1

Introduction: Writing Contemporary Art into History, a Paradox?

Amelia Jones

How can what is defined as *in existence now* – the contemporary – be written into (a) history? Is the notion of "contemporary art history" or a "history of contemporary art" a contradiction in terms?

This book accepts the challenge of exploring the complexities both of contemporary art as a now "historical" phenomenon (as the years between "now" and 1945 expand in number) and of contemporary art as potentially the cutting edge of what people calling themselves artists (or understood by others as such) are making and doing in this increasingly complex and globalized economy of cultural practices.

Certainly since at least the mid to late 1970s departments of art history, visual culture studies, or visual studies in Britain and North America have at least explored the possibility of teaching courses on art practices dating from the end of WWII onward[1] – with 1945 taken as a key turning point in Euro-American history because of the shift of cultural, political, and economic power from Europe to the US that took place during and after the war, and because of the way in which the war marked the tortuous death of European colonialism.[2] The growing number of survey books on art since 1945 (or, in some cases, art since 1960 – another convenient cutting off point, due to the emergence around this time of new generations of artists interested in overturning dominant modes of modernist practice) testifies to the general acceptance of the importance of developing specific tools for studying and talking about contemporary art practices in Europe and North America.[3] Largely due to the vitality of the innovations in the visual arts over the past 60 years, as well as to the explosive growth of what Guy Debord in 1967 called the "society of the spectacle," the visual arts are now arguably one of the most crucial areas of cultural practice in terms of

understanding what and how people convey, contest, or otherwise negotiate aspects of contemporary life.

Given that "contemporary art history," as it were, now has a 60-year life span – a span of time characterized in part by the increasing rapidity and density with which historical events have come to occur – the need for developing new ways of understanding the complexities of visual art practices since 1945 is acute. To that end, this volume is conceived as an alternative and crucial supplement to the standard survey texts in English covering the chronological, social, and aesthetic history of the development of contemporary art. These available surveys, as the author of one of them (David Joselit) has noted, make a "tacit, if impossible, promise: to represent the totality of art produced within a particular set of temporal and geographical boundaries," narrating a more or less coherent story of developments in Euro-American art since the end of WWII.[4] This book, in contrast, offers both a more comprehensive and a more focused set of stories about art since 1945. (It should be noted that, as with these surveys, the focus of the chapters here is on developments in Great Britain and North America, with some attention paid to global or non-Euro-American art trends and movements.) It is more comprehensive in that it explores a range of topics from multiple points of view, with 27 different authors from across the French- and English-speaking worlds of art history and visual studies, and more focused in that each author takes a particular topic and explores it in some depth.

Contemporary Art is thus intended to be both complementary to and different from the available surveys, which are generally filled with numerous illustrations, written by single authors, and cover the established chronological progression of mediums, movements, and themes in the visual arts since 1945. This book has relatively few illustrations, is of course multiply authored, and addresses a vast range of media (from painting and sculpture to performance and body art, video, digital art, and live political activism presented as art). It is organized through a dual logic, covering decades as well as major themes. So as to address the complexity of contemporary art from a historical perspective, the book begins with a section of chapters focusing on developments within specific periods (based loosely on the decades since 1945). Following these chronologically oriented chapters, the thematic sections are meant to provide multiple lenses through which to view the extremely complex debates and developments in Euro-American art and art discourse since the mid-twentieth century.

Eschewing the rigidity of the conventional narratives of contemporary art history, which generally adhere to overdetermined groupings by "movement" (i.e., "abstract expressionism," "pop art," etc.), this volume thus addresses major historical, conceptual, theoretical, and aesthetic issues that have informed contemporary visual art practices and debates about the visual arts; these thematic issues, which are further subdivided into the topics of the individual chapters, are loosely organized according to their chronological appearance in these debates (i.e., "aesthetics" is the first broad thematic category because it was central to 1940s–50s discussions about abstraction versus realism; at the

same time, within the category of aesthetics, the chapters bring the reader up to the present moment – the final chapter in this section addresses "Beauty," a recent "hot" issue in art criticism).

In organizing the book in this way, and commissioning authors from diverse pedagogical, scholarly, or artistic traditions (from art historians to scholars of visual culture studies to practicing artists) and cultural backgrounds, I have attempted to bring together a book that will provide a fresh approach to the study (and potentially the making) of contemporary art. Each author was urged both to cover the bases – to address canonical figures and note generally understood historical trajectories – and to rethink the topic at hand in order to provide an original take on it. Rather than inviting the scholar best known for addressing a topic or decade, I commissioned chapters from relatively unexpected writers, encouraging them to push their thinking in new directions complementary to their known published work. To that end, each of these chapters explores well-known as well as previously marginal works, movements, and cultural pressures, forging into new territory by addressing the visual arts and art discourses from the post-WWII period from a fresh perspective.

My high expectations regarding the richness and range of chapters I would receive were not disappointed. To that end, I believe and hope that *Contemporary Art* can become an indispensable handbook for any student or practitioner of art criticism, art history, or the visual arts themselves, as well as a crucial book for anyone interested in twenty-first century ways of thinking about the visual arts since 1945. Covering the most important historical and theoretical issues and debates that have conditioned our understanding of the contemporary visual arts, as well as offering new approaches to old problems, the book points the reader to future trends, as well as offering multiple, and often interdisciplinary, perspectives on past movements and conceptual issues.

Organization of the Book

Decades

As noted, the first section of the book after this Introduction includes five chapters, each of which addresses one of the decades since 1945, loosely construed (with the first obviously covering a decade and a half). Gavin Butt's chapter, "'America' and its Discontents: Art and Politics 1945–60," thus covers the rise of US cultural dominance in this period; noting the tendency to historicize art from the 1950s purely through dominant practices of painterly abstraction, Butt offers a vital counter-narrative of, in his words, "how in the fifties we witness the development and consolidation of a Modernist 'center' at precisely the same time that this gets undone in the various 'alternative' practices to it and to American Abstract Expressionism."

Covering the 1960s, Anna Dezeuze, in her chapter "The 1960s: A Decade Out-of-Bounds," notes the tendency to understand the art history of this period

as achieving a "systematic dismantling of modernist media," exploring the decade's art practices as seeking to "open" the art work to chance, the everyday, language, the body, and its social and political context. Addressing practices by artists from Britain to the US to Brazil, Dezeuze's chapter also points to the rapid development of an increasingly globalized art world in the 1960s.

In his chapter, "'I'm sort of sliding around in place . . . ummm . . .': Art in the 1970s," Sam Gathercole uses a phrase spoken by Dan Graham in his 1977 performance and video piece *Performer/Audience/Mirror* to evoke the slipperiness of 1970s culture as well as the difficulties of the decade in political and social terms, especially (with state and market both increasing their hold on culture in all its forms) for creative people interested in working *outside* or *against the grain* of these forces. Even as Graham "slides around," Gathercole argues, artists of the 1970s "fumbl[e] for a next move as previously held assumptions of meaning fragment and collapse all around (and through) the work."

Howard Singerman's "Pictures and Positions in the 1980s" charts the rise of "simulation" theory, and the concomitant explosion of "appropriation" art, particularly in New York City, the heart of the Euro-American art world during this period (and, arguably, since 1945). Noting the parallel emergence of AIDS, which had an enormous impact on the creative arts during the 1980s and following, and of the politics of the Reagan–Thatcher era, Singerman turns to the writings of art historians Hal Foster and Douglas Crimp to argue that dominant art practices and discourses during this decade were characterized by a drive to critique and dismantle both the traditions associated with artistic modernism and the conservative, even deadly (considering the cost of AIDS to the creative communities of Western culture) assumptions about identity and meaning informing broader social and political structures and beliefs during this period.

The final chapter in the "Decades" section, Henry Sayre's "1990–2005: In the Clutches of Time," traces the explosive transformation in visual cultures with the rapid rise of digital culture in this period. Making note of the decade's "culture wars" (more expansively discussed by Katz in chapter 12), Sayre explores the tendency for issues of identity to pressure and inform 1990s art practices, as well as the expansion of the art world to embrace international and global trends and works, and the expansion of durational and new media practices during this vital period of development in the visual arts. Like many other contemporary critics, Sayre sees Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* series, which he argues meshes all of these developments into one complex project, as epitomizing the cutting edge of these trends.

Aesthetics

The first thematic section of the book addresses issues of aesthetics – generally speaking, taken here to comprise issues of meaning and value as these have been

determined and understood since the rise of aesthetic theory in the eighteenth century. These issues were taken to be paramount in modernist formalist theory (particularly the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried), but fell into disfavor in the 1960s and following with the rise of pop, conceptual, and performance art and of the identity-based cultural movements. Questions of aesthetics, however, rose to prominence again with the burgeoning of "beauty discourse" spearheaded by the 1990s writings of west coast US-based art critic Dave Hickey.[5]

Caroline Jones's chapter "Form and Formless" maps the development of modernist formalist art critical models from the early twentieth century through the return of formalism in the guise of the "formless" (*informe*) exhibition organized in 1996 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Jones examines the historical pressures informing the particular kinds of formalist criticism, as well as the artistic practices that have either responded to, or been addressed by, these models. Because formalism (she notes) is the "theoretical tool bequeathed to art writing by the search for universally significant form" (and is thus related to certain anthropological assumptions), it can easily become (and has done in the past) a means for stigmatizing and denigrating practices that are viewed not "universally significant" (i.e., non-European art, etc.). The rapid globalization of visual and other cultures points ultimately to the (at best) useless and (at worst) dangerous assumptions guiding the application of simplistic models of form or formless and yet, Jones suggests, the core understanding of visual art works always comes back to *form* in some way – we cannot communicate visually without it.

David Hopkins' chapter, "Re-Thinking the 'Duchamp Effect'," addresses one of the key trajectories developing in resistance to certain rigidities perceived in modernist aesthetics – the conceptualist critique of the idea of *form* as the primary basis of artistic creation and aesthetic interpretation. Citing conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, Hopkins makes the argument, which became standard in 1980s accounts of postmodern art, that Marcel Duchamp's readymades from the 1910s initiated a shift toward the "function of art as a question." Hopkins also notes the role of the formalist criticism of Greenberg and Fried, which became so dominant in the New York-based contemporary art world by 1960 that younger generations of artists began to look to alternative – idea-based – modes of making art as a way of questioning or attempting to overthrow this dominant force.

In "Regarding Beauty," Margaret Morgan discusses the discourse of beauty as it developed in abstract expressionism (via Greenberg's use of Kantian aesthetics), went underground in the 1960s through the early 1990s, and reemerged through the "beauty" discourse of Dave Hickey and his associates on the west coast of the US (with broad international influence). She astutely interrogates the politics of this reemergence, exploring which practices have been legitimated by it and thus have benefited from the return of "beauty" precisely at a time in which artists previously excluded from the canons of art

history had been making inroads into making their work seen and appreciated in the Euro-American art world.

Politics

This section includes chapters addressing debates about the political roles and efficacy of particular types of contemporary art practice, tracing historical links to earlier modernist models of artistic intervention in the political sphere. Collectively, these chapters make the strong point that, although it would be impossible (as David Joselit notes in the quotation above) to narrate a coherent or unified story of Euro-American contemporary art, on some level all art since 1945 has been pressured and inflected by political demands and exigencies and, in many cases, has explicitly responded to them. If anything Euro-American contemporary art has taught us that there is no way to separate art from the social and political realms (as the romantics and to some extent modernist formalist critics would have it).

In her chapter, entitled "Avant-Garde: A Historiography of a Critical Concept," Johanne Lamoureux traces the notion of the avant-garde as it was borrowed from nineteenth-century French military parlance, adopted as a label for artists working "in advance of" mainstream bourgeois culture, and transported to contemporary art debates from the 1940s and beyond (from the art criticism of Greenberg to the work of British cultural theory in the 1960s and 1970s, to the writings of the group of art critics associated with the highly influential journal *October* in 1980s New York and following). Noting that any term that proposes to label what is "advanced" will inevitably *exclude* what is not deemed such, Lamoureux probes the historical ways in which "avant-garde" has in fact functioned to marginalize important kinds of art practice (for example, by women) even as it has also proved its usefulness in encouraging a politicized notion of visual arts practice.

Jennifer González and Adrienne Posner deal with the intersection of activist and artistic practices in contemporary art in their chapter entitled "Facture for Change: US Activist Art since 1950." Their chapter expands on the inevitably *political* and *social* nature of all artistic practices, noting that art discourse now generally acknowledges the fact that "aesthetics . . . does not exist without politics." Drawing on the important work of art historian Lucy Lippard, they explore the complexities of the relationship between art and politics both in a general sense (viewing works from the 1950s as implicitly political), and through the lens of activist art projects (from GranFury's performative and visual protests relating to the AIDS crisis to Internet activism) that attempt to make the connection direct, explicit, and overt.

Further exploring the art–politics intersection, Jonathan Katz's chapter " 'The Senators Were Revolted': Homophobia and the Culture Wars" explores the violent "wars" between artists and art institutions and the increasingly powerful forces of right-wing politics in the US in the 1980s and following. Katz begins

by noting how difficult it is to remember a time when "avant-garde art and conservative politics were not sworn enemies in the United States," and the chapter explores the intricacies of the right wing's manipulation of culture (and particularly the visual arts) as a way of articulating their political position and agency. Tracing the various permutations of these debates, he argues persuasively that the culture wars represent a more or less covert attempt to associate the visual arts with gay culture – itself viewed through a tainted lens colored by assumptions that AIDS is a "gay" disease and so a sign of the pathology of gay sexualities ("art/gay/AIDS") – and thus to discredit art as morally suspect, while simultaneously confirming negative beliefs about gay men.

Grant Kester's "Crowds and Connoisseurs: Art and the Public Sphere in America," the last chapter in this section on politics, deals with the debates and practices relating to "public art." Addressing the question of what or who comprises the public sphere, debates about public funding, and a range of practices from official corporate-sponsored monumental sculpture to earth art, Kester traces the increasingly complex relationships between the artist and the public sphere since 1945 and attends to the political and social shifts paralleling these relationships. Finally, he notes the crucial shift away from "official" public art (due in part to an awareness on the part of artists of the inevitably compromised nature of its sponsorship structure) to a *critical* public practice that would produce (citing artist Krzysztof Wodiczko) "aesthetic-critical interruptions, infiltrations and appropriations that question the symbolic, psycho-political and economic operations of the city."

Identity/Subjectivity

Chapters in this section address the ending of European colonial empires in the post-WWII period, the development of a "postcolonial" consciousness, and the rise of identity politics in the 1960s and beyond, tracing its roots and discussing its impact on discourses and practices of contemporary art. Collectively these chapters make a strong argument for aspects of identity formation and subjectivity as being absolutely central to all contemporary art, whether explicitly acknowledged by the artist and her/his art critical and institutional supports or not. They also address the burgeoning of art practices during the post-1970 period in particular that emphasize questions of subjectivity and the body in its specific identifications.

In her chapter, "The *Writerly* Artist: Beautiful, Boring, and Blue," Carol Mavor explores the shifting conceptions of the artistic author from the modernist to the postmodernist period (particularly after the late 1960s), through a text that is itself "writerly." Exploring the interchanges between the work of novelist Marcel Proust and filmmaker Chantal Akerman (with detours into poststructuralist and feminist theories of authorship and subjectivity), Mavor thus enacts the very opening of the text or work of art to the interpreter that characterizes one of the most significant shifts in postmodernism. Her chapter is a meditation on the

dispersal of authorial agency which differentiates art since 1960 from its precursor movements, which tended to continue to rely on the modernist idea of the artist as a fixed and coherent origin for the meaning (and the value) of the work of art.

In "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews," Steven Nelson grapples with the complex effects of colonialism and its legacy. By addressing this crucial (if not *the* crucial) aspect of globalization – the diasporic shift of populations away from their native lands and into new places (often the very nations that initially had colonized their native cultures) – Nelson unsettles the conventional accounts of contemporary art as a singularly "Western" product. Examining a range of works by diasporic artists and various crucial exhibitions addressing diaspora and globalization, he traces the effects and influences of diaspora *in both directions.* Ultimately Nelson argues that, "[i]n a world that is increasingly interdependent, and increasingly structured by international flows of capital, technology, information, and media," diaspora is a crucial – if also impossibly complex – signifier that pressures every aspect of the way in which contemporary art is made, displayed, marketed, and written about.

While the civil rights movement was the first post-WWII identity-based political movement in the US, until the 1990s it had less purchase in the visual arts than feminism, which was the first identity discourse to develop as a coherent institutional force within academia and the art world (by 1970, the feminist art movement was going strong in New York, London, and Los Angeles). This chapter by Laura Meyer, entitled "Power and Pleasure: Feminist Art Practice and Theory in the United States and Britain," traces the historical rise of the movement and its debates from the late 1960s to the present, including conflicts within the movement. Meyer addresses the dualisms that have haunted feminist art discourse and practice – the "British" versus the "US" models; issues of essentialism vs. anti-essentialism; class issues and national differences; and debates about the movement's assumption of whiteness and heterosexuality – and ultimately complicates these oppositions by showing how many of these themes overlap in complicated ways in single artworks or artists' oeuvres within the feminist movement.

Jennifer Doyle, in "Queer Wallpaper," traces the parallel rise of queer activism in the art world after the Stonewall uprising in New York City in 1969 and examines how queerness has been articulated in art and its discourses. As Doyle argues in contrasting two situations – a particular Andy Warhol print hung in a particular site in Los Angeles (a gay bar), where it is viewed as "queer wallpaper," versus the normalizing presentation of Warhol's work in an official museum retrospective – the former example forces us to question the very nature of how visual images come to mean and come to have social, political, and personal value. Thinking about the queer (that which relates to "deviant" or non-normative sexual behaviors and identifications) in contemporary art has enabled a radical unsettling of how we think about art. *Queer*, rather than the more essentializing terms "gay" and "lesbian", Doyle argues, affords an under-

standing of the subtle and complex ways in which sexuality pressures the making, displaying, and reception of visual culture.

Pauline de Souza's chapter "Implications of Blackness in Contemporary Art" charts the increasing pressures of racial and ethnic difference on visual arts discourses and practices over the past four decades. With the diasporic immigration of formerly colonized populations to Europe and the rise of Civil Rights and other racial identity discourses in the US and Britain (including postcolonial theory and various modes of activism), the visual arts have been inexorably transformed. No longer can art institutions pretend that race and ethnicity have nothing to do with aesthetics, or that whose art gets shown where is a neutral issue untempered by preconceptions about artists' identities and social positionalities. Artists such as Kara Walker and Roshini Kempadoo produce works that, for de Souza, exemplify the trend toward explicit exploration of the history of racial oppression and aspects of racial and ethnic identification in Euro-American art in the contemporary period.

If aspects of identity as they are articulated, experienced, and understood in contemporary life deeply inform (if not entirely condition) contemporary art discourses and practices, then the exploration of how identity *takes place* must in some way be central to the study of these discourses and practices. In her chapter "The Paradoxical Bodies of Contemporary Art," Christine Ross thus explores the veiling of the body in modernism, and its reemergence as a major trope and medium in art since the 1960s – in practices from performance art to Minimalism to "cyborg" practices. Ross argues that the role and significance of the body in contemporary art is still little understood – although recent practices exploring *affectivity* via the enactment of the body provide the best means of getting to the bottom of how the body *means* in contemporary visual practice and so ultimately how it is experienced in other aspects of contemporary life.

Methods/Theories

This section includes chapters addressing major theoretical influences and shifts in contemporary art discourse and pointing to the ways in which art practices and visual culture have both informed and responded to these methodological shifts. Pivoting around the 2001 performative public event by Jeremy Deller – called *The English Civil War Part II*, and colloquially known as the *Battle of Orgreave* – Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska's chapter "A Shadow of Marx" thus explores the various roles played by Marxist theory in contemporary art practices and critical theories of the visual arts.

As Cummings and Lewandowska suggest, projects such as Deller's, which involved the elaborate reenactment of the epochal miner's strike in Britain in the 1980s that was viciously suppressed by the Thatcher administration, insist on art as an explicitly political cultural act and one that is always already caught up in (and even in many cases reproductive of) the forces of capital. As Cummings and Lewandowska note, such works put into play the Marxist recognition

that we are all "enacting a text written elsewhere. And this text, whether we like it or not and whether we can name it or not, is called ideology." Artists and art theorists in the contemporary period can thus either embrace their own inexorable commodification (like the "Young British Artists," or YBAs have done), or attempt to move out from the comforts provided by official art institutions producing performative works like Deller's – works that both remind us that the history of capitalism is a specific one with various events marking its triumphant development, and provide ways of thinking against the grain of its structures.[6]

Examining another key theoretical development closely related to developments in the visual arts, Sarah Wilson's chapter, entitled "Poststructuralism and Contemporary Art, Past, Present, Future . . ." provides an overview of the development of poststructuralism in continental philosophy (from semiotics to Lacanian and French feminist psychoanalytic theory), and its links to art practice and theory. Noting that poststructuralism as such was largely invented by Anglo-Americans enamored of complex theories of meaning and identity taking shape in France after WWII, Wilson points to the relative disinterest in Britain and the US in French contemporary art practices. She examines as well links between poststructuralist philosophy and literary theory, feminism, and other disciplinary models of cultural analysis relating to the visual arts.

Similarly, in the chapter " 'Fragments of Collapsing Space': Postcolonial Theory and Contemporary Art," Mark Crinson notes the crucial intersection between contemporary art and postcolonial theory from the 1980s onward. Beginning with the collapse of the European empires after WWII (in particular the breakaway of India from Britain (1947) and of Algeria from France (1962)), developing in tandem with identity politics, and inaugurated by the 1952 publication of Frantz Fanon's crucially influential *Black Skins, White Masks*, postcolonial theory began to have a major impact on art debates and practice in the 1980s. Crinson examines closely the work of artists such as Sonia Boyce, Yinka Shonibare, and Chris Ofili to explore how artists have drawn on aspects of postcolonial theory to produce works critically invested in notions of hybridity and globalization.

Driven by the impulse to break down disciplinary boundaries, and informed by ideas from cultural studies (a British interdisciplinary mode of cultural criticism developing in the 1960s), the sub- or anti-discipline of visual culture has arisen out of the desire to break down the boundaries staged by traditional art history in order to define high art as an ontologically separate field of objects intended for special (art historical) analysis. Marquand Smith's chapter, "Visual Culture Studies: Questions of History, Theory, and Practice," explores the rise of visual culture, its development as an (anti- or cross-)disciplinary model for examining visual imagery, and the impact of this discourse on the understanding and making of contemporary art. Smith discusses the important texts and institutional sites relevant to the rise of visual culture studies, as well as the debates between more traditional art historians (who tend to be threatened by the concept of visual culture) and avatars of visual culture, ending with an explora-

tion of the project he himself is involved in developing. Called "The Poetics of Place," this project exemplifies the ways in which contemporary art practices can usefully respond to the challenges posed by visual culture theory.

Technology

Ever since the rise of photography and the development of mass reproductive techniques from the mid-nineteenth century onward, technologies of image making have increasingly eroded traditional conceptions of art and aesthetics. With contemporary art, technologies of image making, reproduction, and dissemination (whether acknowledged or not) have become increasingly and unavoidably central to our understanding and experience of visual imagery. This final section of *Contemporary Art* addresses technological shifts in relation to visual culture and the ideological as well as new artistic strategies that have accompanied them.

Debates about the division between high and low culture emerged at the very beginnings of contemporary art discourse with Clement Greenberg's epochal 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." The first chapter in this section on technology, Nick Mirzoeff's " 'That's All Folks': Contemporary Art and Popular Culture," traces the trajectory of these debates and the impact of mass cultural modes of producing and disseminating images on contemporary art. Mirzoeff discusses the crucial role of Andy Warhol in emphasizing art making as inexorably tied to mass cultural production, the rise of postmodern theory, and the significance of the arguments made by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their influential 2000 book on globalization (*Empire*). Paralleling the arguments made in other chapters in *Contemporary Art*, he ends by pointing to the crucial impact of decolonization on globalization.

Photography and photographic technologies became increasingly central to contemporary art practice from the 1960s onward. With conceptual art work (by artists such as John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, and Dan Graham) the incursion of semiotic theory, and, in particular, the important 1977 essay by Rosalind Krauss on the photographic index, artists and theorists began recognizing the profound implications of this incursion of the photographic mode of seeing into our relationship with visuality. In "Image + Text: Reconsidering Photography in Contemporary Art," Liz Kotz addresses these theoretical concerns and focuses on the work of artists who explored or interrogated the photographic index as a means, in her words, "to move beyond the object to work directly on representation and cultural sign systems," examining as well the links between official conceptual art and photo-based work from the 1970s and 1980s.

Dore Bowen's "Imagine There's No Image (It's Easy If You Try): Appropriation in the Age of Digital Reproduction," also explores the ongoing impact of photographic technologies, as well as digital media, on contemporary art. Tracing the development of discourses addressing the rise of what Guy Debord called "the society of the spectacle" with the explosion of the mass media in

the twentieth century (and its acceleration after WWII), Bowen also analyzes a range of art practices exploring the spectacle and its effects in relation to the screen, from Fluxus performative works commenting on the vicissitudes of mass reproduction, to the works of Vietnamese-American photographer Binh Danh, and the melodramatic video installations of Bill Viola. In closing, Bowen notes that the *screen* has become the locus and metaphor for artists dealing with the crucial contemporary obsessions of perception, imagination, and a specific kind of memory ("third memory") particular to our current highly technologized image culture.

The final chapter of the book, María Fernández's "'Life-like': Historicizing Process and Responsiveness in Digital Art," charts the history – now over half a century long – of digital arts, from telematic and robotic works developed in the overlapping terrain between the sciences and arts during and after WWII, to recent artistic projects using artificial life, genetic, and cybernetic technologies to explore the boundaries of life itself. Fernández examines the growing body of art and visual theory that examines or enacts the erosion of boundaries between "the organic, the inorganic, the material, and the virtual," ultimately questioning the very meaning and existence of the human subject.

In Conclusion. . . . What is Contemporary Art?

Contemporary art can be understood, of course, as any work produced in the context of official visual arts institutions and discourses in Europe and the US (and, increasingly, beyond) in the post-WWII period. As noted, the author of the survey book on contemporary art is constrained by the necessity of pulling together some kind of coherent narrative, addressing a range of interrelated themes, in order to produce a viable handbook for students and other non-specialist readers.

In contrast, the 27 authors of the chapters in this book – coming from France, Britain, Canada, and the US – articulate multiple narratives about contemporary art and its attendant discourses. Their points of view range widely from the explicitly historicist or social art historical framework to the more cultural studies (or visual culture studies) oriented model, informed by Marxist, queer, feminist, postcolonial, and anti-racist theory. What this book offers that is unique, then, is precisely the diversity of point of view, which comes together only in the loosest possible way through intersecting arguments emphasizing a varied and heterogeneous range of characteristics associated with art made since 1945. (Although, of course, it must not be glossed that *I* certainly have a very particular editorial point of view, and that I am solely responsible for having commissioned the authors whose work is represented here.)

The few thoughts that might pull the book together as a whole, without violating its vitality (precisely sparked by its lack of unified point of view), would revolve around very broad concepts. In closing, then, let me just note that the

excitement and richness of viewing and studying contemporary art resides, for me, precisely in the way, in its most interesting forms, it continually unsettles understandings of and expectations about the way art functions and means in our culture. From Jackson Pollock flinging paint on a vast plain of canvas spread horizontally across the floor of his studio around 1950, to Robert Morris's and Eva Hesse's elegant yet sloppy "process art" (anti-)sculptural installations from around 1970, to Carolee Schneemann pulling a scroll from her vaginal canal in the mid 1970s, to Shirin Neshat's elegant video installations from c.2000 narrating the complexities of male/female relationships in Iranian Islamic culture, to Jeremy Deller's recent restaging of the "battle of Orgreave" or Sutapa Biswas's ongoing interrogations of postcolonial Indian-British identity – the best things artists have done in the post-WWII period have revolved around finding ways to open our eyes to what otherwise *would or could not be seen*. Perhaps most profoundly, art since 1945 has insistently, in ways varying as widely as the kinds of people making it, explored the *contingency* of the visual arts (like any form of expression) – the way in which works of art (including performances, live events, etc.) exist and come to mean within circuits of meaning, economic and social value, and personal and collective desire that are far more complex than we can ever fully understand.

But *that* – fortunately – will never keep us from trying. This book joins, humbly but with optimism, in that ongoing attempt.

Notes

1 When I attended Harvard University and studied art history in the early 1980s there was already in place a section on art since 1945 in the primary survey course. Granted, this section stopped more or less with the work of Morris Louis from the 1960s, included no work by women artists or artists of color, and addressed the work in a traditional way (using formalist models of analysis and anecdotal historical accounts), but at least the course addressed the contemporary.
2 For the best short overview on this and other related shifts see West (1990).
3 See Archer (2002); Fineberg (1995); Hopkins (2000); Joselit (2003); Lucie-Smith (2001); Wheeler (1991); Wood (1993).
4 Joselit (2003), 6. Joselit's is among the most nuanced of the available surveys, though it only addresses *American* art since 1945.
5 See Hickey (1994).
6 Notably, since Cummings and Lewandowska completed their essay, Deller was chosen as the Turner Prize winner in Britain for 2004. The Turner Prize is the single greatest honor given to contemporary artists in Britain (but also the most institutionalized form of recognition, with the work of Turner Prize finalists exhibited at the Tate Britain, and the whole process obsessively covered by the mainstream media). Deller's designation as Turner Prize winner further reinforces Cummings and Lewandowska's point about the inexorability of capitalism's incorporation of all forms of culture, even those that ostensibly contest its machinations; but also, of course, his triumph testifies to the significance of his work.

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