

ANTINOMIES OF ART AND CULTURE

MODERNITY, POSTMODERNITY, CONTEMPORANEITY

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TO JACQUES DERRIDA, 1930–2004, IN MEMORIAM

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEMPORANEITY QUESTION

TERRY SMITH

In the aftermath of modernity, and the passing of the postmodern, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity?

What a loaded question! Those with an interest in knowing how big-picture concepts tie to the particularities of existence these days will immediately recognize its challenges. For those involved in showing the rest of us how these particularities resonate with more general purport—that is to say, for artists, writers, teachers, thinkers, and the many other workers on matters symbolic (recently labeled “the creative class”)—it may be among *the* most pressing. This book interrogates these kinds of connections in the light of this kind of question. It explores the conditions that have startled such questions into the open, charts their impact within a variety of academic disciplines and cultural domains, and notes their polemic force in public debate. The chapters that follow offer a set of subtle and engaged readings of the most important antinomies at work in the arts and in culture at large today. There is much contestation, and some surprising points of agreement. What emerges are the lineaments of new kinds of approaches to some important issues—not least, the loaded, and of course quite contemporaneous, question of what kinds of purchase macro-descriptors such as modernity and postmodernity retain, and what implications that asking such a question might have for contemporary life, thought, and art.

In early November 2004, the contemporaneity question—its provocations and ambiguities no less naked to the gaze than its character as an entreaty—was posed to a public meeting of scholars, theorists, artists, critics, and curators at

the University of Pittsburgh. The occasion was a symposium, "Modernity ≠ Contemporaneity: Antinomies of Art and Culture after the Twentieth Century," convened by the editors of this volume as a complement to the Fifty-fourth Carnegie International Exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art.¹ The eminence of some participants had made their names nearly synonymous with the concepts of modernity and modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism. Others, however, had become accustomed to dismissing the viability of such world picturing, or to resisting it in the name of radical particularity. Still others were active proponents of more partial, even partisan descriptors. Three generations of thinking on these matters, from widely different perspectives and from all over the globe, were represented. This book maps out the considerations that led to the posing of the question of contemporaneity, and records the extraordinary responses that it received, both at the symposium and in the papers that have been revised by their authors as chapters for this volume.

CHANGING TIME

For a number of years there have been indications of profound realignments between the great formations of modernity, and of the emergence of what may be new formations. The 9/11 moment is a recent flashpoint of both civilizational and region-to-region conflict, and it continues to be used as a justification for governments of all stripes to declare open-ended states of emergency, and as an umbrella for the imposition of repressive agendas in many countries, not least the United States. Intractable, irresolvable "events" of this kind have come to seem almost normal in the state of aftermath: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the uncertain prospect of a U.S. emperium; the question of European polity, internally and externally; the implosive fallout of the Second World and the reemergence of authoritarianism and "democracy" within it; in the ex-Soviet peripheries, the suddenness of unReal states, and of the apparent extension of Europe; continuing conflicts in the Middle East, Central Europe, Africa, and the Pacific; the deadly inadequacy of both tribalism and modernization as models for decolonization in Africa; the crisis of post-World War II international institutions as political and economic mediators (United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank); the revival of leftist governments in South America; the accelerating concentration of wealth in a few countries, and within those countries its concentration in the few; ecological time bombs everywhere, and the looming threat of societal collapse; the ubiquity and diversification of specular culture; the concentration and narrowing of media, in contrast to the spread of the Internet; contradictions within and between regu-

lated and coercive economies and deregulated and criminal ones; the coexistence of multiple economies and cultures within singular state formations (most prominently, now, China); the proliferation of protest movements and alternative networks; the retreat toward bunker architecture at the centers and proliferation of ingenious, adaptive architecture in the border zones of swelling cosmopoli; and the emergence of distinctively different models of appropriate artistic practice, as manifested in major survey exhibitions, such as documenta 11 of 2002 and the Fiftieth Venice Biennale in 2003, along with the retreat into compromise that has marked much curatorial planning since then—with some exceptions, such as the 2006 editions of the Sydney Biennale and the Second Seville Biennial, also in 2006.²

These are just some of the most obvious new formations and fissures at the most public, political levels. Intense friction between them has set the world's agenda since the end of the Cold War, creating a nearly universal condition of permanent-seeming aftermath—Ground Zero everywhere—yet also inspiring insights into adaptable modes of active resistance and hopeful persistence. While there are many elements in a list such as this that are familiar from accounts of modernity and postmodernity, something about the mix, the mood, and the outcome seems to be becoming distinctive. On all levels, in every sphere, but above all at the level of public polity, there is an evident need for fresh ways of seeing the shape of present diversity. In the following sections I will set out the framework of concerns that led to the posing of the lead question about contemporaneity, situate the symposium in its immediate political context, and then introduce the chapters that make up this volume.

MAPPING MODERNITY

One of the most suggestive essays in the history of ideas—at least as that field bears on the arts—is "Modernity and Literary Tradition," by Hans Robert Jauss.³ It is a subtle study of conceptions of the modern—"the consciousness, that is, of having taken a step from the old to the new"—ranging from ordinary Latin usage in the ancient world to the self-conscious statements of the mid-nineteenth century. The story culminates in Charles Baudelaire's famous formulation of 1864: "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable" ("*modernité*, that is, the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, the other half of which is the eternal and the immutable").⁴ For Jauss, writing in 1970, Baudelaire's insight marked "the threshold of our current modernity." He was right about that. Jürgen Habermas and Matei Calinescu are prominent among those who have

since attempted to chart the next chapter, to bring Jauss's account up to date.⁵ No one has done so with the gusto and the philological precision that Jauss applied to the earlier history. In fact, much more acumen was displayed in profiling the appearance of concepts of postmodernity in cultural discourse, and doing so, in the great syntheses of Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, and in studies such as John Frow's *What Was Postmodernism?*, while it was happening.⁶

In mid-nineteenth-century Paris, Baudelaire's act of definition gained much of its force from its double nature: it frightened by insisting on the priority of the immediate, the chancy, the passing present, but it was thrilling, too, in its promise, to Modern artists of consequence, that a timeless art could be distilled from the random-seeming mobility of the contemporary. This art would be classic—perhaps eventually, perhaps soon—but in ways that neither the classical artists of the distant past nor the romantic artists of the recent past could ever have imagined. It would be new beauty, a modern eternity, whatever the future may hold. No wonder Baudelaire's doublet has attracted artists and critics, curators and collectors, ever since. It has also attracted sociologists, political scientists, commentators, and ideologues of many stripes.⁷ It held out the hope of a modernist realism that would outlast its necessary (but never sufficient) contemporaneity.⁸ It was the best of Modernism.

Yet modernity in the larger sense—as an ideology, a social formation, a world order—can now be seen to have developed such that it ratcheted up “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent” as facts of experience and history to such a pitch that it gradually but inevitably obliterated the other half of the doublet. Throughout much of the twentieth century, there was an incessant cycling between the two halves, a phenomenon that defined the main features of Modern art: its play of acceptance and rejection of the elements of modern life, its mobilizing of aspects of both high and popular culture, its interlacing of traditional practices with those of the new mechanical means of reproduction, its division into a formal and a historical/critical/political avant-garde, its tracking in and out of the museum. Many of these tensions became, in time, and especially in Europe and the United States, comfortably resolved. Modern art had achieved its own immutable eternity. Yet, in the 1960s and 1970s, when larger world changes and internal tensions pushed the edifice of modernity into overload, art began to struggle to generate productive syntheses. It does so now, in the form of official Contemporary Art, as echoes of its past glories. The anti-thetical energy of modernity's internal contract has faded, its trading off the past for the future is no longer foundational, its ice-calm control, however dazzling, is thinning fast.

Nowadays, the idea of returning to “the eternal and the immutable,” or of

forging new forms of both, appears anachronistic, quaint, and feeble, or worse, infantile. More broadly, the qualities of modernity have been forced into new conjunctions. Aspects of these changes were first recognized under the label “postmodernity,” and their artistic, fashion, and intellectual manifestations soon attracted the appellation “Postmodernism.” The nagging concern right now is that, for all their history as outcomes of modernity, does not the evolution of these qualities amount to a fundamentally changed situation? Have not forces that preexisted modernity returned unavoidably, do they not insist on the validity of other worldviews? Modernity has not, for decades, been able to maintain its division of the world into those who live in modern times and those who, while physically present, were regarded as noncontemporaneous beings. In arguing that the global spread of information and the instantaneousness of its communication now means that the “sociotemporal world order is changing in favor of contemporaneity for all,” historian Wolf Schäfer quotes a passage from Cheikh Hamidou Kane's 1961 novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, an exchange between the father of a young Senegalese revolutionary and a French teacher: “We have not had the same past, you and ourselves, but we shall have, strictly, the same future. The era of separate destinies has run its course. In that sense, the end of the world has indeed come for every one of us, because no one can any longer live by the simple carrying out of what he himself is.”⁹

Increased opportunity of access has not, of course, meant equality of outcome—on the contrary—nor has it meant (contrary to early fears about globalization) homogeneity of choices. During the period of modernity's dominance, the downside of what used to be called cultural imperialism was a kind of ethnic cleansing carried out by the displacement of unmodern peoples into past, slower, or frozen time. In a mediascape characterized by such contrary forces as instant communication of key decisions by political leaders and the capacity to demonstrate against them anywhere across the globe within the same news cycle, the power to force everyone forward in broadly the same direction has been lost. In many parts of the world, consciousness is concerned with taking many steps, fast, not from the old to the new, but vice versa. Multiple temporalities are the rule these days, and their conceptions of historical development move in multifarious directions. Against this broad tide, fundamentalisms move in just one direction, implacably. In these conflicted circumstances, any appellation that ties a current world description entirely to modernity, in however conditional a manner, and however decked out with a modified version of postmodernity, will miss as much of the main point as do the fundamentalisms.

Are we at a threshold of large-scale meaning change, yet again? If so, it is one

that has built its gateway around us, through indirection, and as an outcome of quite other great changes, not least the reduction of modernity to “the only remaining superpower,” the evaporation of postmodernist fashions as a one-generation wonder, and, some would argue, the isolation of postmodernity as a fate of the West (or, at least, of many parts and elements of it) but not the world. Nor does postmodernity seem any longer to explain, to others, enough of what is happening in what remains of the West as the world migrates to it, everyone changing as they come and go.

In these circumstances, a number of options loom. Contributors to this volume exemplify their variety. They tend, however, in two main directions. One mainstream returns to modernity, to revised visions of its richness in the West, of its multiplicity and distinctiveness elsewhere, and of the tensions across its many borders. The presumption here is that this revisioned modernity will return to take up a paradigmatic role, hopefully one less conflicted and deadly than that which reached its apogee in the twentieth century. Another seeks a strategic deferral of the question of the nature of the contemporary world picture while the business of critique continues, along with the identification of valued particularities. The hope here is that a configuration open to the antinomies of the present will emerge, one that tends toward hope, equity, and freedom—a genuine globalism, for example, or cosmopolitan citizenship. The risk in deferral is that it leaves effective definition in the hands of those with the will and power to impose their definitions. Given the current disposition of force in the world, and the evangelical and bellicose disposition of those forces, this is a risk indeed. Surely it is time to push critique further, to grasp a more supple set of ways of being in time now, and to shift to another set of terms. There is such a set, lying close by. But first another quick detour through the modern.

THE THICKENING OF THE PRESENT

In the ancient world, around the shores of the Mediterranean, the word “modern” (*modernus*) distinguished a mood, or mode, of fullness emergent in the otherwise ordinary passing of time, and within the predictable unfolding of fashion (*hodiernus*, “of today”). This sense that the present could be pregnant with something special about itself persisted until late medieval times, when contrast with what was seen to be the past, and then several past periods, became central to the meaning of modern. An early formulation was that of Saint Augustine: “There are three times: a present time of past things; a present time of present things; and a present time of future things.”¹⁰

In the expanded modern world, however, “modern” became the core of a set

of terms that narrated the two-centuries-long formation of modernity in terms of novelty, pastness, and futurism, not least those of its definitive artistic currents, Modern Art and modernism, Modern Movement architecture, and modern or contemporary design. Despite the vibrancy of these tendencies, the “modern” aged, as its time went on, until it became, in a paradox tolerated by most, historical. Indeed, it became the name of its own period, one that would, it was presumed, become increasingly modern, without end.

In art world discourse for most of the twentieth century—especially in the 1920s and the 1960s, when modernist attitudes prevailed—“contemporary” served mainly as a default for “modern.” In his proposal for the symposium, Boris Groys pointed out the main reason: “Modern art is (or, rather, was) directed toward the future. Being modern means to live in a project, to practice a work in progress. Because of this permanent movement toward the future, modern art tends to overlook, to forget the present, to reduce it to a permanently self-effacing moment of transition from past to future.”¹¹ Nevertheless, a number of the most engaged contemporary artists are redefining what it means to live in a project, and doing so in terms that acknowledge the power of the present. Examples of their work are regularly cited in the chapters that follow. This shift has been occurring since the decline of modernism in the 1980s, and has appeared in institutional naming—of galleries, museums, auction house departments, academic courses, and textbook titles—which, however, tend to use “contemporary” as a soft signifier of current plurality. This reflects broad-scale, ordinary usage: in English, and in some but not all other European languages, in China and much of Asia—“modern” has surrendered currency to the term “contemporary” and its cognates. Saint Augustine’s accumulation of presents has returned, uncannily, to currency.

REGARDING CONTEMPORANEITY

The word “contemporary” has always meant more than just the plain and passing present. Its etymology, we can now see, is as rich as that of “modern.” The term calibrates a number of distinct but related ways of being *in* or *with* time, even of being *in* and *out* of time at the same time. Indeed, for a while, during the seventeenth century in England, it seemed that the contraction “cotemporary” might overtake it to express this strange currency. Current editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* give four major meanings. They are all relational, turning on prepositions, on being placed “to,” “from,” “at,” or “during” time. There is the strong sense of “Belonging *to* the same time, age, or period” (1.a.), the coincidental “Having existed or lived *from* the same date,

equal in age, coeval" (2), and the adventitious "Occurring *at* the same moment of time, or *during* the same period; occupying the same definite period, contemporaneous, simultaneous" (3). In each of these three meanings there is a distinctive sense of presentness, of being in the present, of beings who are (that are) present to each other, and to the time they happen to be in. Of course, these kinds of relationships have occurred at all times in the historical past, do so now, and will do so in the future. The second and third meanings make this clear, whereas the first points to the phenomenon of two or more people, events, ideas, or things, "belonging" to the same historical time. Yet, even here, while the connectedness is stronger, while the phenomena may have some sense of being joined by their contemporaneousness, they may equally well do so, as it were, separately, standing alongside yet apart from each other, existing in simple simultaneity. They may also subsist in a complex awareness that, given human difference, their contemporaries may not stand in the same, or even a similar, relation to world time as they do; yet we are all, at the same time, touched by what is now global time—a new phase, perhaps, in what Fernand Braudel named "world time."¹² Given the diversity of present experiences of temporality, and our increased awareness of this diversity, it is becoming more and more common to feel oneself as standing, in important senses, at once *within* and *against* the times.

It is the *OED*'s fourth definition of "contemporary" that brings persons, things, ideas, and time together under a one-directional banner: "Modern; of or characteristic of the present period; especially up-to-date, ultra-modern; specifically designating art of a markedly *avant-garde* quality, or furniture, building, decoration, etc. having modern characteristics." In this definition, the two words have finally exchanged their core meaning: the contemporary has become the new modern. We are, on this logic, emerging out of the Modern Age, or Era, and into that of the Contemporary.

To leap to such a conclusion would be to miss an essential quality of contemporaneousness: its immediacy, its presentness, its instantaneity, its prioritizing of the moment over the time, the instant over the epoch, of direct experience of multiplicitous complexity over the singular simplicity of distanced reflection. It is the pregnant present of the original meaning of "modern," but without its subsequent contract with the future. It is the first, discomforting part of Baudelaire's famous doublet, but bereft of the comfort of the second part. If we were to generalize this quality (of course, against its grain) as a key to world picturing, we would see its constituent features manifest there, to the virtual exclusion of other explanations. We would see, then, that *contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctions of percep-*

tion, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them. This certainly looks like the world as it is now. 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 contemporary conditions periodization is impossible.¹³ The only potentially permanent thing about this state of affairs is that it may last for an unspecifiable amount of time: the present may become, perversely, "eternal." Not, however, in a state of wrought transfiguration, as Baudelaire had hoped, but as a kind of incessant incipience, of the kind theorized by Jacques Derrida as *à venir*—perpetual advent, that which is, while impossible to foresee or predict, always to come.¹⁴

Multeity, adventitiousness, and inequity are not only the most striking features on any short list of the qualities of contemporaneity; they are at its volatile core. Unlike Baudelaire's three initial markers of *modernité* ("the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent"), they are not the symptoms of a deeper stability, or an entry point to its achievement. In the aftermath of modernity, and the passing of the postmodern, they may be *all that there is*. This is why there is no longer any overarching explanatory totality that accurately accumulates and convincingly accounts for these proliferating differences. The particular, it seems, is now general, and, perhaps, forever shall be.

This is not a recommendation for stand-alone, singularizing particularism—rather, it is an appeal for radical particularism to work with and against radical generalization, to treat all the elements in the mix as antinomies. Global historians continue to do us great service by tracking the trajectories of large forces that unfold through lengthy durations. These include the social and ecological elements—localized, metropolitan, and cosmopolitan—of the successively expanding "human web" described by J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill.¹⁵ Yet it is equally important to weave into these accounts some recognition of the less visible workings of what Manuel DeLanda names "matter-energy."¹⁶ A paradoxical outcome of recent long-term historical explanations is their unusual degree of uncertainty with regard to the immediate future.¹⁷ While belief in the persistence through the present of ongoing formations is widespread, the forms in which that might occur seem less predictable. Obsession with the past, and concern about the complexities of the present, have tended to thicken our awareness of it, at the expense of expectations about the future. Social geographers such as Jared Diamond alert us to the prospect that societies based on

guns, germs, and steel are on the verge of immanent collapse if they continue to maintain present modes of thought and organization.¹⁸ As Wolf Schäfer (rather mildly) puts it, “coming to terms with the complexity of the present time, which results from the massive parallelism of cultural contemporaneities, is obviously one of the great challenges.”¹⁹ The most developed theorization of contemporaneity so far advanced is that of Marc Augé. Responding to the crisis in anthropology brought about by decolonization, he boldly draws out the consequences of the fact that the core object of that colonial discipline suddenly ceased to be the remote other—rather, it became the proximate other and then, precipitously, othernesses within ourselves. His insight is that what counts in contemporaneity (which he labels “supermodernity”) is none of these identities-in-formation alone but their existence in relation to each other. “The world’s inhabitants have at last become truly contemporaneous, and yet the world’s diversity is recomposed every moment; this is the paradox of our day.”²⁰

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the elements of accelerated modernity picked out during the 1970s by the theorists of postmodernism had become, with a precise perversity, popular. When, in late 2004, Apple Inc. sought a slogan to market its iPod Shuffle—a portable device for playing digitalized music files installed and organized not, as in the original iPod, by the owner but by the machine itself, which plays them in a preprogrammed but unpredictable sequence—it chose “Life is Random.” Reading that on billboards, or seeing it on television, seemed more than tautological. During the early months of 2005, the best-selling book on the *New York Times* nonfiction list was Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink*. Subtitled *The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, it celebrated the acuity of instant, intuitive judgement, as exemplified in the attributive ability of art connoisseurs.²¹ These are two widely separated but convergent instances of contemporaneity recognizing, and celebrating, itself in its most superficial manifestations.

In public discourse, “master narratives” not only persist but also have become increasingly simplified (perhaps so that they can be grasped, and believed, without thinking). They continue to promise everything from continual modernizing progress—“freedom” and “democracy” are the watchwords of U.S. expansion into the Middle East—to the return of spiritual leaders under the banner, for example, of jihad. Certainly the commanding, beguiling power of these simplifications builds followings in larger and larger numbers. But their partiality inevitably means that they do so in ways that divide each bloc of believers more and more from the others, with the net effect that they not only cast out “unbelievers” but also undermine their own future triumph. In the hearts of their spiritual leaders, there is a dawning sense that world domination

by any one set of views is impossible in human affairs, that not even their fundamentalism is applicable to all human kind, that the others will, mostly, remain Other. This sense underlies, and deeply threatens, the homogenizing thrusts of certain kinds of economic globalization, obliging it to adapt to local circumstances. It also renders provisional, and often gestural, the appeals to universal rights that have been for decades an available language for negotiation between competing interests. This is dangerous. New forms of translation need to be found for channeling the world’s friction.

Differences that are as profound as these do not lie side by side, peacefully, nor do they sit up separately in some static array awaiting our inspection. They are actively implicated in one another, all over the place, all the time, just as every one of us lives in them, always. Their interaction is a major work of the world, of the world on us and us on the world. We are, all of us, thoroughly embedded inside these processes. Too many of them are violently bent on the erasure of the other. Some, however, seek reconciliation within a framework of respect for difference. The Australian contemporary Aboriginal art movement, for example, is significantly driven by this impulse. All of these elements were present in events such as the 9/11 attacks on various U.S. “icons of economic and military power”—an incomplete event with continuing effects in all spheres of life. While the language of universals remains current, reflecting the global networks that actually and materially connect the world’s diversity, it always arises in concrete particulars, and increasingly in the form of frictional encounters.²²

IMMEDIATE POLITICS

One condition unavoidable in a conference about the present held in the United States (or, perhaps, anywhere else) in the first week of November 2004 was the presidential election campaign, completed just two days before. The usual clichés about this being “the most important election ever” had been advanced, at their normal, hyperbolic level. There were, however, good reasons to take such a claim seriously. Like many others, the symposium conveners had thought that the country—and all those elsewhere in the world affected by U.S. policy and actions (that is to say, most of us)—would likely be in a state of suspension similar to that which occurred in the weeks following the 2000 election, when the outcome was not clear, the will of the people so divided that its accurate expression became impossible to discern, and a partisan institutional solution was imposed, with the result that a much-vaunted political system seemed to survive by chance, through the wielding of raw power, and to subsist through blind luck. Suspension of disbelief, a sense of waiting for the

fallout from events incompletely understood, dread of arbitrary punishment, fearful anticipation of obscure disaster, uncertainty with regard to both past and future—these are just some of the moods of aftermath that the symposium set out to explore. They played a key role in the 2004 campaign, which had become a pitched battle between steadfast commitment to a few simple values, a plain list of patriotic staples, and a realistic recognition that, on September 11, 2001, the world's complexity had come home to roost.

Nor was this great divide confined to the messages sent by candidates Bush and Kerry. That other global players could see its signature was evident in their comments made during the campaign period. British prime minister Tony Blair obediently explained the U.S. president's banalities in more subtle registers. Osama bin Laden addressed the American people, via video, enumerating a decades-long list of U.S. attacks on Muslims in the Middle East, to which, he claimed, Al Qaeda was reacting, and doing so with demonstrable effectiveness. Faced with the persistence of exploding planes, subway bombs, schools held hostage, and botched rescue attempts, Russian president Vladimir Putin came clean: "We have to admit that we failed to recognize the complexity and danger of the processes going on in our country and the world as a whole."²³ Nevertheless, by a sufficient majority, on November 2, 2004, the U.S. electorate accepted, as a truth or at least a tolerable fiction, the gross simplification that the world was riven by just two tendencies: globalization, led by the U.S. government and U.S. companies, was a progressive, universal good, whereas all forces ranged against it were deluded at best, or, at worst, terrorists. Along with many others elsewhere, they accepted the argument that the warring between globalization and terrorism is definitive of the present time, and that the winning of this war will define the future. Or, perhaps more accurately, they were prepared, for various quite particular reasons of self-interest, to be governed by those who held this view. As these realizations sunk in, they infiltrated the speech of the symposium in a variety of ways.

One political season, however fraught, in one country, however influential, does not in itself signal a change in the ways the world strives to understand itself. Nor does one occurrence, however traumatic its outcomes. In the months immediately following the attacks of September 11, 2001, it became a commonplace, especially among citizens of the United States, to characterize "9/11" as "The Event That Changed the World Forever." Phrases such as "Nothing Will Ever Be the Same" concretized an already existent age of anxiety, and were a plea to be led out of the strangeness through an all-out attack on fear, quickly labeled by a desperate media and an opportunist president as a "War on Terror," to be carried out both at home and abroad. Originating in genuine shock, the state-

ment elevated specific bewilderment into an act of History; it generalized immediate affect into a cliché that recognized pain but promised ultimate comfort. Public rhetoric, so often confined to the pragmatics of average self-interest—as in the case of the phrase "It's the economy, stupid!" that swung the 1992 presidential campaign in Bill Clinton's favor—inflated itself to the stratosphere. Many critical thinkers, artists among them, were caught short.

While simplification might dominate the public rhetoric of elites across the political spectrum, and prevail in elections at major power centers, it less and less matches the everyday experience and the imaginary lives of more and more people. Voters in India in 2004 threw out a fundamentalist regime; in 2005 voters in "core" European nations refused to ratify a Constitution for Europe; petty dictators are being dislodged from the periphery of the former Soviet empire; in 2006 voters in the United States finally lost patience with the tissue of self-deception that shrouded the conduct of U.S. policy in the Middle East and called it for what it was, a colonialist enterprise being pointlessly pursued in postcolonial times; meanwhile, within Islam, a great contestation is occurring between literalist and open forms of belief, one that may dislodge the rigidity of its ruling houses and perhaps its fundamentalisms . . . condensed instances of each of these developments are not only instantly seen all around the world, and seen for what they are, but in one form or another they are felt to matter everywhere. They are the antinomies of contemporaneity: now, more than before, the services of those able to grasp complexity, and place its clarity before the people, are not only necessary but, in the longer or shorter run, may stand a chance of being effective.

ANTOLOGIES OF THE PRESENT

In the aftermath of modernity, and the passing of the postmodern, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity?

While few defenders of Postmodernism as a style in art or architecture remain, many still take postmodernity as the best available critical theory of global capital and its cultures in the contemporary world. Pivotal to the planning of the 2004 symposium and this volume were the theories of postmodernity as the form of "the cultural logic of late capitalism" advanced during the 1980s by Fredric Jameson and elaborated by David Harvey. Jameson continued to deepen his analyses in a number of books that warned against the hegemonic tendencies in ideas of globalization and emphasized the antinomial nature of the main forces constituting postmodernity.²⁴ His more recent work has been a salutary signal of the need to confront these issues in all of their stark intrac-

tability. In *A Singular Modernity* he warns against pluralist dreams of “alternative modernities,” pointing out that such analyses suit the ideologues of global capitalism.²⁵ Against this, he sets out to confront the persistent power of modernity as a necessarily periodizing, situational “narrative category,” and that of “artistic modernism,” which “necessarily posits an experience of the work in the present.”²⁶ Attacking modernity for its ideological work on behalf of capitalism, and Modernism for its incessant recursions to formalism and putative artistic autonomy, Jameson confined their usefulness as concepts to the past, and concluded that “ontologies of the present demand archaeologies of future, not forecasts of the past.”²⁷

The chapters in this book pursue this goal in a variety of ways. In the first, Antonio Negri poses a key question: “What does it mean to be ‘contemporary’ between modernity and postmodernity?” A lot rides on that “between.” Negri argues for a postmodernism that escapes “the direct lineage of modernity.” After carefully measuring the concept of contemporaneity against each of the elements in his own extraordinarily subtle conceptions of postmodernity and of Empire, Negri concludes that it subsists *within* postmodernity, originating at the points of its most radical break with modernity and is manifest now at its points of most radical potential. Responding directly to the ideas advanced by the symposium convenors, he states: “Contemporaneity (as you define it) is situated in postmodernity, when postmodernity is understood as a field of forces that are not only new and orbiting the global circuit, but are also innovative and antagonistic. . . . Contemporaneity is the only way to express the eternal will to resistance and freedom.” As Geeta Kapur shows in the second chapter, exactly this type of will was expressed by the people of India in their vote in the 2004 national elections, as it had been in the work of a number of documentary filmmakers.

Staunch defenders of a type of Modernism that is committed to focused, exact acknowledgment of the specificities of its mediums as the only possible pathway for serious art today (explicitly in this volume, Rosalind Krauss) seem nonetheless satisfied with postmodernity, particularly that defined by Fredric Jameson, as an adequate world descriptor. Other art world voices propose that Modernism needs to be updated: in his contribution to the symposium (unfortunately not in this volume) curator Nicolas Bourriaud extended his now quite famous description of major tendencies in current art (relational aesthetics, postproduction art) by identifying what he called an *altermodernism*—the Modernism of the others, a worldwide spread of distinct but related Modernisms.²⁸ The installation, now ubiquitous in contemporary art exhibitions, is explored by Boris Groys, who argues that it designates a space both literal and

metaphorical, in which anything from the actual world may be made at once present and provisional. Because this occurs without evoking the implied social and aesthetic narratives of modernity and Modernism, installation, he suggests, is the quintessentially contemporary art form.

Another major theme in the chapters that follow begins from the recognition that periodizing generalizations such as “modernity” and “postmodernity” were foreign to non-Western cultures, and that their imposition onto these cultures, while provocative of local Modernisms, was accomplished, as Sylvester Ogbechie and Colin Richards argue, at great and, in many cases, continuing cost. Nevertheless, as these authors, along with Monica Amor and Suely Rolnik, show, individual artists in such settings were quite capable of developing practices that absorbed and transcended the limits that others sought to impose. Jonathan Hay urges us to think of these complex exchanges and developments in terms of doubled and even para-modernities.

More broadly, Okwui Enwezor points out that decolonization has had as profound a set of effects as globalization (the latter might indeed be seen as a response to the former), not only in previously colonized cultures but also in those of the colonizers. The entire world is, from this point of view, in a postcolonial constellation. Modernity and postmodernity are seen as having diminishing relevance to other cultures at the borders of Europe and beyond the West. Nancy Condee argues modernity was always a strange hybrid in the Soviet empire, and has become a malleable, yet still astringent, relic in the aftermath of its implosion. Contemporaneity, Gao Minglu suggests, has always been a permanent condition of Chinese culture (it being tradition-directed but never futuristic), yet is being redefined, according to Wu Hung, by the recent and current engagement of Chinese artists with the contemporary art world, itself increasingly internationalized beyond East-West, North-South divisions. Just how artists working in different parts of the world are responding to the situation in their regions and to the global condition of contemporaneity is an issue to which authors in this book constantly return.

In the last section, a number of authors offer pointers toward political orientation in present conditions. Bruno Latour argues for a return to consensus building based on an ecological model: the agreement among things as to their negotiated differences. James Meyer shows that the revival of interest among contemporary artists in the strategies of political engagement proposed during the 1960s and 1970s, however nostalgic, is also a searching for a useable past. What, then, of the impact of ubiquitous new media, especially digital? Lev Manovich urges us to notice the shift to “infoaesthetics,” while McKenzie Wark lauds hacker interventions into the seeming dominance of the vector class. In

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the concluding chapter, Nikos Papastergiadis returns to the contemporaneity question posed at the beginning of this inquiry and sums up ways in which contemporary artists are facing its challenges.

Composer Karl-Heinz Stockhausen saw the 9/11 attacks, however deplorable, as having some of the sublime qualities of the “total work of art.” During the culture wars of the 1980s in the United States, passionate conservatives such as Jesse Helms labeled certain artists “cultural terrorists.” If it is to be truly contemporary, rather than an update of comfortable Modernism, the art of today must respond deeply to the complex conditions of contemporaneity. Does this put at risk the assumption, widespread among artists, that the very process of making art, the lifelong struggle for insight and originality, is fundamentally redemptive? The implied contract between artists and their societies—the invitation to provide beauty, insight, and provocation in exchange for tolerance and occasional support in pursuing one’s obsessions—that has been forged over the past two centuries: what will be its fate in the new world disorder?

My own description of the current situation is one that would find varying degrees of support, and some strong opposition, among the contributors to this volume. I discern four major preoccupations in most contemporary art practice and discourse: continuing work on the implications of the fundamental provisionalization of art that erupted in the 1950s and 1960s; the institutionalization of Contemporary Art as a recursive refinement of high Modernism; the accommodation of the diversification of values introduced by practitioners emergent from all over the world; and a widespread inclination toward an art of small gestures, slight interventions, imagined transformations. (These last are, however, far from unstructured: time, place, medium, and mood preoccupy younger artists—theirs is an immediate response to the turbulence of temporalities, locations, mediations, and identities that typifies contemporary conditions.) All of these themes occur in the chapters that follow, where they receive different degrees of emphasis and are combined or challenged in distinctive ways. From the broadest perspective, they might be seen as art world responses to friction between the three antinomies that have come to dominate contemporary life: (1) globalization’s thirst for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural differentiation (the multiteity that was freed by decolonization), for control of time in the face of the proliferation of asynchronous temporalities, and for continuing exploitation of natural and (to a degree not yet seen) virtual resources against the increasing evidence of the inability of those resources to sustain this exploitation (for these among other reasons globalization is bound to fail); (2) the accelerating inequity among peoples, classes, and individuals

that threatens both the desires for domination entertained by states, ideologies, and religions and the persistent dreams of liberation that continue to inspire individuals and peoples; and (3) an infoscape—or, better, a spectacle, an image economy or “iconomy,” a regime of representation—capable of the potentially instant yet always thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere, but which is at the same time fissured by the uneasy coexistence of highly specialist, closed-knowledge communities, alongside open, volatile subjects, and rampant popular fundamentalisms.²⁹

Working within but also against this general condition (contemporaneity itself), artists everywhere supply particular kinds of provisional syntheses, or provide pauses in the overall rush into the unsynthesizable, showing its flows as if in section, or as glimpses frozen into objects intended for passers in between; artists model the minutiae of the world’s processes as supplements that mark out possible pathways before us. It is no accident that works such as Gego’s *Retriarea*, Lygia Clark’s *The Structuring of the Self*, and Zoe Leonard’s *Analogue* are highlighted in this book. These kinds of artistic offerings take shape somewhat distinctively in the different regions of the world, depending on the purchase of recent history and the specific demands of locality, but they also seem to be benefiting more and more from growing experience of interrogatory cosmopolitanism, from the circulation of critical ideas and examples. Mapping, accurately, the specific frictions of this world making—the actualities, the potentialities of it—is the most pressing task before contemporary art history. Relating such maps to the larger scale frictional machinery of the current world (dis)order—identifying, again, the actualities, the potentialities—is the main challenge facing cultural theory today. The essays in this book are offered as a contribution to these urgent enterprises.

NOTES

- 1 According to its curator, Laura Hoptman, the exhibition profiled certain artists whose work engaged with “the Ultimates’ . . . [the] fundamentally human questions: the nature of life and death, the existence of God, the anatomy of belief.” See her “The Essential Thirty-Eight,” 35.
- 2 See Merewether, *2006 Sydney Biennale*; and Enwezor, *The Unhomely*.
- 3 In Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*. An English translation was published in *Critical Inquiry*.
- 4 Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 12.
- 5 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*; Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*.
- 6 Frow, *What Was Postmodernism?* and *Time and Commodity Culture*. This essay charts,

- among others, the classic statements of Fredric Jameson, Ihab Hassan, and David Harvey. See Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," and his *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*; and Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.
- 7 For example, Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*; Hall and Gieben, *Formations of Modernity*.
- 8 See Nochlin, *Realism*, 25–33.
- 9 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 79–80; quoted by Schäfer, "Global History and the Present Time," 119; Schäfer quotation page 118.
- 10 Augustine, *Confessions*, book 11, chap. 20: "tempora sunt tria, praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris." I am indebted to Schäfer for this reminder.
- 11 See www.mc.pitt.edu/overview—Resources.asp.
- 12 As "the trades and rhythms of the globe," for Braudel world time is "a kind of superstructure of world history"; yet he cautions, "even in advanced countries, socially and economically speaking, world time has never counted for the whole of human existence" (*Civilization and Capitalism*, 3:19–20).
- 13 This responds to one of the dilemmas posed by Jameson in his *A Singular Modernity*.
- 14 A key concept in Derrida's later work, the most relevant texts here being *Specters of Marx* and the interview following 9/11 in Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*.
- 15 McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, introduction and chap. 8. Attempts to relate developments in art to larger social and natural formations have a long history. See Kaufmann, *Towards a Geography of Art*. An anthology of current efforts is Kaufmann and Pilliod, *Time and Place*.
- 16 DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, 227–74. Just as relevant is his effort to develop Deleuze's ideas about assemblage to the layerings of social complexity between the personal and the global. See DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*.
- 17 See Christian, *Maps of Time*.
- 18 Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *Collapse*.
- 19 Schäfer, "Global History and the Present Time," 109.
- 20 Augé, *The Anthropology of Contemporaneous Worlds*, 89. Augé is best known for his earlier book *Non-Places*, a brilliant study of the interstices of contemporary spatial experience, seen, along the lines of David Harvey, as accelerations of the conditions of modernity. An accessible introduction to the implications of this approach for anthropology today is Augé and Colleyn, *The World of the Anthropologist*.
- 21 Regarding art connoisseurs, Gladwell might have profited from reading Panofsky's 1927 essay, "Reflections on Historical Time," in which it is demonstrated that such connoisseurs are actually thoroughly expert art historians, applying, in the instant of looking at a previously unseen work of art, the same skills and competencies that are at the base of their scholarly essays, and which may be found in expository form there.
- 22 See Tsing, *Friction*.
- 23 Quoted by Meyers, "Putin Says Russia Faces Full 'War.'"
- 24 Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*.
- 25 Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 12.
- 26 Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 94–95.

- 27 Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 215. In his comments at the Pittsburgh symposium, Jameson expressed doubt as to whether the concept of contemporaneity was adequate to this task.
- 28 See Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* and *Post-Production*, both reviewed in *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004).
- 29 For expanded versions of this argument see my *The Architecture of Aftermath*, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," "World Picturing in Contemporary Art," and "Creating Dangerously." I thank Susan Bielstein, W. J. T. Mitchell, Okwui Enwezor, and James Thomas for their assistance in refining these formulations.