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TERRY SMITH
Thinking Contemporary Curating

Terry Smith
Thinking Contemporary Curating is the first in a new publication series developed by Independent Curators International (ICI) entitled Perspectives in Curating which offers timely reflections by curators, artists, critics, and art historians on emergent debates in curatorial practice around the world.

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The starting point for Thinking Contemporary Curating occurred on March 11, 2011—day one of The Now Museum conference that Independent Curators International (ICI) produced in collaboration with The Graduate Center, CUNY and the New Museum in New York. Involving artists, art historians, curators, and museum directors in a series of panel discussions and conversations, the three-day event looked at the diversification of the notion of the “museum of contemporary art,” providing intergenerational perspectives on recent developments across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

While topics in the spotlight included the reconsideration of historical narratives (or their abandonment), recent alternative models to traditional museum infrastructures, and burgeoning international collaborations, the subtext to the whole event was a revelation of the various positions the speakers held in relation to the contemporary museum as a place and/or concept. What became evident was a slightly uneasy breakdown in communication among speakers (and at times audience members)—in particular between curators and art historians—who, even when talking about the same thing, frequently could not tell that this was the case, causing a slippage in establishing what was at stake, let alone any cooperative game plan in moving ideas forward.

The breakdown became palpable on the afternoon of the first day, during the discussion “Contemporanizing History/Historicizing the Contemporary,” led by Claire Bishop (Associate Professor, PhD Program in Art History, The Graduate Center, CUNY) with panelists Okwui Enwezor (Director, Haus der Kunst), Annie Fletcher (Curator, Van Abbemuseum), Massimiliano Gioni (Associate Director and Director of Exhibitions, New Museum), and Terry Smith. It continued as a fascinating glitch in the proceedings of the many sessions that followed.

A month or so later, over dinner, I brought up this slippage to Terry Smith, asking him
what he thought lay at the root of it. I suggested perhaps it was a difference in style and use of language. Art historians are trained (and expected) to propose a unique observation (no matter how minutely different) on any given topic, outline the facts and problems that pertain to its specificities, and present their solutions before providing a conclusion that proves they are right. Curators, on the other hand, take a far more speculative (and often meandering) approach, outlining the issues at stake from personal experience, describing a project and various artists’ practices that test ways to understand key points, then making an open-ended proposition for consideration with the conclusion that research is ongoing.

Smith did not totally agree with my reasoning, but conurred that there was something in the “glitch,” particularly as a result of the increasingly multifarious production modes of curators. While it is widely accepted that the role has been professionalized and given independence from bureaucratic mandates, with a “coming of age” occurring in the 1990s, we are still fumbling to pinpoint what really constitutes contemporary curating. If the curatorial position remained fixed, as it was historically—behind the scenes, pragmatic, and ostensibly service oriented—this belaboring of specifics and terminologies would be unnecessary, but as the curatorial imperative gains momentum around the world, its form is mutating and becoming untethered from its modern precedent. Furthermore, the notion of a language around curating is still nascent, or at best tentative, as evidenced by the anecdotal fallback position so often used by practitioners. After much back and forth and a few glitches in our own conversation, by the end of the night we were left with yet another question, though one that was pertinent to getting to the bottom of the first: What is distinctive about contemporary curatorial thought?

And so Thinking Contemporary Curating became the first book-length text to lay the groundwork for articulating specificities in this still-forming field. As described in his acknowledgments, Smith has actively (and I would add generously and thoroughly) engaged with numerous exhibitions, conversations, and projects around the world—often as they are occurring—and gained an overview of both emerging and established curator’s ideas, practices, and outcomes, with one pivotal closed-door group discussion between professionals triggering the form of the text in front of us now. Divided into five chapters that loosely define five facets or operatives, Smith considers what contemporaneity means for curating, and examines the curator’s position in relation to the artist, the public, the exhibition, the institution, and the expanded infrastructure that constitutes the art world within global social, political, and cultural frameworks. Recognizing the drive for contemporary curatorial practices to destabilize common
assumptions or positions, as well as rethink geographic and political representations, Smith also weaves case studies of key exhibitions, debates, and propositions in recent history that have set precedents from which we can build.

This is the first book in a series entitled Perspectives in Curating that will be published by Independent Curators International (ICI) to provide sustained analysis on topics that are pressing for curators now. This initiative follows a number of others that ICI has established since 2010 to support curatorial research and development in various forms: The Curator’s Perspective—a talks series in New York that periodically travels across the U.S.—provides a platform for curators from around the world to present their observations on social and political situations that are impacting their practice, the projects they understand to be important to curatorial developments, and the artists who are making them think; DISPATCH—a quarterly online journal with each issue guest-produced by a different curator around a topic of their choice that relates to where they live and work—provides a flexible format for sharing information and ideas-in-progress; and The Curatorial Intensive—a short-term program for working professionals from around the world held twice annually in New York and in collaboration with institutional partners internationally—enables the exchange of knowledge and expertise while developing a new project with all-too-rare peer feedback. While each of these programs, together with conference and fellowship initiatives, offers curators the opportunity to test ideas, think out loud, and develop an international network, the imperative for the book series is to take research to a deeper level. By dedicating resources and attention to a single topic in each volume and building the issues explored over time, Perspectives in Curating is intended to be responsive to the rapid developments in the field while recognizing the need to slow down in understanding what is at stake in the questions we ask of the practice.

Although a new initiative, the precedent for Thinking Contemporary Curating was established in 2001, when ICI published its first book on curatorial practice, Words of Wisdom: A Curator’s Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art. Markedly different in its approach, the book included short texts offering advice to a new generation of curators from sixty professionals who were playing a crucial role in shaping the field. (These included Lynne Cook, Bice Curiger, Thelma Golden, Hou Hanru, Vasif Kortun, Lucy R. Lippard, Maria Lind, Jean-Hubert Martin, Gerardo Mosquera, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Seth Siegelaub, and Harald Szeemann.) It’s hard to imagine today, but just over ten years ago there was only one Curatorial Studies Masters program in the United States (five worldwide), and barely six publications available on the subject. Now the need is not an
increased quantity of material but the publishing of more internationally widespread and comprehensive research that enables the field to gain a shared history and language from which to grow. Terry Smith’s incredible work in Thinking Contemporary Curating ensures its place as the first of such titles and a key reference for years to come.

This book would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of people and organizations: Chelsea Haines, ICI’s Public Programs Manager, has steered the project from start to finish with great dedication and style as always; editor extraordinaire Audrey Walen and ICI’s ever-creative designer Scott Ponik have made production a pleasure; and Jessica Gogan has been the quiet force behind ensuring images and facts are all there.

Thanks go to Claire Bishop and Eungie Joo, my partners in crime in conceiving of and programming The Now Museum conference, and Okwui Enwezor, Annie Fletcher, and Massimiliano Gioni, Terry Smith’s fellow panelists in the discussion that caused this book. To reiterate Smith’s acknowledgment, special thanks also go to the participants of the “Contemporary Art: World Currents” curatorial roundtable at ICI on October 20, 2011, for their perspectives and insight that gave the book its form.

Perpetual thanks go to ICI’s staff, especially Renaud Proch, Deputy Director, who gives ICI its wings, Fran Wu Giarratano, Exhibitions Manager, who guided this project, and Mandy Sa, Communications Manager, who always ensures our books get out there.

Crucial to the development of Thinking Contemporary Curating was the confidence in ICI from Ray Graham III, and the very generous funding from the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation for the production of our new publications. Important support has also come from the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, especially Margaret Ayers and Roslyn Black, whose deep commitment to international exchange enables ICI to develop meaningful programming and research around the world. For the first time, ICI has also had the benefit of the new International Forum, whose members are pioneers in recognizing the importance of ICI’s global networks. As ever, I extend my warmest appreciation to the ICI Board of Trustees for their ongoing support and enthusiasm.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to Terry Smith, who has been inspiring to work with and learn from. I hope this is just the beginning of our research. This book is an amazing gift. Thank you.
Acknowledgments

These essays were initially developed as talking points for the “Contemporary Art: World Currents,” seminar with Terry Smith, held at Independent Curators International, New York, October 20, 2011. Following discussion during the seminar, and later reflections, they have been revised and considerably expanded. Many thanks to the seminar participants: Leeza Ahmady, Kalia Brooks, Doryun Chong, Sarah Demeuse, Ruba Katrib, Olga Kopenkina, Diana Nawi, and Sofía Olascoaga. Thanks to Jessica Gogan for deeply informed and careful research assistance with both the text and images. I am grateful to Robert Bailey, Brianne Cohen, Izabel Galliera, Boris Groys, Peter S. Myer, Nicole Pollentier, Mari Carmen Ramírez, João Ribas, and Hilary Robinson for their comments on the draft text, and my curatorial colleagues in Pittsburgh, Sydney, New York and elsewhere for useful informal discussions. I thank, too, everyone at ICI, especially Chelsea Haines, who have worked tirelessly on this publication. Most thanks go to Kate Fowle for her inspirational work at ICI and for our ongoing dialogue on matters curatorial.

To Okwui
When it comes to showing art, do curators think in ways that are unique to their profession? Can curatorial thought be distinguished from the thinking processes within the myriad of closely related practices—especially art criticism, art history, and art making—and from curating within other kinds of museum or display spaces, public and private? Every exhibition demonstrates that curators reflect on circumstance, wrestle with ideas, develop research programs, and spark insights. Yet the discourse of art curators about curating—curatorial talk—while passionate and committed, seems routinely satisfied with rhetorical gestures, knowing asides, and ostensive demonstrations. For a profession driven by the desire to communicate with art’s publics, its enabling dialogue is surprisingly inner-directed. Why is the substance of curatorial thinking so rarely articulated? It seems to me that this question has surfaced (become public) within a vast, rapid, and quickening change in the conditions within which curating is now undertaken. These changes require a different kind of thinking than that which served during modern times. They lead to a key question, to the exploration of which these essays are devoted: What is contemporary curatorial thought?

I raise this question at a time when curating is everywhere being extended, encompassing every kind of organizing of any body of images or set of actions. The title of curator is assumed by anyone who has a more than minimal role in bringing about a situation in which something creative might be done, who manages the possibility of invention, or even organizes opportunities for the consumption of created objects or orchestrates art-like occasions. Google invites us to curate our profile, Picasa our very own image gallery. Certain restaurants proudly display menus curated by a food expert. A leading department store boastfully advertizes the name of its curator of jewelry. A gallery proudly acknowledges the designer of its elaborate opening event as its curator. On the front cover of a brochure, the Whitney Museum encourages members to curate their own 2012 Biennial by planning their attendance at the events constituting the exhibition. The underlying thrust of these usages is made explicit in projects such as net entrepreneur Steven Rosenbaum’s Curationnation.org, which is devoted to advising businesses on “How to Win in a World Where Consumers are Creators,” curation being understood as aggregating “manageable, inviting, online experience” from within the “chaos of digital noise.”
Within the art world, the title “curator” has for some time expanded beyond the confines of those who care for collections and stage exhibitions in art museums to include those in museums who curate what are now regarded as core programs, such as education. Museums routinely name guest or adjunct curators who organize exhibitions on invitation. This practice and the myriad activities associated with it has become itself a professional subfield under the title “independent curator.” An increasing number of practitioners seek shelter under its bright-yet-fragile umbrella. These range from the few celebrated international artistic directors of biennials and mega-exhibitions (most of whom have at least one part-time institutional base) to do-anything interns whose actual working conditions make them foot soldiers in globalized capitalism’s outsourced armies of cultural producers in whose ranks the thrill of being seen to be doing something cool stands in for the slim prospect of being paid, sometime, for their labors.

Although museums have not been abandoned, art curating is no longer necessarily tied to them, except by conservative definitions that draw a distinction between the curator devoted above all to the care and conservation of collections and the exhibition maker who does only, or mostly, what the name suggests. Instead, curating now encompasses not only exhibition making but also programming at many kinds of alternative venues, and is often adjunct to even the most experimental art space. A recent issue of the online magazine On-Curating.org, for example, focuses on “aspects of the public sphere, public space, and public art in seven different metropolises around the world,” from Zurich through Istanbul to Shanghai and Mexico City, with not even a passing mention of museums. The entire schedule of performance art events constituting Performa 11 was, of course, curated by director RoseLee Goldberg, while nearly every event was itself curated by someone other than the performer. There were fifty-five curators in all. Brooklyn-based artist William Powhida, scathing critic of the financial domination of the contemporary art world, described his sensationalizing manipulation of decadent stereotypes to draw attention to his 2010 show at Marlborough Gallery, Chelsea, in these terms: “Part of the goal was to use the press to curate hype.” If it is done in a certain way and according to a certain spirit, it seems that even the critical interrogation of curatorship itself can be curated: for example, activist, performance artist, and academic Lissette Olivares was listed as curator of “A Symposium of Curatorial Interventions,” held at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University, on November 17, 2011.

Which way and in which spirit? A current and widely shared answer goes along these lines: “Curating is caring for the culture, above all by enabling its artistic or creative
transformers to pursue their work. This facilitation is done, preferably, with empathy and insight, effectively, and with some style.” Such an answer might serve as a job description within the Omigod, iwaslike whirl of getting on with the exigencies of this project while looking for the next one, but it does not identify the distinctive elements of contemporary curatorship and it does not qualify as a definition of contemporary curatorial thought.

Some seem to doubt that curators are capable of critical thought.

Given the ageing of postmodernism as a critical category, but also the absence of any plausible replacement for it, the contemporary has become the default cultural periodization for the artistically current. It is, however, notoriously difficult to specify the contemporaneity of contemporary art. Nevertheless, notwithstanding reservations about its suitability, “contemporary art” has been taken on as the generic name for the post-postmodern art that began to emerge in the 1990s, but that is only now receiving the serious and sustained attention that it demands if it is to be taken as a critical, rather than a merely journalistic or curatorial, category.

Notice the instinctive distinctions drawn in this otherwise quite accurate remark about the use of the term “contemporary” for today’s art and the less accurate remark about the time lag in critical discourse getting around to treating the contemporary critically. Curators reading this passage may find themselves appalled, as I was, by its implication that their thought amounts to something equivalent to journalism and that it cannot by categorical definition ever become critical.

In fact, the elements of contemporary curatorial thinking can be readily identified. Curators regularly speak about them, reflect on them, and share them with others. They amount to a concrete mix of principles, values, ideas, rules of thumb, and ethical necessities. The seven points that English-born Australian curator Nick Waterlow, director of a number of Sydney Biennales, wrote in his notebook shortly before his untimely death in November 2009 are a particularly poignant instance. Entitled, with dreadful prescience, “A Curator’s Last Will and Testament,” they read:

1. Passion; 2. An eye of discernment; 3. An empty vessel; 4. An ability to be uncertain; 5. Belief in the necessity of art and artists; 6. A medium—bringing a passionate and informed understanding of works of art to an audience in ways
that will stimulate, inspire, question; 7. Making possible the altering of perception.6

Values such as these resonate within more programmatic efforts by curators to reimagine museums; write the history of curating; innovate within exhibition formats; extend curating into educational activity; and, in some cases, commit to activist curating in venues beyond the art world. These impulses are reshaping modern curatorial thinking. They are crucial to its efforts to become contemporary. Less obvious in the discourse as yet, but equally important for the future, are issues such as rethinking spectatorship, engaging viewers as co-curators, and the challenge of curating contemporaneity itself—in its present, past, and future forms.

What follows are five essayistic tracks into this volatile territory—each drawing freely on adventures in the art world during the past year as I responded to ideas, events, and encounters as they occurred to me—leavened with occasional retrospective diversions and with some attention to the burgeoning literature on curating. To get the flavor of what I am attempting, imagine “Thinking Contemporary Curating” as three words in Bruce Nauman’s 100 Live and Die (1984), centerpiece of the Benesse House Museum on Naoshima island, in the Inland Sea of Japan, in which rows of sets of words on either side of “and” flash on and off randomly in brightly colored neon. Think of the terms of my title as three ideas that flash independently, in bold isolation, but then combine into a number of almost sentences, seemingly located at levels below and more basic than those allowed by the surfaces of spoken and written language, through which they often, these days with accelerating insistence, break.

I do not write as a curator by profession, having been involved in making just a few exhibitions.7 I am, rather, an art historian, critic, theorist, and teacher who is a professional visitor to exhibitions and an amateur enthusiast about them. I have, over many years, learned an enormous amount from the efforts of curators—from the most collection oriented to those who would never think of setting foot in a museum. These reflections are a respectful attempt to offer something in return. I owe my first glimpse of art to a curator. Coming from a family for whom original art was out of the question, and going to primary schools where it existed, unremarked, as reproduced decoration, I discovered art by what I thought was an accident. At the age of nine, my father took me to visit the Museum of Natural History, Melbourne, to see the dinosaurs and the effigy of Phar Lap, a great racehorse, when I noticed in a cabinet at the bottom of some stairs what I thought were colored sketches for comic books of the kind I was making at home.
Climbing up to the landing, another cabinet housed fine line drawings of extraordinary intensity. When I reached the top of the stairs, looking for more, a wonderful vista opened in both directions: vigorous battle scenes, lustrous figures, and dreamy landscapes. This was the National Gallery of Victoria, then as now stocked with a major collection of art from Europe, courtesy of the Felton Bequest, and from Australia, courtesy of local donors, mainly artists. The images that had attracted me on that stairwell were drawn from the gallery’s unmatched collection of William Blake’s illustrations to Dante’s Divine Comedy and its set of Blake’s etchings of the Book of Job. Years later, Dr. Ursula Hoff, Curator of Prints and Drawings, told me that she placed them there in the hope that they would do for the youth of the city exactly what they did for me.8 This is curating as laying out the lure.

In these essays, I think alongside the thoughts about curating expressed by a number of curators, looking for traces of the constituents of contemporary curatorial thought, such as those listed a few paragraphs back. These essays are also a set of provocations. They urge curators to complicate thinking about “the contemporary” and to grapple with the challenges of curating contemporaneity.

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2 A distinction drawn, for example, by Robert Storr in his essay "Show and Tell," in Paula Marincola, ed., What Makes a Great Exhibition? (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006), 14. Museum-based exhibition makers looking for an introductory compendium of sound advice about how to conduct their profession in an honorable fashion will find this an extraordinarily useful essay, as are the contributions by Carlos Basualdo, Lynne Cooke, and others to this anthology.


5 Avanessian and Skrebowski, “Introduction,” in Armen Avanessian and Luke Skrebowski, eds., Aesthetics and Contemporary Art (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011). My grumble about the time-lag remark is occasioned by the fact that some of us have been attempting to theorize contemporaneity critically since the 1990s—in my case, in publications since 2001. It is true, however, that this effort has only been taken up more widely in the past two or three years.

6 A film by Waterlow’s partner, Julie Darling, entitled A Curator’s Last Will and Testament, was screened in Sydney in April 2012.

7 My curatorial record is modest and has always been undertaken as part of productive collaborations: The Situation Now: Object or Post-Object Art?, inaugural exhibition, Contemporary Art Society Gallery, Sydney, July 16–August 6, 1971 (with Tony McGillick); Dreams, Fears, and Desires:

8 On Dr. Ursula Hoff, see Sheridan Palmer, Center of the Periphery: Three European Art Historians in Melbourne (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008).
1. What is Contemporary Curatorial Thought?
In a recent essay, “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” I track the usage of the term “contemporary” in art discourse during modernity and propose an art-historical hypothesis about contemporary art. I try to set out a framework in which we might identify the precise shape of the act of thought—the affective insight—that contemporary life requires of its art, of the criticism of that art, and of the history of that art: the (necessary, but never sufficient) kernel from which, via many vicissitudes, art must be made and criticism and history written. All kinds of inherited inspirations, medium constraints and possibilities, and many still-vital artistic trajectories remain relevant to such making and writing. Nevertheless, our experience of contemporaneity—of the multiple, various ways of being in time today, contemporaneously—is disposing art, criticism, and history in different ways, and is requiring fresh concepts, mediums, and languages. This is my conclusion:

Place making, world picturing, and connectivity are the most common concerns of artists these days because they are the substance of contemporary being. Increasingly, they override residual distinctions based on style, mode, medium, and ideology. They are present in all art that is truly contemporary. Distinguishing, precisely, this presence in each artwork is the most important challenge to an art criticism that would be adequate to the demands of contemporaneity. Tracing the currency of each artwork within the larger forces that are shaping this present is the task of contemporary art history.

Is it possible to be as concise about what contemporaneity—our current condition—is asking of art curatorship? Perhaps it is. If so, the first step is to recognize that the object of contemporary curating is much larger than contemporary art. It must encompass all other art: art from any and every past, current art that is not contemporary, as well as projective, future art. (Some artists, in fact many, envisage art that is not subject to this past-present-future triad. Curators will follow; some are already on this trail.) Like contemporary art, contemporary curating is embroiled in time, but not bound by it; entangled with periodizing urges, but not enslaved to them; committed to space, but of many kinds, actual and virtual; anxious about place, yet thrilled by dispersion’s roller-coaster ride. It does not follow a set of rules; rather, it adopts an approach arising from an emergent set of attitudes. Can we say that the purpose of curating today is something like this: To exhibit (in the broad sense of show, offer, enable the experience of) contemporary presence and the currency that is contemporaneity as these are manifest in art present, past, and multitemporal, even atemporal? It follows that what is understood in the art world as “Contemporary Art,” while it does in fact inspire contemporary curating
of all kinds, including exhibitions of art from previous periods, does not bind curators to
its time-bound imperatives.

By art, to put it at its minimum, I mean any intentionally created existent that, following
processes of searching self-reflection and including consideration of previous and other
imaginable art, embodies its being and establishes its relationships with its anticipated
viewers, primarily through visual means. To exhibit is—again following such processes—
to bring a selection of such existents (along, perhaps, with other relevant kinds), or newly
created works of art, into a shared space (which may be a room, a site, a publication, a
web portal, or an app) with the aim of demonstrating, primarily through the experiential
accumulation of visual connections, a particular constellation of meaning that cannot be
made known by any other means. Of course, such meaning may be parsed in terms other
than strictly exhibitionary: art critical, art historical; literary, philosophical, cultural;
personal or idiosyncratic; ideological or programmatic—the list is long. But exhibitionary
meaning is quite specific because it is established and experienced in the space of an
exhibition, actual or virtual (virtual includes memory).² The parsings, therefore, are
translations from curatorial into other expository and interpretative languages.

It follows from what I have said thus far that, broadly speaking, contemporary curating
aims to display some aspect of the individual and collective experience of what it is, or
was, or might be, to be contemporary. Thus there is a spatial and phenomenological
horizon for contemporaneity within the exhibition: it is a discursive, epistemological, and
dramaturgical space in which various kinds of temporality may be produced or shown to
coeexist.³ Enabling viewers to experience contemporaneity in an exhibition setting (taking
“exhibition” in the broad sense mentioned, and “setting” to mean any appropriate
situated context) would, through this reading, be the curatorial equivalent of making
contemporaneity visible in the case of art and of capturing it in writing for publication in
the case of criticism and history. I am assuming that exhibiting artistic meaning is the
main task of the contemporary curator, to which all other roles are subservient.

Yet while this might bring us to the same kernel of meaning that I got to (I hope) for
contemporary art criticism and history writing, it does not fully distinguish what is unique
to curatorial thinking. To do so would be to identify the kind of act of thought, the sort of
affective insight, that contemporary life requires of curating in a way that it asks it of
nothing else. What, then, is contemporary curatorial thought?
In the Art Bulletin article, as well as in What is Contemporary Art?, there is a crucial step in my argument where I set out, under the headings “Curators in Contention” and “Curators Stage the Debate,” the ways in which, in the years around 2000, Kirk Varnedoe, Okwui Enwezor, and Nicolas Bourriaud offered competing perspectives on the prevailing direction of contemporary art. Their insistence, respectively, on a continuity of modernist values within contemporary art, the arrival of a worldwide postcolonial constellation, and the small scale yet portentous emergence of a relational aesthetics, are examples of the kind of curatorial insight into contemporary art that I am talking about. Note that these are different kinds of ideas: the continuity of modernism is an idea about the current profile of art’s autonomous evolution (how art develops by persisting through all the non-art forces that act upon it); the postcolonial constellation is an idea about the current overall shape of human history, to which artistic developments are assumed to be subject; while relational aesthetics is an art world tag, a term for an emergent, imperfectly grasped, but nonetheless interesting way of making art, tossed around between artists, which after a while surfaces as one among a plethora of others to become a critical descriptor, and is then adopted by a curator who believes that curating is a practice of working closely with artists to enable them to manifest their intentions in exhibitions in the optimal possible form.

These three curators already knew, or quickly recognized, that each of these tendencies—although vastly different in scale, ambition, and impact—required a distinct kind of exhibition making, respectively understood as: expand the white cube, decolonize the biennial, domesticate the gallery space. Taken together, in their very contention, these tendencies, along with the ongoing evolution from institutional critique to critical institutionality—to which I will return—shaped debate about what was happening in the years around 2000 more than any other set of ideas coming from art criticism, history, or theory at the time, more even than the unthink that sustained the art market then and does so still.

At that time I understood these curatorial ideas as key indicators (among a plethora of others) of a larger art critical—and, I soon realized, art historical—idea: the contemporaneousness of three powerful currents that, I believe, surge through the bewildering, beguiling variety of contemporary art. My reading would have been impossible without the insightfulness of curators such as these. Their thoughts became crucial elements in a broader argument that I will now briefly summarize. It begins from
the realization that, during the 1980s and 1990s, art had come to seem markedly different from what it had been during the modern era: it seemed, above all, and before anything else, contemporary. In art contexts, during the past century or so, these two terms were used interchangeably, usually with “contemporary” as the default, secondary reference to “modern.” Recently, however, usage has nearly equalized and the buzz is with “contemporary.”

I asked myself what kind of change was this: Illusory or actual, singular or multiple? Why did it happen? How deep does it go? Why is it at once so easy yet also strange to itself, so estranged from itself? How come it had, so soon, a history or, already, many histories? In What is Contemporary Art? and Contemporary Art: World Currents I offer an integrated set of arguments in response to these questions, each of them identifying a different kind of contemporaneity within the totality of the world’s art.

Here are these arguments, in a nutshell. A worldwide shift from modern to contemporary art was prefigured in the major movements in late modern art of the 1950s and 1960s, was unmistakable by the 1980s, and continues to unfold through the present, thus shaping art’s imaginable futures. These changes occurred and continue to unfold in different and distinctive ways in each cultural region and in each art-producing locality around the world, the specific histories of which should be acknowledged, valued, and carefully tracked alongside recognition of their interaction with other local and regional tendencies and with dominant art-producing centers. This diversity has fed into a worldly (not global or world) contemporary art, within which, I suggest, three currents may be discerned. Remodernist, retro-sensationalist, and spectacularist tendencies fuse into one current, which continues to predominate in Euro-American and other modernizing art worlds and markets with widespread effect both inside and outside those constituencies. Against these, art created according to nationalist, identarian, and critical priorities has emerged, especially from previously colonized cultures. It came into prominence on international circuits such as biennials and traveling temporary exhibitions: this is the art of transnational transitionality. The third current cannot be named as a style, a period, or a tendency. It proliferates below the radar of generalization. It results from the great increase in the number of artists worldwide and the opportunities offered by new informational and communicative technologies to millions of users. These changes have led to the viral spread of small-scale, interactive, DIY art (and art-like output) that is concerned less with high art style or confrontational politics and more with tentative explorations of temporality, place, affiliation, and affect—the ever-more-uncertain conditions of living within contemporaneity on a fragile planet.

Continuing modernism, the postcolonial constellation, and relational aesthetics—the
signature ideas of the curators mentioned above—are labels for complex and subtle curatorial insights into a cluster of values, practices, and effects that were definitive ten or fifteen years ago. For me, as a historian of contemporary art, my ongoing questions are these: How have the currents I identified in 2000 unfolded since? How have they changed relative to each other? What other kinds of art and art-like practices have emerged, and how do they impact on these currents or suggest the growth of others? I present my ideas in my teaching, in public talks, and in essays and books. Critical thought about these phenomena demonstrated by inventive curators (those already mentioned, as well as Dan Cameron, Catherine David, Charles Esche, Hou Hanru, Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist and many others) builds on their insights into the current state of art in order, above all, to present them in the format of an extended, expanded exhibition of some type. Exhibiting might range from rehanging part of a permanent collection through various kinds of temporary exhibition to the staging of an event, the creation of a sequence of sites, or the orchestration of a discursive interaction, such as a public dialogue. The exhibition—in this expanded, extended sense—works, above all, to shape its spectator’s experience and take its visitor through a journey of understanding that unfolds as a guided yet open-weave pattern of affective insights, each triggered by looking, that accumulates until the viewer has understood the curator’s insight and, hopefully, arrived at insights previously unthought by both.

If we can say that a historian, critic, or theorist searches for a conceptualization (usually a mental image) that encapsulates the apparently disparate elements of his or her analysis into a definable “shape,” a discursive figure that holds up when explicated (thought through, written out, contested in dialogue, measured against the works) in detail, then the equivalent kind of curatorial insight might be one that gathers all of the elements under consideration into a previsualized exhibition or, more explicitly, into a projective imagining of the viewer’s journey through such an exhibition, or of the participant’s likely accumulative experience if it is an event. While many curators still envisage one (ideal?) viewer’s pathway, others prioritize a number of possible routes for that viewer, or the passaging of numbers of viewers, moving in parallel or in concert. And of course these projective imaginings are modified in the planning, in the mounting, in response to the exigencies of available elements, to the limits, but also the potentialities, of the time, space, and persons involved. The how of selecting the artworks and other materials and of mounting the exhibition as an arena of experience is as crucial as what it is for and why it is consequential.

To many curators, it is precisely the necessity of having to forge an exhibition in the
crucible of practical contingencies that distinguishes what they do from the empathetic insight required of the critic, the speculative bent of the theorist, and the historian's commitment to arm's-length research into art that is becoming consequential. (Let us leave aside for the moment that critics, theorists, and historians have their different, but equally demanding, pragmatic crucibles; thus this distinction is poorly conceived.) In What Makes a Great Exhibition? Paula Marincola argues that:

Questions of Practice places its emphasis on and asserts the value of how concepts surrounding curating are filtered through lessons derived from repeated performance, from thinking and doing, or, perhaps more accurately, thinking based on doing. It is in practice that a priori theories and closely argued theories meet with the resistance of the empirical and the contingent. Various factors, many beyond the curator’s control—insufficient budgets, recalcitrant lenders, space constraints, competing institutional imperatives and priorities, ancillary resources or the lack of them, to name a few—defy the most carefully cherished ideas and ideals. Curatorial intelligence, invention, improvisation, and inspiration are developed and refined by effectively engaging and reconciling these constraints as the inevitable limitations that accompany most exhibition making.  

Every point made here is absolutely true. As an ensemble of statements, however, this implicitly identifies curatorial thought with the conditions in which it is exercised. It is as if to “think and do” within such constraints is unique to curators. Yet the metaphorical comparisons for which Marincola and others reach suggest that the same holds for many other kinds of cultural producer and interpreter. She cites Walter Hopps as saying, “The closest analogy to installing a museum exhibition is conducting a symphony orchestra.” For his best analogy to exhibition making, Robert Storr cites the film director when it comes to ultimate responsibility (he or she who controls “the final cut”), while the process, for him, is closest to that of “the literary editor who negotiates with publishers and writers on behalf of the ‘best’ version of the work that can be obtained.” While these are suggestive analogies they do not, in themselves, isolate the unique features of curatorial thought. They are, however, helpful in pointing to one of its essential (necessary, but not sufficient) qualities: whatever else curatorial thinking is, it is always deeply embedded in the practice of actually mounting the exhibition. On analogy to the thinking within a medium that artists must do in order to create a work, it is praxiological.
In her review of Performa 11, “So Big, Performa Now Misses the Point,” New York Times critic Roberta Smith chastises RoseLee Goldberg for not pushing hard enough at programming events that, in contrast to those that blur the boundaries between theater and the visual arts in some vague or haphazard manner, fully exemplify and at the same time push at the boundaries of “visual art performance.” This is an art critic holding a curator to account, demanding explicitly that her exhibition be “a kind of argument about what is and what is not performance art or, more specifically, what constitutes a particular kind of performance art that is implied by the term ‘visual art performance.’”

Is this a fair comment on a real shortfall within an enterprise that is essentially shared by both curator and critic or an example of an art critic missing a curatorial point?

Perhaps, if we take a historical perspective on the Performa project, we will find it to be an interesting disagreement about what counts as “visual art performance.” Since 2005 these biennials have consistently pursued and expanded Goldberg’s conviction about the centrality of performance art to the history of modernist avant-gardism and have sought to revivify the flagging energies of this tradition. She has done this through deliberate commissions, thus infusing performance art as a category of practice with the visual intelligence, production values, plentitude, and embracing affect so evident in the works of certain installation artists, such as Shirin Neshat and Isaac Julien, who have absorbed cinematic poesis. Each iteration of Performa has sought to advance this quest by testing it against one or more of the other arts adjacent to performance and by reviving a relevant historical connection: contemporary dance and Happenings in 2007, architecture and Futurism in 2009, and theater itself in 2011. As with any experimental event, especially those that are festive in character, there is overreach, confusion, and failure. However, the interesting outcome, still emergent, is a compelling hybrid form, a kind of performative installation, the shifting shapes of which we can glimpse in William Kentridge’s I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine, Mike Kelley and Mark Beasley’s A Fantastic World Superimposed on Reality, both from 2009, or Ragnar Kjartansson’s Bliss from 2011, the 12-hour-long performance of repeats of the last act, two minutes in duration, of Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro. Is Smith sensing a project that, however successful at its best, is hitting up against the limits of its initial conception? Or must art-critical priorities always undervalue the instinct within performance to exceed its own terms, an achievement of theatricality only possible if performance contrives to court failure? Has this instinct, so fundamental to theatrical performance, but questioned in favor of the neutral or the natural in late modern experimental performance art, returned
What do examples such as these suggest for our quest to distinguish the qualities that
are distinctive about curatorial thought? Provisionally and schematically, we might posit
that art-historical thinking typically seeks to identify the concerns, techniques, and
meanings that shape works of art made during the time and in the place under
consideration and that connect these works to the social character of their time and place
(how they come from it, what they return to it). Taking an art-historical perspective also
means constantly assessing the significance of each work or grouping of works in
comparison to those made before and after in order to identify the profile of that time
through its major and minor forms, styles, and tendencies. We might then say, again too
schematically, that art-critical thinking seeks to register the ways form is figured into
meaning in individual works of art at the moment that they are first seen by the critic, to
compare these immediate impressions with memories of elements in works that the
same artist has made to date, in others made recently by other artists, and, if relevant,
those made earlier. If these reductive characterizations are (provisionally) acceptable,
then perhaps we could go on to say that curatorial thinking about the art of our time, or
another time, is also devoted to making manifest the same elements that preoccupy art
historians and critics, but differs in its relationship to the elements. Above all, curating
seeks to encourage or enable the public visibility of works by artists either by assembling
a selection of existing works for exhibition or by commissioning works for display so that
they may be seen by a disinterested audience for the first time or be seen differently by
such an audience because of the ways the works are presented. In this ideal, imaginary
model, curating follows the response to a new work of art by the artist’s immediate circle,
and in many cases by those interested in making it available for sale or wishing to buy it
(though the word “disinterested” in the previous sentence), but curating precedes art-critical
response, audience appreciation, and the eventual assessment of art-historical
significance.

Of course, each of these practices is deeply dependent on the other. If we can say that
from the 1940s to the 1960s critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg
gradually moved from working within what was essentially a literary genre—a belle
lettrist writing of essays, commenting on events, and reviewing of books—to providing
regular responses to the shows presented (we would now say, softly, curated) by the art
dealers shaping the emergent commercial gallery scene in New York, then we might also
say that the height of Robert Hughes’s art writing was achieved as he grappled with the
blockbusters staged by the major public galleries in the city during the 1970s and 1980s,
promoted by the auction house-led art market. Unfortunately, this kind of writing prevails today in most art publications. Fortunately, it is being assailed on all sides: by a growing awareness of the historical resonances within contemporary art and by a dispersion of interest in art and visual creativity that spreads across social media. While criticality drives the first of these, it is a rare, occasional spark in the second. Here is an interesting challenge for curators: to think past the invitation to assist in the uncritical immedation of consumerized subjects that capital now offers (the much-celebrated interactivity that Slavoj Žižek correctly caricatures as “interpassivity”) and to curate experiences in which subjects exercise the kinds of creativity required by their contemporaneity.

In this context, the exhibition is a selective offering of art to an audience, to art’s future, and to the world to come. The curator is a crucial handmaiden not necessarily to the creation of an artwork (although that is becoming more often the case) but certainly to its becoming public beyond a narrow circle, to its entering the art world, its reaching (in recent times) the expanding audiences for art, and thus its circulation to the world at large. In this comparison, curators are likely to be more tentative, more provisional about their ideas of what is meaningful about the work than art historians and, to a lesser, but still appreciable degree, more circumspect about specifying the significance of art than art critics. They will certainly have a strong sense that the work is meaningful, albeit in ways yet to be fully defined. Storr puts it this way:

A good exhibition is never the last word on its subject. Instead it should be an intelligently conceived and scrupulously realized interpretation of the works selected, one which acknowledges by its organization and installation that even the material on view—not to mention the things that might have been included,
but were not—may be seen from a variety of perspectives, and that this will sooner or later happen to the benefit of other possible understandings of the art in question. In short, good exhibitions have a definite, but not definitive, point of view that invites serious analysis and critique, not only of the art but also of the particular weights and measures used in its evaluation by the exhibition maker.11

Critics and historians, in comparison, seek stronger, more definite statements about the nature and the significance of the art they encounter and study. Curators do everything necessary to bring works up to the point where they may become subject to critical and historical judgment. They exercise a very similar repertoire of skills and competencies and are moved by a closely similar set of passions and commitments, but curators, on this reading, are appraisers, not judges. Nor are they mainly chroniclers, as art historians must be (even of the present and especially of the immediate past). Curators certainly may leap to attempt both judgment and claims of significance, but will do so with a conscious sense of how provisional their proposals must be.

What is being emphasized from these perspectives is curating as a profession, one that proffers art and offers fresh work or a fresh presentation of known work. To whom? To what? Making the work available to appreciation, understanding, interpretation, and impact. A corollary is holding back from articulating any of these things at the time of presentation and being reticent about doing so in the place of presentation. Interpretation remains in the wings, as a second order of knowledge awaiting the viewer who is imagined standing in front of the work in the context of an exhibition staged by the curator or as a participant in the work enabled by the curator, if that is its form. Within the space of the exhibition itself, the curator’s interpretation remains unstated, implicit. In its explicit form, it usually becomes available to the viewer later—in the catalogue, for example—as a supplement to the understanding that he or she already arrived at while taking in the exhibition.

While this sequence of events may benefit the exhibition visitor, it could be seen to disadvantage the curator. As many curators say, the preparation for an exhibition is governed by two deadlines: that of the catalogue being sent to the printer and that of the opening night. The gap between these dates can run to many months. This schedule deprives the curator of the chance to learn from the exhibition itself and to share that knowledge with the visitor. No matter how well the curator knows the work that is to be shown, no matter how suggestive the model, however experienced he or she may be,
when writing in the catalogue the curator can state only a belief about the subject of the exhibition. No claim to be able to share its exhibitionary content can plausibly be made. In practice, most curators write as if this gap did not exist. To others, it is a root cause of the reticence that pervades their texts. It is extraordinary that a widely shared solution to this problem has not yet evolved.  

What is the role of wall texts within this model of curating? Modernist conceptions of the autonomy of the art object, expressionist theories of instinctive, unmediated empathy, and the more general reluctance among curators to, as it was often put, “interpose themselves between the artwork and the viewer’s direct experience of it” led to decades during which exhibitions received no more than the most minimal title (and then a purely descriptive one) and nothing more was to be found inside a gallery than wall labels with the name of the artist, title of the work, its date of making, and perhaps its medium, always in plain, nine point type. With the recent boom in audiences (the majority of which are unfamiliar with art) and the increasing display of art that is unfamiliar even to knowledgeable visitors, the provision of information within exhibitions has become essential. Even when the work of the exhibited artist or group of artists is well known, most exhibitions open with a general statement as to the main content and relevance of this exhibit. If, as we have already established, the curator is a creative producer of exhibitions, it is a deception to pretend to be absent.

Therefore, this raises a question about the second-person voice used in nearly all introductory texts, an issue that can only be resolved in the circumstances specific to each exhibition. In general, the challenge is to calibrate the information precisely to that needed for each stage of the experience: thus the general introductory text, the room text or those related to a cluster of works, the wall labels beside individual works, and, sometimes, a take-out reflection. Many of these tasks are now migrating to rentable audio devices, where they are supplemented by the voice of the curator (or often the director, but sometimes, regrettably, the collector). They are also appearing, via apps, on the mobile devices that increasing numbers of visitors bring to galleries, which deeply mediate viewers’ reactions to the work on display. Making exhibitions will more and more become an activity conducted at least in part online. Viewers will expect a variety of voices in the exhibition, as they do in most contexts outside of it: there will be fewer divisions—territories, hierarchies—within the consumption of culture. This will diversify the curator’s role and spread laterally his or her voice.

The same will be true for art critics and art historians. So far, I have been writing as if
there were basic, core, ongoing tasks for all art world players and that these tasks, however intimately interdependent, are also to an important degree distinctive in each case. I have concentrated on curators, critics, and historians, but similar comments could be made about the roles of artists, gallerists, agents, collectors, auctioneers, museum directors, arts administrators, and so on. Our challenge is to identify what is ongoing and what is contemporary about each of these tasks—that is, what remains and what has changed during the shift from modern to contemporary art. Given the drift of exhibitionary venues toward more and more experimental, open, virtual, and temporary forms, and the constant, even accelerating switching of roles between players from every node, we know that these efforts to identify core concerns and distinct competences for each player are doomed to become outdated as soon as they are identified. Nonetheless, they are actualities, and we must see them straight if we are to find answers when we ask: Is this or that change, however inevitable it might seem, a change for the better?

THE GRAMMAR OF THE EXHIBITION

When Storr wants to specify “the basics” of exhibition making, he is led to this merging of terms:

Now to the basics. The primary means for “explaining” an artist’s work is to let it reveal itself. Showing is telling. Space is the medium in which ideas are visually phrased. Installation is both presentation and commentary, documentation and interpretation. Galleries are paragraphs, the walls and formal subdivisions of the floors are sentences, clusters of works are the clauses, and individual works, in varying degrees, operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and often as more than one of these functions according to their context.13

He does not pursue this metaphor any further. A recent issue of Manifesta Journal attempts to do so by devoting itself to “The Grammar of the Exhibition.”14 It features not only a variety of ideas about what the underlying structures of exhibition making might be but also some quite antithetical perspectives concerning whether anything approximating a grammar is possible. Efforts to define a grammar are attempts to discern whether there is a set of rules (syntax) that works on the raw material (art practice, or some aspect of the world, seen as a generative base) to shape the language of the exhibition (on analogy to written or spoken language). Of course, for curatorship every aspect of these operations is spatial (it presumes a setting—physical, mental, imagined,
affective) and then temporal (it presumes reflexive movement through that setting). Thus each particular exhibition would be an array of speech acts; the exhibition is, in this analogy, a conversational setting. A more accurate metaphor would call up the semantics of the exhibition, that is, how it generates meaning by the relationships between its parts. This obviates the elaborations necessary to keep alive the metaphorical connection between languages and exhibitions, one that almost no one pursues anyway. From this perspective, the most useful essay in this issue is Mary Anne Staniszewski’s account of the curatorial thought underlying Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo’s exhibitions at Exit Art since the early 1980s.

Putting it this way (as philosopher and critic Peter Osborne does in his opposition to the very idea, expressed in the same issue of Manifesta) moves us away from the tendency toward rule-bound formalism that is implicit in most appeals to systematic structures such as grammar, and instead toward a critical curatorial tendency that is closer to the spirit of Maria Lind’s original proposition.

Is there something we can call “the curatorial”? Something that manifests itself in the activities of a curator, whether employed or independent, trained as an artist or an art historian? It is clear that curating is much more than making exhibitions: it involves commissioning new work and working beyond the walls of an institution, as well as what are traditionally called programming and education. But can we speak of “the curatorial” beyond “curating in the expanded field”: as a multidimensional role that includes critique, editing, education, and fundraising?15

The changed conditions within which curators practice is evoked here, but this does little more than name as curating a number of activities that have been to date considered subsidiary, feeder, educational, or publicity—roles that may or may not be carried out by the curator, depending on time, inclination, and the availability of others to take them on. Acknowledging the inspiration of site-specific practices, context-sensitive art, and institutional critique, Lind goes on to evoke the importance of consciously “curating” these activities in order to link “objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories,
and discourse in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions.” This description could apply to populist programming, such as the Mixed Taste series at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, but Lind has something more serious in mind:

Rather than being the product of the curator’s labor per se, curating is the result of a network of agents’ labor. The outcome should have the disturbing quality of smooth surfaces being stirred—a specific, multilayered means of answering back in a given context. Rather than representing, “the curatorial” involves presenting—it performs something in the here and now instead of merely mapping it from there and then.

A distinction between curatorial and art-historical thinking is being suggested here. A closeness to artistic creativity and perhaps to that of engaged public education is sought instead. The critical aspect of her concept comes out more distinctly in a recent formulation:

I mean a practice that goes beyond curating, which I see as the technical modality of making art go public in various ways. “Curating” is “business as usual” in terms of putting together an exhibition, organizing a commission, programming a screening series, etcetera. “The curatorial” goes further, implying a methodology that takes art as its starting point, but then situates it in relation to specific contexts, times, and questions in order to challenge the status quo. And it does so from various positions, such as that of curator, an editor, an educator, a communications person, and so on. This means that the curatorial can be employed, or performed, by people in a number of different capacities in the ecosystem of art. For me, there is a qualitative difference between curating and the curatorial. The latter, like Chantal Mouffe’s notion of the political in relation to politics, carries a potential for change.

Irit Rogoff offers a more deconstructive version, one that moves the idea more firmly beyond its efforts to first recognize, then “unbound,” the various art world roles:

In a sense “the curatorial” is thought, and critical thought at that, that does not rush to embody itself, does not rush to concrete itself, but allows us to stay with the questions until they point us in some direction that we might not have been able to predict.... Moving to “the curatorial,” then, is an opportunity to “unbound” the work from all of those categories and practices that limit its ability to explore
These formulations have achieved some currency among curators—rightly so, because they pick up on major shifts in art practice, in art institutions, and in the constantly changing conditions of those who work within them and in relation to them.

What would it be like to stay with the questions, as Rogoff suggests, and to follow them as far as they can go? Perhaps it would enable us to be a little more exact as to how we might define the kind of curatorial insight needed now. This is what I will attempt to do in these essays. I believe that something like this is what João Ribas is seeking in his essay “What to Do With the Contemporary?”

He is alert to the variety of ways of being in time that constitute contemporaneity as I have described it. He ends up, as many others do, with Agamben’s (and Žižek’s, but first Nietzsche’s) paradox that the most contemporary person is he who is most out of joint with his time. Archiving this contemporaneity from a position alert to its darknesses is Ribas’s recommendation. To me, Agamben’s paradox marks both the strength and the limit of the most advanced thinking on these matters.

Here is another recent example of such thinking:

Among the more puzzling preoccupations of dialogues around art during the past five years has been “the contemporary,” a seemingly self-evident description that, to date, has operated largely in reverse—that has been put forward, in other words, as a meaningful denomination and subject of inquiry in advance of any actual, deductive relationship to the surrounding world. The hope, it would seem, is that the term employed by itself and evocatively will help tease out some general understanding of the conditions for art making and its reception today. Yet, unlikely as this might seem, the impulse is easy enough to fathom: artists, art historians, curators, and critics alike wish to find historical trajectories in art today where none immediately announce themselves; a disorienting air of atemporality prevails instead. Indeed, the imperative for historical precedence or distinction becomes only more urgent in light of the speculative obsessions with the “new” in a radically expanded art system whose borders have become so porous...
as to erode the very ideation of art. If there is a substantive sense of “the contemporary” to be employed here, it is likely to be the “out-of-jointness” that philosopher Giorgio Agamben ascribed to the term: Something is contemporary when it occupies time disjunctively, seeming always at once “too soon” or “too late,” or, more accurately in terms of art now, seeming to contain the seeds of its own anachronism.22

These remarks open Tim Griffin’s review of the 2011 Venice Biennale, from which he goes on to contrast the “quietness” with which Central Pavilion curator Bice Curiger displays this condition to the urgency with which Francesco Bonami presented it in 2003: “The volatile symptoms of Bonami’s exhibition have by now settled into general conditions. Like so much art today, each individual work might reflect the cultural moment, but one asks whether reflection is enough, or whether there is some other job left to do.”23

Asking about “some other job” is, I believe, more challenging than retreating into Agamben’s paradox, which is limited by its being an evocation of the affective experience of an intellectual’s experience of contemporary conditions that, however poetic and accurate, has little to say about many other ways of world making and unmaking that are in play today. The philosopher is, however, absolutely right about the world condition that has thrown down this kind of challenge to (European and U.S.) intellectuals:

The fall of the Soviet Communist Party and the unconcealed rule of the capitalist-democratic state on a planetary scale have cleared the field of the two main ideological obstacles hindering the resumption of a political philosophy worthy of our time…. Thought thus finds itself, for the first time, facing its own task without any illusion and without any possible alibi.24

Griffin’s question is one for artists, certainly. It is also a question for curators, otherwise curating is merely the provision of “reflections”—more acutely, see-through mirrors—of “the times.” This is not what is meant by curating contemporaneity.

Ribas notes the practice of a number of artists who are concerned with tracking the “modalities of the past in the present,” and that some recent exhibitions—Formalismus at
the Hamburger Kunstverein (2004), Modernism as a Ruin at the Generali Foundation (2009), and Modernologies at the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (2009)—amount to “an ongoing process of archiving the contemporary.”

He takes these artists and philosophers, such as Agamben, as raising a challenge to curators: “It is a fundamental necessity of curating to situate itself within those contemporaneities that remain in darkness, untheorized and unlived.” This gets us closer to one of the key imperatives driving curatorial thought in contemporary conditions. Its boldness and grit expresses much about the kind of attitude needed now. But Griffin’s comment reminds us that, while the darkness is, necessarily, a component of the deep dwelling of such thought, it is not its only one, nor its end point.

This brief review of some of the key ideas behind current talk about curating indicates the vitality of the discourse, its close engagement with art practice, and its willingness to grapple with changes in contemporary life. It also suggests that the ground of what it is to be a curator in contemporary conditions is shifting, a fact that is glimpsed in the discourse, but remains dimly understood. We need to push a little harder at this darkness and see what light might flash within.


2 This is a more specific meaning than the “exhibition value” that Walter Benjamin ascribed to all works of art that, as distinct from cult objects within ritual settings, are shown as art, and, since the early twentieth century, have been reproduced as widely disseminated images, especially as photographs and film. See his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,” in Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2008), 25ff.

3 This phrasing owes much to a comment by João Ribas, who recalls in this context Le Corbusier’s 1939 design for a Museum of Unlimited Growth, a maze-like structure developed from the spiral of a seashell. A recent realization of this concept would be SAANA’s twenty-first century museum at Kanazawa, Japan.


5 Searches through www.worldcat.org and other databases conducted around 2000 showed interesting moments of prominence but not priority for “contemporary”: the 1920s in Europe, the 1960s throughout the world. A recent Google ngram search run by João Ribas for the occurrence of the terms “modern art” and “contemporary art” since 1900 across books in Google Books shows the trend in recent decades toward quantitative near convergence in recent years.


It is disappointing that there is so scant a record of audience responses to art exhibitions. Curators talk about it all the time as the holy grail of their profession, but do very little beyond filing press responses and taking record photographs to actually examine it in depth and detail. This is left to the education and press people. Spectatorship seems a notional, not an actual, repository of value. The real thrill seems to have remained with conceiving and installing an exhibition. Is there a parallel to architects’ taste for photographs of their buildings made just after the moment of completion and before their intended users, who are, at least ostensibly, the primary motivators of the design, occupy them? The equivalent for curators is the folio of generalized shots of room installations, the major information value of which is to record which artwork hung where. It is telling that no practice of photography has evolved to capture the actual experience of walking through an exhibition. The closest thing to that ideal might be the virtual tours offered by various galleries and by services in some cities (which tend to be short-lived). The Google Art Project, and Vernissage TV, are interesting attempts to offer online access to quite different aspects of the exhibitionary complex, but remain rather limited relative to actual experience. My text editor suggests that e-publishing might eventually create a space that could address this issue. Perhaps so, when the time comes that most relationships have become e-relations, including exhibiting visual art (at that point mostly a matter of image-exchange, with objects remembered as holographic specters).


18 Lind, in Jens Hoffmann and Maria Lind, “To Show or Not to Show,” Mousse Magazine, no. 31 (November 2011), http://www.moussemagazine.it/articob.mm?id=759#top


23 Ibid., 289.


25 Ribas, “What to Do With the Contemporary?,” 90.

26 Ibid., 91.
2.
Shifting the Exhibitionary Complex

Can we ever get beyond the essential conservatism of displaying works of art in conventional, dedicated spaces?

—Paula Marincola, What Makes a Great Exhibition?, 2006
Sites of exhibition are the most visible elements of the infrastructure within which art curating is practiced today. We might set them out as a spectrum, an array, ranging from the traditional (in the minimal sense of having been around the longest) to the most recent, and from those thoroughly invested in landmark and location to those that presume mobility and transience. At one end, there is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: a mother-ship among megamuseums that—like its few comparators, such as the British Museum, London, and the Louvre, Paris—has recently included contemporary art within its treasure troves, appointed a specialist curator of twentieth and twenty-first century art (Sheena Wagstaff, who arrived from the Tate Modern), oriented its collection rooms toward making vivid the contemporary circumstances surrounding the creation of at least some of the items, and heralded, where appropriate, the continuing vitality of cultures that had previously been regarded as having reached their aesthetic highpoints at some time in the past. We could place at the other end of the spectrum venues that focus on the work of one artist or even, as is the case with The Artist Institute, New York, a slowly changing program of exhibitions of just one work of art at a time. Yet the real other is not concentrated versions of the same thing but the proliferation of open-ended curated projects, short and longer term, that seek to work from within the creativity already present in the everyday life of small, but constrained, communities. Between 2000 and 2005 Oda Projesi (Room Project), a collective formed by three women artists, staged thirty community arts projects in their apartment and the courtyard of a building in the Galata section of Istanbul, continuing their work since then in more mobile and virtual formats, as well as pursuing projects in the Kreuzberg section of Berlin. Since 2003 in Yangon, Myanmar, Networking and Initiatives in Culture and the Arts (NICA), founded by two artists, Jay Koh and Chu Yuan, has nurtured a variety of local possibilities and international connections for Burmese artists and spun off other independent arts spaces. Meanwhile, in East Liberty, Pittsburgh, the Waffle Shop is a community building, consciousness raising location, performance space, TV studio, and blog site, conceived and run by artists associated with Carnegie Mellon University, that also offers a full menu of edible waffles. A related project, the take-out restaurant, Conflict Kitchen, only sells food from nations with which the United States is in conflict.¹

What are the exhibitionary venues that fill out the infrastructural spectrum between these two ends? Having begun with the universal history of the art museum that holds pride of cultural place in most metropolitan centers, we soon shift our gaze to the huge variety of more specialized collections—the period museum, the national collection, the geopolitical area or civilization museum, the city museum, the university gallery, the art school gallery, the private collection museum, the museum of modern art, the single artist...
museum, the museum of contemporary art, the one-medium museum, and spaces dedicated to large-scale commissioned installations. Continuous with these, in well served cities, are various venues that do not have collections as their basis but are devoted above all to changing exhibitions: Kunsthalle, alternative spaces, artist-operated initiatives, satellite spaces, and the exhibition venues of art foundations (some of which have collections). Finally, we visit institutes of various kinds that include exhibitions as one part of their research, publication, and educational activities, and check out temporary and online sites. With these last, and with many emergent quasi-institutions, the focus shifts from physical location and on-site continuity as the literal grounding to situations in which the event and the image prevail over place and duration. Each of these venues or operations has distinct features and purposes, and they often spring up in response to perceived shortcomings of already existing institutions. At the same time, traffic in ideas, objects, and people has always flowed between them. These days it is becoming very dense indeed.

To this long—and, it must be said, impressive list (how many other arts spin off new infrastructure so often, and so variously?)—we should add the growing interest of many commercial galleries, collector museums, and art fairs in certain kinds of public-oriented, “art historical” exhibitions. This has not displaced their basic commercial orientation, nor is it likely to, given the seemingly endless boom (at least at the top of the market), especially for contemporary art. With a narrower set of costs and far greater financial resources than most public museums, Gagosian Galleries has taken to presenting “museum-quality” shows of artists such as Piero Manzoni, Yayoi Kasuma, Pablo Picasso, and Lucio Fontana. Staged by in-house curators, these shows sometimes include among the works for sale a number of not-for-sale works borrowed, or loaned for a fee, from museums. In their Miami location, Mera and Don Rubell regularly present theme shows drawn from their collection: their focus, since 2000, on young artists from Los Angeles helped propel that city to its current return to prominence as an art center.
Certain private collectors have always known that they can influence the development of art itself, not just the direction of the market, simply by the weight of their attention: Charles Saatchi is merely the most notorious recent example of the collector become museum director. There are many precedents, going back to the first large-scale private collections made available to select circles of invited viewers that were assembled during the seventeenth century by certain Italian cardinals and German princes. Closer to our times, and still very influential, are public museums oriented around the values of the original collector, such as the Menil Collection and the associated Rothko Chapel, Houston, which are constantly curated to promote relationships between “Art, Spirituality, Human Rights,” so dear to the founders, John and Dominique de Menil.

Some collectors are beginning to see that they can become not only museum directors and de facto curators but artists as well. Toronto foundation director Ydessa Hendeles curates exhibitions aimed at creating “an experience that precludes words” by establishing “new metaphorical connections” between artworks that she collects for this purpose. Since 2001 she has worked on Partners (The Teddy Bear Project), a vast accumulation of found photographs that include teddy bears, usually from family albums compiled between 1900 and 1940. In the versions shown at the Haus der Kunst, Munich (2003), and the Gwangju Biennale (2010), the multilevel central rooms were filled with thousands of these images. Installation style, they were preceded by smaller rooms that displayed a range of vernacular artifacts including a 1950s Minnie Mouse doll and artworks such as a small Diane Arbus self-portrait taken in 1945, and were followed by a room that included one item that the viewer approached from behind: Maurizio Cattelan’s Him (2001), a child-sized figure, on its knees praying, with the unmistakable features of the adult Adolf Hitler. In this installation, one of Cattelan’s typical visual one-liners suddenly resonated with multiple, darkly explicit meaning.

In 2011 Hendeles was invited to curate an exhibition in the Chelsea space of the dealer Andrea Rosen. The only stipulation was that she include at least one of the Polaroid images that Walker Evans shot in the last year of his life (1973–74), which the gallery was licensed to sell. The result was The Wedding (The Walker Evans Polaroid Project), shown between December 2011 and February 2012. Subtitled A curatorial composition by
Ydessa Hendeles, she used certain items from her own collection and borrowed others from museums and dealers: the final installation included eighty-three Evans Polaroids, including some from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Rosen Gallery consists of a narrow entrance area that opens on to a large central space topped by an impressive skylight mounted on a wooden frame and supported by steel beams. Hendeles cleverly negotiated the affective distance between this imposing environment and the modest Polaroids through selections that laid out a set of affinities.

In the first room visitors were greeted by a model of a cooper’s workshop crafted in France in the nineteenth century set on a child’s table manufactured by Gustav Stickley around 1904. The center of the main space was dominated by a monumental birdhouse made in England in 1875 from mahogany and wire, around which were arrayed, pew-like, wooden child’s settles based on a design by Stickley. The Polaroids lined each wall of the main space, their subdued grays, blues, and greens offering mute witness to the existence elsewhere of the buildings or architectural details that Evans recorded. Imitation architecture squared off against reproductions of absent architecture, leaving an emotional gulf between them.

The gap was filled by imagery of movement, of living things, albeit elusive ones. The cardinal points of the main room were marked by four pairs of images from Roni Horn’s Bird series shot between 1998 and 2007 that show close-ups of birds seen from behind, their folded wings betraying no signs of their identity, except as singular, and singularly beautiful, creatures. We now understand why the first room contained two photographs: Eadweard Muybridge’s 1887 record of the running flight of the adjutant bird and Eugène Atget’s photograph, taken around 1900, of a shop front, an old boutique on the Quai Bourbon, Paris. In the doorway of the latter we glimpse the blurred shadow of a young girl. Is it she who has imagined these spaces? Is it her house of memory, her dream world, into which we have been invited?

In the explanatory booklet (designed somewhat like a child’s notebook), Hendeles is quite explicit about her process:
In my practice, my approach is to develop a site-specific work, conceiving and executing each show as an artistic embodiment of the particular exhibition space. I start with the context and search for ways to develop a relationship with it that is expressed through layered metaphorical connections. I use an artistic process to create a site-specific curatorial composition that interweaves narratives from disparate discourses using disparate elements. These elements are in no way aligned art historically, and I regard each as a fundamental component of the composition that bears no substitution, not even from the same body of work.  

A clearer statement of the contemporary convergence of artistic and curatorial impulses and constraints is difficult to imagine. Every key artistic idea since conceptualism and minimalism is amalgamated into a seamless, pure, J. K. Rowling-kind of “curatorial composition.” That this statement comes from a collector who sees no boundaries between any place on the spectrum is typical of our times. Nor is it a surprise that Hendeles’s projects excite the interest of young curators more than most other models out there.

THE EXHIBITIONARY COMPLEX

How does this Houdini-like identity-swapping of roles across the spectrum relate to the idea of “the exhibitionary complex”—as described by Bennett, historicized by Lorente, and theorized by Duncan and Wallach, among many others—that undergirded the growth of modern art, linked it to the modernizing city, provoked the avant-garde into existence, and subsequently sustained modernism for many decades? These authors identified the system that was initiated most influentially for Europe and its cultural colonies by the addition, in 1818, of an annual showing of new works to ongoing displays of works from the permanent collection at the Luxembourg Palace, Paris. Entrants to the Museum of Living Artists were chosen by members of the Academy, a professional organization led
by artists that operated under the patronage of the Emperor and later the state. Works deemed worthy of entering the national collection were passed on to the Louvre Museum ten years after the artist’s death, while others went to provincial museums, to storage, or were returned to the artist’s estate. Artists sold works from these annual exhibitions or direct from their studios. By the mid-eighteenth century in England a number of independent auction houses had been established and commercial galleries began appearing throughout Europe in the 1890s. This apparently competitive, but mostly cooperative system is the core of the multimuseum and gallery spectrum that we have inherited. Role swapping has been endemic since the beginning, especially as the system was adopted in city after city throughout the modern world. This is still occurring, as new art distribution centers are created; China during the 2000s is a striking example, with the Arab states in the Middle East the most recent.

Yet the framework is changing, leading us to ask why, and what would change for the better look like? If French artists in the early nineteenth century faced the problem of how to effectively distribute their work and solved it by institutionalizing, proliferating, and varying the venues for doing so, artists in the Middle East today are small players in local art worlds that seem primarily dedicated to selling works drawn from all over the world to targeted buyers from their region and to anchoring large-scale real estate projects. In the longer-established art centers, the issue for curators is rather different. If the selecting, collecting, and exhibitionary ensemble, however chameleon-like in its capacity to change, tends, like all institutional structures, to prioritize self-perpetuation, slow down time, and incline toward the securities of repetition, are sets of practices, such as those that Lind labels “the curatorial,” examples of emergent, more inventive, and more critical alternatives? Or are they the latest supplement to a structure quite capable of generating its own transformations—as it has done in the past, is doing now, and will do for the foreseeable future?

A third, pivotal element pushes itself into this mix: the repeated mega-exhibition, or biennial, now so widespread as to have become an institutional form in itself. We may situate it, logically, in between concrete institutions, such as museums, and supplementary ones, such as Kunsthalle's and online sites. Indeed, biennials have evolved into internally diverse displays that occasionally, but regularly, spread themselves out across the range of exhibitionary venues of the city that hosts them, occupying each site, making each site different from what it normally is, while also connecting them, at least for the duration. Biennials, therefore, may be considered structural—they have become fundamental to the display of contemporary art. For historical art, the parallel is the
blockbuster. Since Treasures of Tutankhamun, which toured England, Europe, Japan, and the U.S. between 1972 and 1979, attracting millions, blockbuster exhibitions have become so regular a part of museum programming that they, too, may be considered structural. The major museums seem to be incorporating the mega-exhibition into themselves: they have become so large, so internally various, so full of attractions, and so crowded that we might regard these institutions themselves as megamuseums.

Our galleria-like infrastructural array might, therefore, be seen as concentrating its energies into three realms: the institutional, the alternative (or the supplement), and the link. These are the forms taken by its urge to territorialize. At the same time, as we have shown, there is an incessant urge on the part of each type of venue and each exhibition format to imitate the vital practices of the others, to absorb some of their enabling energies (in the case of institutions), to counter them with previously unimagined activity (in the case of the alternatives), and to embody projective versions of both (in the case of the biennial). Stasis is always vitiated by change; storms are vital to the regular patterning of the weather. To fully grasp the settings in which curating is done, we need to keep in mind the interplay between the art system’s slow moving yet constant regeneration of structures and its fast moving proliferation of artworks and exhibitionary ideas.

In this section, I will reflect further on this interplay by thinking first about museums, then about biennials. What has been happening to both, and what do the changes mean for curating? We have come to a pass in which the museum seems no longer to be the limit setter, perhaps not even the default, for contemporary art and contemporary curating. Biennials have become the major vehicles of contemporary art, yet their very success has brought problems for curators, their primary custodians, not least the challenge of constant reinvention. Are these the indicators of infrastructural shift? I will explore these issues while continuing to ask: What kinds of contemporary curatorial thought are in play in each instance?

THE EXPERIENCE MUSEUM

In recent times the status of the museum as a site of permanent collection is gradually shifting to one of the museum as theater for large-scale traveling exhibitions organized by international curators and large-scale installations organized by individual artists. Every exhibition or installation of this kind is made with the intention of designing a new order of historical memories, of
proposing new criteria for collecting by reconstructing history. These traveling exhibitions and installations are temporal museums that openly display their temporality.\textsuperscript{6}

Boris Groys’s remarks in his book Art Power highlight the modern transformation of the art museum from that of repository of a collection to site of exhibition, its transmogrification from a place that held history in stasis, presenting it as a stilled panorama, to one in which everything—including the collection rooms—has the status of an event in the process of happening. As he goes on to say, contemporary art may be distinguished from that which prevailed during the modern era precisely in its core commitment to radical temporality: it makes every element in the situation utterly and only temporary.

In the modernist tradition, the art context was regarded as relatively stable—it was the idealized context of the universal museum. Innovation consists in putting a new form, a new thing, into this stable context. In our time context is seen as changing and unstable. So the strategy of contemporary art consists in creating a specific context that can make a certain form or thing look other, new, and interesting—even if this form has already been collected. Traditional art worked on the level of form. Contemporary art works on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation.\textsuperscript{7}

This is an acute description of key aspects of the situation—not least because in late modern and contemporary circumstances, and in line with a history I will sketch in the next essay, when it comes to the radical renovation of exhibition forms, curators have mostly followed artists.

Museums everywhere use these strategies to “contemporize” their offerings. A spectacular instance is Tate Modern’s framing, since 2000, of its collections of modern art with both spectacular (in the Turbine Hall) and less in-your-face, but still agenda-setting works of contemporary art (in the entrance and exit rooms of each of the themed floors). On a quite different scale, and far away, the idea of the temporary exhibition is recast in projects such as One Day Sculpture. Curated by David Cross and Claire Doherty, it consisted of twenty installations, performances, events, or demonstrations, each mounted for twenty-four hours, in twenty different places across the two islands of Aotearoa New Zealand, during an eight-month period from August 2008. This was an innovative way of splitting the difference between a place-bound medium and a cultural setting saturated by multiple and fragile temporalities. No surprise that productive tensions between these
two factors shaped each of the twenty exhibits.\textsuperscript{8}

In my description of the three currents that predominate within contemporary art, I highlight how each was hatched within, latched onto, or coevolved with the disseminative forms most suited to its needs. Thus remodernism prevails at universal art history survey museums when they address contemporary art and it drives the desire of museums of modern art to remain contemporary, as it does those museums of contemporary art (the majority) that see their role as updating audiences on the continuous output of art (rather than grappling with the challenges of contemporaneity). Retro-sensationalism is the preferred mode for the private museums of those collectors who identify with its maverick-in-the-citadel attitude—famously Charles Saatchi, Eli Broad, and François Pinault. Their enterprise is echoed, on a smaller scale, by many of those newly arrived to riches in Russia, China, the Middle East, and elsewhere. For example, the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) that opened in Hobart, Tasmania, in 2010, to house the collection and present the lifestyle of gambler David Walsh. Emergent during the wealth concentration enabled since the 1980s by the widespread embrace of neoliberal economics, the new collectors have been drawn to spectacular art and to high-profile public presentations of their collections, whether as part of well-known museums (Broad at the Los Angeles County Museum), grand renovations of older structures (Saatchi at the Duke of York’s Headquarters, Chelsea, London, and Pinault at the Palazzo Grassi and the Customs House, Venice), or by carving out art parks in the jungle (Bernardo Paz at Instituto Inhotim, Minas Gerais, Brazil).

The second current, which I call the transnational transition, has found its ideal vehicle in the biennial.\textsuperscript{9} Local-international exchange is built into the biennial form, as is the regular repetition of the temporary survey exhibition. Thus the biennial has suited Western institutions that wish to sample art from everywhere else, yet not necessarily collect it: Venice, São Paulo, Sydney, the list goes on. (Pittsburgh, beginning in 1896 and thus the second biennial, has consistently collected from its Carnegie Internationals.) In mirror reversal, it suits artists from elsewhere who wish to sample art from the West, but not necessarily reproduce it. Havana, beginning in 1984, remains the leading instance of this (unaligned, Third World) perspective. As well, the biennial offers international standard models for art producing locales that wish to build and maintain permanent infrastructure. At the same time, it substitutes for the grand exhibition in locales that either do not wish or are unable to present them as a matter of course. This has been a winning combination for the global trafficking in art.
Museums are not the preferred disseminative modes for the under-the-radar proliferators whose activities constitute the third current in contemporary art. Nor are biennials. Preferences are for the Internet, direct interactivity, alternative spaces, and temporary settings—all constantly changing, all entirely experimental. Museums of any kind are OK, if they are interesting for whatever immediate purpose, but are not special in the sense that helping to shore up their continuity has any priority. While they remain, in the public mind at least, the singular gatekeepers for what counts as art, they seem increasingly openhanded—at times, frantic—about what they will encourage into their portals. Meanwhile, third current prosumers care less about their output being labeled as “art” and more about whether it is of interest to their peers. Some curators, consciously turning away from the art world’s fawning dependence on the 1%, actively seek to add artistic energies to social changes that are occurring in new contexts, such as the Occupy movements. Most curators working today are aware that the most interesting, rapid, and perhaps the most profound kinds of change in their field of practice are happening inside the three currents I have identified and along the fault lines between them.

THE MUSEUM QUESTION

Taking these changes together—they are, after all, occurring contemporaneously—we might ask: Are they threatening to make ruins out of all kinds of museums and exhibition spaces, no matter where they fall within the spectrum? If so, is the best response one of defiant resistance, total acceptance, or calibrated change mixed with carefully chosen continuity? If the latter, precisely which elements should go into the blend and how should they be blended? Has the move from “temple” to “forum,” from being “about
something” to being “for somebody,” gone too far, or nowhere near far enough? Putting these questions in this way is to deploy the language of cultural administrators and museum directors, perhaps more so than that of curators. But these roles are shifting now, especially as a generation of curators who have found their vocations within the shape-shifting spectrum that I have been describing take on higher positions within arts institutions.

One extremely popular response has been to turn museums into centers of culturtainment (ugly word, awful phenomenon). Carsten Höller pinpoints the context:

We’re in the middle of the “rule of populism.” All the big museums all over the world are showing contemporary art. Contemporary art galleries are opening everywhere and becoming larger. In the 1970s contemporary art was a specialist domain—not many people were interested in it. Now it’s impossible to open a lifestyle magazine that does not contain something on contemporary art. Today, though, it’s necessary to go out of the museum, to avoid the mainstream to produce new, more radical concepts. The museum has done its job, and, as an artist, the benefit you get from making more and more museum shows is decreasing. It’s not possible to make things in a museum that are radical enough to have a powerful influence, because the important things have already been done. And that’s not only pertinent to art shows and museums. It’s something you see in many domains in society, including science, where all the big discoveries have already been made.

He should know. Along with others, such as Maurizio Cattelan, he is an expert supplier of contemporary art as entertainment—it was the entire object of his New Museum exhibition in late 2011, as it was of Cattelan’s contemporaneous show uptown at the Guggenheim. He is wrong, however, about there being nothing “big” left to discover. We are just beginning to grasp the depth of complexity within contemporaneity and how to live with it.
Höller paints a picture of the triumph of the conformist contemporary—a nightmare scenario. Of course, it is extremely pleasant for most of those involved, as seductive as the “death rooms” in *THX 1138* (1971), George Lucas’s first, and in many ways best, film. This mood is captured in Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska’s video *Museum Futures: Distributed* (2008), which features an interview between an archivist and the director of the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, set in 2058, the centenary year of the museum. Their exchange reviews a “history” of the Museet up to that time, with the years between now and then imagined as a struggle between open inventiveness and managerialism during which the museum is put partially into the marketplace to become a quasi-private, quasi-public institution. One becomes gradually aware that the managers have absorbed institutional critique into their official language while never having become at all critical. It is as if a time-transported Andrea Fraser is interviewing her double.12

At The Now Museum conference, held in New York in May 2011, Reina Sofia director Manuel Borja-Villel remarked, “Museums are more popular than ever before, but most of them are more banal than ever before.” (There are, of course, many kinds of banality: for example, that of the lowest common denominator of taste and that of the conformist parrot of high fashion.) Borja-Villel traced a three-stage history, or evolution, from the exclusivist modern museum (which used white cube transparency and immediacy to display a linear art history to a specialist and a generalized public), through the inclusive postmodern museum (which mixed styles, mediums, and chronologies and used marketing to sell multiculturalism as a product to audiences), until now, at a moment of crisis for societies and museums, when there is a need to rethink the presumptions about property and patrimony embodied in collections and to treat them instead as an “archive of the commons.” This archive should be displayed, he believes, as a repository of other narratives, from oral ones to multiple modernities, as stories of belonging, with works of art treated as relational objects, that is, objects to which people can relate in a variety of ways.13

In a setting as vast and varied as the Reina Sofia, itself a minicity, one already experiences something like this incessant interplay between deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization. More broadly, for the past thirty years, unevenly across art worlds around the globe, we have been experiencing the contemporaneity of the three types of museum that Borja-Villel outlines. These exhibitionary venues register the three currents in art that I have distinguished. Museums across the spectrum busily strive to adapt to the unfolding of each current, while also showcasing instances of the complex interactions between them.
At the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in recent years, a quite different approach has been attempted. Updated in 2010, its Mission Statement declares its primary goal as remaining “the foremost museum of modern art in the world,” but then goes on to add “and contemporary” to every subsequent use of “modern” in the more specific bullet points about how it will remain at the forefront. In its public advertising, MoMA pitches itself, in every respect except for its brand name, as a museum of contemporary art. An advertisement in the New York Times (November 18, 2011, C27) has this header: “MoMA Contemporary Galleries 1980–NOW Over two hundred new works in all mediums ALWAYS NEW ALWAYS ON VIEW.” These messages overlaid or bordered an image of picture frames in which the titles of these works were given:

(16mm film transferred to video [black and white, silent]) Deadpan, Steve McQueen
(pantyhose and sand) R.S.V.P.1, Senga Negudi
(video [color, sound]) Histoire(s) du Cinema (Chapters 1A and 1B), Jean-Luc Godard
(candies, individually wrapped in silver cellophane [endless supply]) Untitled (Placebo), Félix González-Torres
(glass, painted steel, distilled water, plastic, and three basketballs) Three Ball 50/50 Tank (Two Dr. J. Silver Series, One Wilson Silvershot), Jeff Koons
(refrigerator, table, chairs, wood, drywall, curry, and lots of people) Untitled (Free/Still), an interactive installation of vegetarian Thai curry served free of charge in a gallery, Nov 17–Feb 8, 12:00–3 p.m., except Fridays: 4:00–7:00 p.m., Rirkrit Tiravanija
(clay, wood, wire, styrofoam, plastic, cast iron, fabric, aluminum, synthetic polymer paint, ink, paper, and brass wire) Bleekmen, Huma Bhabha
(plywood, shoes, animal fiber, thread, and sheepskin) Atrabilious, Doris Salcedo

In other words: This is what you can expect to see when you come to the museum now. And: How more contemporary can you expect us to be? Subtext: Do you really want us to
be more contemporary than this?

Elsewhere, I have tracked, month by month from its reopening in November 2004, MoMA’s struggles with its core wish to continue to be the defining museum of modern art in the world while at the same time remaining open to, even being at the forefront, but not quite at the cutting edge, of collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting contemporary art. I identified some of the factors preventing the successful performance of this double act: the presumption that the only contemporary art worthy of consideration was that which evidently extended the innovations of twentieth century modernism, the token inclusion of a small number of artists outside the modernist mainstream and from cultures outside of Europe and the U.S., the territoriality of departments based on traditional artistic mediums, the infrequent showing of art using new and digital media, the constant foregrounding of the museum’s own history, and incessant curatorial deference to precedence and institutional sanction.

Since then it has been fascinating to watch the museum wrestle with these self-imposed and increasingly anachronistic limitations and find ways of modifying them, with varying degrees of success. There is support for research, archiving, and publication involving aspects of the art of other regions: Eastern Europe, China, Japan, Venezuela, and Argentina, to date. This has taken the form of a series of anthologies of documents, though rarely, as yet, exhibitions. A brace of contemporary curators have been appointed in recent years. Their impact can be seen in some of the temporary exhibitions and in the changing installations of the collection shown in the second-floor galleries. Slowly, spasmodically, but one hopes inevitably, these galleries are shedding their modernist residues, gradually becoming contemporary spaces. (At least in the first rooms: to date, this sense is rarely sustained around the entire suite of galleries.)

The Saatchi Gallery, London, for all of its fast-schedule exhibiting of current art, its clever educational programming, and sexy website, remains a profoundly conservative operation, a kind of museum of retro-sensationalism in frenzied (yet in effect freeze-frame) motion. Its founder, Charles Saatchi, recently announced that he was fed up with the self-aggrandizing, pig-ignorant, money-grubbing spectacularization of the international art world, which has become, in his words, “the sport of the Eurotrashy, hedge-fundy Hamptonites; of trendy oligarchs and oiligarchs; and of art dealers with a masturbatory level of self-regard.” Any reader of The Art Newspaper can fill in the names. Most would include his among them. Saatchi’s view of curators betrays one basic reason for the conservatism of his gallery:
For professional curators, selecting specific paintings for an exhibition is a daunting prospect, far too revealing a demonstration of their lack of what we in the trade call an “eye.” They prefer to exhibit videos, and those incomprehensible, postconceptual installations and photo-text panels, for the approval of their equally insecure and myopic peers.  

Presumably he does not see as curatorship his personal approval of every purchase added to the collection, his firm policy settings for the exhibition programs of his galleries, his walk-around review of the hangings, or his oversight of publicity. For him, the wealthy amateur—inspired by a genuine love of art and possessed of a pure “eye”—transcends the callow collectivism of professionals.

The New Museum, New York, founded in 1977 as a gallery devoted entirely to contemporary art—in explicit contrast to MoMA—has, since moving into its new building on the Bowery in 2007, tended toward showing mainly work from the first and third currents, with isolated elements of the second thrown in. It often does so in three layers—historical, contemporary, and online—usually presented on three separate floors. I celebrate its Museum as Hub initiative, which, while it might seem to the fleeting visitor like just another floor, is a clearly delineated space devoted to the museum’s strong commitment to connecting itself to art spaces around the world. Begun in 2006, it explores possibilities for new art, events, and exhibitions via residences and exchange programs between the museum and a small number of partners in Seoul, Mexico City, Cairo, and Eindhoven. It is no accident that the museum’s second Triennial, The Ungovernables, was curated by Eungie Joo, director and curator of education and public programs, who also directed the Museum as Hub, which was the catalyst for the Art Spaces Directory, a resource that profiles four hundred art spaces in ninety-six countries.

I am not advocating a three-floor museum, each level tracking how one of the currents is unfolding through the present and how its past might be understood, its future imagined. (That would be an ethnographic museum, one that offered, from some point in the
future, and inevitably shaped by its own anxieties, an archaeological profile of this present.) The “exhibitionary complex” of most cities with any degree of art infrastructure already does something like this—implicitly, in a prefigurative way. Better that contemporaneity is experienced spatially and contingently, rather than give the mystifying illusion that it is accessible, in its entirety, at one site. If it were, would it not, in such a place, at such a moment, instantly freeze up, become past history? Does such a modernist fear still haunt contemporary conditions?

I share Borja-Villel’s hope that big public art museums are evolving in the direction that he indicates, toward open-hearted archives of the commons, but we also have to recognize the powers of recuperation, spectacle, and recursion that Höller identifies when it comes to museums of such scale. As well, we need to be aware of the powerful persistence of national cultural elites and acknowledge that, in many parts of the world, “the commons” is itself a highly contested space. In some repressive situations, it exists only as a dream; in others, such as the Middle East, it is turning into transformatory action (and provoking extreme reactions). Throughout South America today people’s movements are becoming governments, rather than taking government—with, so far, less extremely repressive reactions than those that followed the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Even in the United States, where consumerist comfort squares off in an uneasy alliance with fearful citizenship, spontaneous combustion is proving more and more possible—as we have seen as the Occupy movements have spread throughout the country.

A sidebar of the transnational transition is the current convergence between art and ethnography museums. For some of the latter, in Europe especially, as the West surrenders its presumptions of superiority, contemporary art has become the one best hope for their continuation. In Cologne early in 2011 one could visit Afropolis at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (of Ethnography), an engrossing exhibition in which displays of daily life in six African cities were anchored, and, in fact, dominated, by specially
commissioned installations by artists from each city. In comparison, an exhibition of Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art at the nearby Wallraf-Richharz Museum (of Art) seemed aestheticized by being presented almost entirely without context, despite its promising title, Remembering Forward. Both kinds of museum were subjecting themselves to certain modes of aesthetic deinstitutionalization while at the same time using traditional display frameworks to try to tame the cuckoo that they had invited into their nests. Meanwhile, at the Kolumba Museum in Cologne, Peter Zumthor’s superb renovation of the St. Columba church site enables a display that mixes, with considerable elegance and restraint, modernist and contemporary art with religious artifacts to create spaces that, while resonant with an unspecific, rather amorphous spirituality, are constantly interrupted by aesthetically arresting artworks. (Those more spiritually or religiously inclined will of course have different experiences in such spaces.)

In such situations we can see the operations of institutionalization, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization that is the “natural” life, the breathing in and out, of any institution or system. In orthodox managerial terms of reference, it is up to directors, boards, and managers at all levels to decide on the balance between these forces, one that ensures the growth (or at least survival) of the institution by enabling a comforting degree of continuity, while inviting in calibrated doses of disruption, which is then incorporated into a narrative of reinvigoration, adaptation, and regrowth. All of this would be easy to manage if the social locus of the museum and the pattern of change in society at large were relatively constant. But they are not; they are becoming less so, everywhere. In Cologne, for example, the programs of the three museums just mentioned are markers in an ongoing ideological contestation that is city wide, regional, and often national, in its dimensions. This is to be expected in any city of any size.

THE BIENNIAL IDEA
What of the biennial, tsunami-like in its recent ubiquity? Claire Bishop opens her review of the 2011 Venice Biennale with this comment:

Who would have thought, eight years ago, that the biennial as an exhibition form had peaked? In hindsight, it appears that Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11 in 2002 and Francesco Bonami’s “Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer” in Venice the following year may have marked the outer limits of what is possible in these sprawling endeavors. Enwezor’s and Bonami’s shows seemed to confirm that the biennial, with its global reach and its comparative freedom from institutional red tape and historical baggage, provided a unique opportunity to experiment freely with curatorial arrangements (international teams, shows within shows, artist-curated shows) and exhibition structure (geographically dispersed satellite programs; conferences, symposia, and publications), and to seek out practices that museums were too provincial or cautious to embrace.... The idea that these biennials were constituting an alternative public sphere, one in which visual culture offered compelling propositions for a world in disarray, imbued the exhibitions with an energizing sense that the stakes were high.18

Not so anymore, at least not in Venice. The past three Biennales have been laid out in zones that echo at least two of the currents constituting contemporary art. In the Central Pavilion, we find a reach for a “universal” theme within contemporary art (some version of Art in General) that usually implodes into a melancholy remodernism, but retro-sensationalism has mostly been avoided (except when offered in quick and easy doses, as last year in Cattelan’s ubiquitous pigeons, entitled Others, themselves an expanded version of his 1997 installation, then entitled Tourists). A “global” glance outwards at the world from the Euro-American center usually prevails at the Arsenale. Transnational transition in various “official” forms appears in the National Pavilions (that divide between aspiration to enter the Central Pavilion and indignant opposition to any such ambition). There is a spilling over of transnationality throughout the city, including in the hired out palazzos, where smaller nations show their art and better-resourced ones show their “unofficial” art, while dealer coalitions show quasi-official art. Meanwhile, at the Palazzo Fortuny, Belgian collector Axel Vervoordt demonstrates what universality really looks like when it comes to art. (Or at least he attempts to do so, with diminishing returns—as a blinkers-off comparison of ARTEMPO [1997] and TRA [2011] will attest.) Art made within the third current appears sporadically, usually as an echo or an absent option.19

Venice is, of course, the primogenitor of all biennials. Its history as a theater on which the
world’s art—on analogy to international trade fairs and expositions—showed itself to itself, every two years, is routinely acknowledged, yet has not been explored in satisfactory historical detail or been thoroughly contextualized. It is arguable that the biennial format was not categorically revised until the São Paulo Bienal (1951), documenta 1 (1955), and the Bienal de la Habana (1984). Each, in their different ways, inaugurated a more limited, regional version of international–local exchange. In each case, again distinctively, regional emphasis aimed to manifest an ideological perspective: São Paulo to connect art in South America (Brazil especially) to Europe and the United States; documenta 1 to make Kassel a site for the symbolic internationalization of German art after the Nazi era and to contrast West German abstraction to the Socialist Realism that prevailed across the nearby border; and Havana to offer a base for artistic connection within Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as to reach out laterally to other “non-aligned” nation states around the world. As Carlos Basualdo observes, “In all these shows, however, diplomacy, politics, and commerce converge in a powerful movement, the purpose of which seems to be the appropriation and instrumentalization of the symbolic value of art.”

He goes on to suggest that the proliferation of biennials in the past thirty years—which itself seems to constitute either a second wave or a new phase in their history, one now coming to an end—has occurred “completely in tune” with the global integration of markets and the worldwide dissemination of information about localities everywhere, along with resistances to such globalizing forces. The tension between the homogenizing and anti-homogenizing forces of globalization itself is captured in the biennial, with its simultaneous foregrounding of both international and local art and its highlighting of the complex relays between them. We might add that the same is true of the museum that enlivens its dutiful displays of its collection and of local art with imported blockbuster shows from famous museums elsewhere. These generalities seem valid enough, but more work needs to be done to ground them with historical precision. For example, in some cases, if one looks at the capacity for long-term planning, budget size, and levels of personnel management, many biennials have matched and often exceeded the capabilities of the local museum. This is particularly so outside of the Euro-American context—the São Paulo and Mercosul biennials in Brazil, for example—where operations move from small working staffs during the off years to employing hundreds in the year of the biennial.

Yet Basulado’s worry arises at a deeper level: that of the museum’s role as an “objective” guarantor of artistic value, a house of judgment supposedly separate from the
commercial greed of the art market.

The symbolic value created initially by museums—as a concealed affirmation of the exchange value of objects and artistic practices—is ultimately transformed by biennials into pure utility. Perhaps this was (and in some cases, may still be) the (ultimately naïve) reasoning of many institutions that founded biennials. And in some cases, such reasoning may be partly justified.\(^\text{24}\)

But, he argues, the convergence between the biennial and the museum on this level is more apparent than real. Works shown at biennials tend to be less tied to market and collector tastes and dictates, more critical in character, more adventurous as to medium, and more likely to be drawn from other expressive and symbolic mediums such as cinema, design, and architecture (in a word, more contemporary). And biennials require greater and more immediate immersion in dense and diverse interpretative discourse than do the usual run of exhibitions at museums. (Ditto.) This has certainly been the case in the history of biennial exhibitions to date. The question is, for how long will it remain so?

Returning to my own argument, I would observe that curators have a relationship to this complex mix of elements distinct from that of artists, critics, or historians, on the one hand, and the demands and expectations of public officials, funders, and traditional museum professionals, on the other. While respecting the specific perspectives of all of these players and constantly negotiating between them, the curator must articulate a position that interrogates “local history and contexts,” though always in terms of their potentially productive relationships with the “horizon of internationalism” on which the biennial is based. This is a huge challenge to the contemporary curator, one that (presuming that my argument that biennials are now structural within the system has been accepted) faces him or her with a degree and kind of responsibility that parallels that of the museum director. Certainly the long-term planning, the size of the budgets, and tasks of personnel management are, in many cases, comparable. As well as being exhibition makers par excellence, curators of mega-exhibitions are required to become custodians of the biennial form itself. They tend, therefore, to assume the title Artistic Director, thus locating themselves on a par with the music director of an orchestra.

Taking a broader view, many of us have argued that, in recent decades, the biennial has frequently led in explorations of the implications of radically new forms of art making.
Thus this statement by Rosa Martinez about her 2005 Venice Biennale:

A biennial... looks beyond the present and into the future... Biennials are the most advanced area for this expanded field precisely because they do not function like museums. Museums are temples for the preservation of memory... Biennials are a context for the exploration and questioning of the present.25

This is classic modernist wish projection. More concretely, we are now reaping the benefits of twenty years of sustained assault, through the biennial form, on the “canonical mechanisms established in the historical narratives produced, almost exclusively, in Europe and the United States.”26 Despite the fact that museums often house biennials, I agree with Basualdo that “large-scale international exhibitions never completely belong to the system of art institutions in which they are supposedly inscribed” and that, therefore, “the range of practical and theoretical possibilities to which they give rise often turns out to be subversive.”27 This is highly significant, with enormous potential for the development of art and for its disseminative structures. Museums have taken note and have been quick to at least partially absorb some of the lessons of the biennial into their usual displays and regular programming. What has this done to the subversive potentials of the biennial format?

RETHINKING THE MEGA-EXHIBITION

Since 2000 the biennial has been widely seen as being in a crisis of overproduction, of having become stale in form (theme A, with subthemes a, b, c, and d; theme B, ditto; x number of artists, y number of works each, in z amount of rooms) and, as a result, in danger of being absorbed back into the traditional museum. Among the curatoriate there seems to have arisen a competition as to who could reconceive the biennial in the most inventive and influential way. “Of late, it has become a cliché for curators to announce bravely that they are dispensing with the conventional biennial structure, a tendency so pervasive that one begins to wonder where, outside of Venice, a conventional biennial might be found today.”28 Eleanor Heartney made this comment in connection with the 2010 Gwangju Biennale, noting that its early editions were curated by teams overseen by “big-name European curators, like Harald Szeemann and René Block,” while more recent editions fell to “younger, more geographically, philosophically, and ethnically diverse curators.”29 These have included Charles Esche and Hou Hanru who, in 2000, turned over curatorship to alternative spaces and artist’s collectives; and Yongwoo Lee who, in 2004,
teamed “ordinary” people with professional curators. In 2008 Okwui Enwezor presented an exhibition of other exhibitions, recreating in part or whole a number of shows that had been presented elsewhere in the world during the previous year. While these innovations aimed at opening up the event to “the serendipity of unexpected choices,” Massimiliano Gioni’s 2010 edition, entitled 10,000 Lives, struck Heartney as “a carefully crafted exercise in curatorial control” that “embodied the museum ethos it was meant to overturn.” However accurate her characterizations (they are partial at best), they nonetheless illustrate my larger point about the contradictory friction between an open-ended format (such as the biennial) and a singular event (the clear curatorial statement, the definitive exhibition) that haunts the curating of contemporary art, whatever the site of the exhibitionary act.

There is, I think, a quantitative issue at play here. The sheer number of biennials (nearly two hundred) has made it impossible for even the brilliant curatorialate described above to pull off its self-imposed challenge of reinventing the exhibition each and every time. No wonder that São Paulo in 2008 and Bergen in 2009 decided to prioritize meetings and events that reflected on the history, relevance, and prospects of the biennial form itself over exhibits of works by international and local artists. That is to say, they invited attendees to reexamine an exhibition format whose success as a mode of global connectivity—arguably to the point where the “international” and “local” dialogue has become decreasingly productive as an antinomy—was coming under threat due to local funding and political difficulties (themselves the outcome, largely, of the global financial crisis). There were, of course, significant back stories at both places. The São Paulo organization, with its relatively long history (since 1951), its relative success in consolidating cultural links with Europe and the U.S., and its promotion of local artistic ideas as of international relevance (notably “anthropophagy” in 1998, an initiative of curator Paulo Herkenhoff), had often demonstrated a capacity for reflective changes of direction, however fraught and contested. In 2008 the decision to show few (initially zero) artworks and to devote the entire exhibition to different forms of debate about contemporary art’s relationships to local society and international forces was derailed by the high-level security imposed on the venue in response to a graffiti attack on the main walls of the empty exhibition spaces.

As elsewhere, the polemical tone was soon lowered. The 2010 Bienal at São Paulo explored a constellation of political/artistic “territories”: “The skin of the invisible,” “Said, unsaid, forbidden,” “I am the street,” “Remembrance and oblivion,” “Far away, right here,” and “The other, the same.” In 2012 we can expect an exploration of “The
Immanence of Poetics.” Poesis is replacing politics everywhere as the retreat position in the international art world. Titles of this kind—mixed lists of lines of poetry, graffiti, book titles, text headers, and film subtitles—are becoming a familiar mode for naming clusters of curatorial themes. They signal the presence of disparate elements, “torn halves,” that do not add up, perhaps because that would imply totalities that no longer exist. This does not, however, take away the challenge of making meaning on more specific levels.

Applying “biennial processes” to the problem of rethinking the biennial is occurring throughout the system at the moment. For example, the Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, under the title “The Most Beautiful Kunsthalle in the World,” organized twenty-five meetings between 2010 and 2012 for art world players to debate “the diverse models of exhibition spaces and its characteristics; the relation between economy and art; the definition and identity of the figure of the curator; the publications of art and other questions related to all the aspects of doing and producing exhibitions.” Outcomes are as yet uncertain. The 2009 conference in Bergen, To Biennial or Not to Biennial, led to an excellent resource book, The Biennial Reader. At the conference itself, the underlying issue was whether or not to institute a biennial in the city, given the plethora around the world, but the few in Scandinavia, the relative wealth of Norway, and its need to prepare for a post–North Sea oil future. The City Council recently announced that the Bergen Biennial Foundation would play a major role in developing the proposed Scandinavian Triennial for the city, and that “an aspect of discourse and knowledge production” would be inserted into its outlook.

Against this model of updating and regionalizing the standard “international” model, the history of Manifesta, the nomadic biennial, is instructive. It was launched from Holland, one of the key nations of Western Europe, precisely to engage the fragmentation of the borders of the European Union, at that time a newly formed yet largely notional entity. The errant itinerary of Manifesta, a fragile yet resilient quasi-organization, has accurately reflected the productive errancy at the heart of the enterprise of rethinking the idea of “Europe.” Since Rotterdam in 1996, Manifesta has been staged every two years in a different European city—Luxembourg, Ljubljana, Frankfurt, Donista-San Sebastián, etc.—by teams of curators from outside that city who have never worked together before, who are asked to spend the intervening years combing the continent for new art and to present it in whatever ways seem relevant to them. Iterations have deployed innovative formats ranging from museum exhibitions through the use of unusual sites all over each city to Internet sites. The Manifesta planned for Nicosia in 2006, which was to take the form of an art school that would conduct classes in both parts of the only divided city
remaining in Europe, fell afoul of local regulations and political tensions. Since then it has been shown at Trentino-South Tyrol (2008), and Murcia in Spain in dialogue with North Africa (2010). In 2012 it will land at Limburg, Belgium, curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, Katerina Gregos, and Dawn Ades.34

On a global scale cultural connectivities are also changing, fast and drastically, as locales in Asia and the Middle East in particular institutionalize rapidly and the old cultural centers see the ghosts of entropy looming within their success with spectacle. In locales outside of the former West, regional connectivity has been sought for some decades, as we have seen most notably in Havana since 1984, from a tercomondialist perspective. In recent years, as the income divide becomes a yawning gap and concentrates in relatively few yet highly mobile hands, many Asian biennials, and those in the Middle East, such as the Saadiyat Cultural District at Abu Dhabi, seek to use high art as lifestyle cement within the formation of economic hubs for the top 1% in the region. On an intrastate scale, within large nations such as Brazil and China, internal cultural connectivity is a growing concern. It is coming to match their interest in connecting with “global” currents. Cultural policy, they might say, must face both ways.

If I am right that the biennial has become structural, then this recent history might indicate a certain ossification of the large-scale mega-exhibition, a lowering of its subversive potential. Does it make sense to take the biennial form, rather than the concept of the specific exhibition for this place and at this time, as the crucial object of critical curatorship? Is this not to mistake a medium for a subject? Perhaps it also presumes that the biennial is perfectible, singular, when the success of the format as a vehicle for transitionality has for decades depended precisely on its node-like structure; its easily imitated parameters; and, on the local level, its unique (for the art-institutional ensemble) mix of flexibility, regularity, and reliable unpredictability. This confusion between open-endedness and singularity remains unresolved—it might be said to have proliferated.

We could keep going across the exhibitionary spectrum, noting the low-level warring between the institutionalizing, deinstitutionalizing, and reinstitutionalizing forces that shape each site and each actor. We could plot the ways in which each kind of institution and each kind of curator seeks to draw either reactive or enabling energy from one or more of the other actors while at the same time striving to create and maintain a distinctive, yet always transformable, profile. And we could chart the ways these interactions have unfolded through time, at different locations, and plot the connections
between them. There would be value in this, as it would highlight the complexities within which curators actually work and bring out distinctive aspects of the different kinds of curating required by each kind of exhibition site, as well as recognize the constant, variable traffic between them. Would Marcia Tucker, founding director of the New Museum, have ever contemplated staging an exhibition such as Skin Fruit (2010), drawn from the collection of one of its trustees, Dakis Joannou, and curated by Jeff Koons, whose work Joannou assiduously collects? How does the programming at the Museum of Installation Art, London, differ from that at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh? An account that mapped out this field and tackled questions such as these would show, more than any to date, the pivotal role that alternative spaces, artist-run cooperatives, and supportive site-specific organizations (such as Artangel, London, Exit Art, New York, or Artspace, Sydney) have played since the 1970s in the growth and diversification of infrastructure for the visual arts. It would also show how much unsung groundwork undergirds what is emerging as a major activity for artists and curators today: infrastructural activism. “The infrastructural” is rapidly replacing “the curatorial” as the problem to be grasped, the issue to which attention must be paid, and upon which energy must be expended.

Before we can clearly see how this issue is being tackled today, it is important that we understand the delicate symbolic dance between two figures: the curator as artist and the artist as curator. There is a considerable history to both models, a history that is constantly subject to simplification as a new relationship between these two emerges to set the present agenda. Let us put some history back into it and see what happens.


7 Ibid., 40.

8 I explore Tate Modern’s contemporizing strategy in What is Contemporary Art?, chap. 4. See David Cross and Claire Doherty, eds., One Day Sculpture (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2009).

9 “Transnational” is a term adopted by all sides of these equations: it is, for example, favored by the Guggenheim for its Abu Dhabi project.


12 The text of the interview opens the centenary volume, Anna Tellgren, ed., The History Book (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl; Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2008).

13 For videos of The Now Museum presentations, go to http://curatorsintl.org/events/the_now_museum.

In Spain, these issues were raised in the 1995 exhibition El limits del museu (The End(s) of the Museum) curated by John G. Hanhard and Thomas Keenan at the Fundació Antoni Tapies, Barcelona. They are elaborated in Francisco Baena, Manuel Borja-Villel, Chema González, and Yolanda Romero, eds., 10,000 francs reward (The Contemporary Art Museum, dead or alive), conference proceedings (Barcelona: Ministry of Culture, State Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action Abroad and International University of Andalusia, 2009).


15 In What is Contemporary Art?, chap. 1, I pay particular attention to the succession of exhibitions in the second floor “contemporary” galleries.


20 Lawrence Alloway, The Venice Biennale 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl (London: Faber and Faber, 1969). For minihistories from contemporary perspectives, see also the introductions to the catalogues of most subsequent editions.


23 We anticipate such a treatment from Caroline Jones’s forthcoming book, Desires for the World Picture: the global work of art, judging by her “Biennial Culture: A Longer History,” in Elena Filipovic, Solveig Ovstebo, and Marijeke van Hal, eds., The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 66–87.


27 Ibid., 60.


29 Ibid., 78.


33 Filipovic, Ovstebo, and Van Hal, Biennial Reader.


35 Examples of the beginnings of such research include Julie Ault, ed., Alternative Art New York: 1965–1985 (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Julia Bryan-Wilson, Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era (California: University of California Press, 2009); and Peta Rake, “Inclusivity and Isolation: Artist-Run Initiatives in Brisbane,” Fillip, no. 11 (Fall 2011): 70–78. Research into alternative art spaces underlies the small but sustained governmental support for them since the 1970s in certain European countries and in Canada and Australia. Documentation of, and arguments for, their pivotal importance regularly appear in reports to sponsoring agencies. For example, Sarah Thelwall, Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operations and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organizations (London: Common Practice with support from the Arts Council England, 2011). Over ninety artist-run initiatives are currently operating in Australia; see http://aripedia.org.au/index.php?title=List_of_Active_Artist_Run_Initiatives; and Georgie Meagher and Brianna Munting, eds., We Are Here (Sydney: National Association for the Visual Arts, 2012). These initiatives complement the dozen contemporary art spaces, most of which have been active promoters of experimental arts for over forty years; see www.caos.org.au/content/Home/.

A history of these kinds of quasi-institutional initiatives throughout the world, especially since the 1960s, would show that infrastructural activism has been with us for a while, but has only recently come to be valued within the art world as inherently creative, transformative, and essential. At the same time, the growth of neoliberal values within governments, and increasing economic uncertainty, means that support from shrinking public funds is becoming less and less likely.
3.
Artists as Curators/Curators as Artists

Kaprow: Do you like waxworks?
Smithson: No, I don’t like waxworks. They are actually too lively.

This exchange occurs halfway through “What is a Museum?” Kaprow begins by stating that museums have come to “look like mausolea” and are irrelevant to current and future art, which is happening either in the mind or out in the world. Ever the contrarian, Smithson responds by deploring the recent tendency of museums to react against their life-denying anachronism by imitating discotheques, and says that artists should exaggerate the “nullifying” qualities of museums—they should fill museums with art that explores “different kinds of emptiness.” The two artists go back and forth, one-upping each other, deliberately missing the other’s point so as to better define their own. In the end, Smithson’s negative capability and Kaprow’s enthusiastic radicalism seem equally potent, equally fanciful options for the future. Awkwardly, Kaprow attempts a positive summary: “My opinion has been, lately, that there are only two outs: one implying a maximum of inertia, which I call ‘idea’ art, art which is usually discussed now and then and never executed; and the other existing in a maximum of continuous activity, activity which is of uncertain aesthetic value and which locates itself apart from cultural institutions. The minute we operate in between these extremes we get hung up (in a museum).”

Two generations later, after much profound change consequent on precisely these two options, artists, critics, and curators have arrived at a somewhat similar position concerning the range of possibilities. The parameters have broadened, but the options look familiar. Spectacularism has come to dominate visitor experience in major museums and echoes through more specialist and alternative spaces further along the spectrum (of course losing its resonance as belief in top-down power shrinks, reminding us that the spectrum is also a vertebrae, a hierarchical distributor of cultural power, generating, but also feeding off the cellular oppositions that cluster at its edges). The merging of art with the everyday (“activity which is of uncertain aesthetic value and which locates itself apart from cultural institutions”—“blurring” was a favorite Kaprow goal) has accelerated to the point that each constantly disappears into the other and reemerges, from time to time, somewhat, although not totally, changed. Operating between art and the everyday, with conceptualism as a residual aesthetic, can mean that some museum somewhere will soon, or eventually, hang your work. Nevertheless, practitioners averse to blurring also know something else: that acting within the spectrum, but at angles to it, opens out a parallel universe, a space where criticality may be rehearsed, ready to be imported back into the spectacularized everyday, to its detriment. The subversive component of curatorial thinking remains relevant.
FROM CRITICAL CURATING TO THE CURATING OF CRITIQUE

Despite the recent, rightful celebration of a few maverick curators—Harald Szeemann, René Block, Pontus Hultén, Kynaston McShine (and a few maverick critics such as Lucy R. Lippard)—who staged pathbreaking shows during the years around 1970, the historical record shows that radical exhibition practice by curators was preceded and, until recently, dramatically outmatched by the work of certain artists who reimagined ways to make exhibitions. Anti-exhibitions, substitutions of one kind of public display space for another, including transpositions of nonmuseum spaces into the museum and vice versa. As to purpose, these were envisaged, firstly, as vehicles for showing the artist’s own work, then the work of confreres, until the transformatory urge embraced the museum as institution, beginning with the reinstallation of certain rooms, through parts of the collection, until some artists showed us ways of rethinking the museum itself. Not that this occurred systematically. Rather, it seems to have been as diverse in its inspirations and random in its effects as the art of the period. Many of these exhibitionary experiments have survived as models for current curatorial practice—they frequently serve as go-to inspirations, often eclipsing more recent precedents.

Early efforts were all about artists projecting the core instincts that drove their art making onto the larger scale of a museum installation. In 1968 Marcel Broodthaers used the label “Museum” for the setting, which happened to be his studio, in which he and other members of the Belgian art world met to discuss the implications of the events of May of that year. “Museum,” in this instance, was meant figuratively, to signify a place least like a museum, yet that was now the place in which the most important things relating to the visual arts were occurring. To name this particular meeting place a museum was a deliberate misnomer. In Broodthaers’s idiosyncratic, fey, jokey way, it called attention to the retreat of the official institutions in the face of the uprisings. Invited to exhibit in the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle in 1971, he reassembled the meeting materials (borrowed packing crates), added a number of items from local art and natural history museums, antique shops, and stores (nineteenth-century sculptures, stuffed
eagles, film apparatus, etc.), and labeled the lot “Musée d’Art Moderne,” “Department des Aigles,” “Section Cinema,” and so on. To each of the stuffed eagles the label “This is not a work of art” was attached. While nothing in the display was a work of art, the display as a whole was. This is because it embodied Broodthaers’s intention: to ask, in the exhibiting of these things, in this way, and in this space, “Can’t this place... exist as a museum and fiction at the exact same time, so that ultimately those visitors who are willing will be happy to simply take on this idea?”²

At the time, a number of artist’s museums were conceived in a similar spirit. The Mouse Museum, Claes Oldenburg’s homage to the commercialization of the Walt Disney character, to the everydayness of souvenirs of all kinds, and to miniaturized replicas of his own work (themselves funky evocations of popular tokens), was begun in the mid-1960s and is now in the collection of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Variants of Daniel Spoerri’s musée sentimental were installed in Paris in 1977, Cologne in 1979, and Basel in 1989: like his art, these were frozen moments of the detritus of his daily life. The faux-musée is a travesty of the high art museum, exactly through its insistence on the exceptional peculiarity of everyday items, on the ordinary beauties of banality, and the inevitability of kitsch. The challenge to the museum establishment was immediate and long lasting, as Rebecca DeRoo has shown.³ The deadpan yet deeply eccentric para-museum has achieved perhaps its most sustained realization in David Wilson’s Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles.⁴

For his 1969–70 “intervention” known as Raid the Icebox, Andy Warhol installed the backrooms of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum of Art in the main exhibition spaces. The museum director commented, “there were exasperating moments when we felt that Andy Warhol was exhibiting ‘storage’ rather than works of art, that a series of labels could mean as much to him as the paintings to which they refer. And perhaps they do, for in his vision, all things become part of the whole and we know that what is being exhibited is Andy Warhol.” Citing this remark, Peter Wollen makes the director’s characterization more exact: “It is as if the label ‘Andy Warhol’ would signify, not a person, in the sense of a human subject, but storage: boxes, reels, spools, Polaroids, all labeled ‘Andy Warhol.’”⁵ He is highlighting Warhol’s obsession with recording every exchange between people and things in his life—everything as it is and as it occurs to him, an unperson, who wished above all to become a passive recording device. Perhaps this was Smithson’s ironic vision, realized straight.

Radical reform of the museum was the
prime target of the artists’ gatherings in New York during this period, including the Artists Workers Coalition, founded in 1969, and Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, founded in 1975. The latter included the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and five women artists’ collectives. Direct actions included picketing the museum with signs pointing to the almost total absence of art by women, blacks, and other minorities in the collections. An Anti-Catalog (1977) was issued in response to the Whitney Museum of American Art’s decision to feature the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III as one of their Bicentennial exhibitions. It was a primer that exposed, in direct graphics, the exploitative, exclusionary, class basis on which museums functioned.

The 1971 cancelation of Hans Haacke’s mid-career retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, is widely recognized as a turning point in artist-museum relationships in the U.S., the moment when cooperation turned sour and the relationship became conflicted. Real-Life Systems—as Haacke called his installations that displayed the complexities and contradictions of contemporary life—proved to be too real, too lively, and too threatening to The System. Haacke went on to become the most consistent and astringent critic of museums among contemporary Euro-American artists, writing key polemical essays such as his 1984 "Museums, Managers of Consciousness."
an anti-catalog

Because it calls the neutrality of art into question, this Anti-Catalog will be seen as a political statement. It is, in reality, no more political than the viewpoint of official culture. The singularity of that viewpoint—the way it advances the interests of a class—is difficult to see because in our society that viewpoint is so pervasive. In this Anti-Catalog, we have attempted to elucidate some of the underlying mechanisms and assumptions. Our effort is not intended simply as a critical exercise. Culture has the power to shape not only our view of the past but also the way we see ourselves today. Official culture can only diminish our ability to understand the world and to act upon that understanding. The critical examination of culture is thus a necessary step in gaining control over the meaning we give our lives.
These questions are and your answers will be part of
Hans Haacke's VISITORS' PROFILE
a work in progress during the Haacke exhibition at the
Guggenheim Museum.

Please fill out the questionnaire and drop it into the box on
the white round table near the windows on the Museum's ground
floor. Do not sign your name.

1) Do you have a professional interest in art,
e.g., artist, student, critic, historian, etc?  yes  no

2) Is the use of the American flag for the expression
of political beliefs, e.g., on hard-hats and in
dissent art exhibitions a legitimate exercise
of free speech?  yes  no

3) How old are you?  years

4) Should the use of marijuana be legalized,
lightly or severely punished?  legalized  lightly severely
punitively

5) What is your marital status?  married  single  divorced  separated
widowed

6) Do you sympathize with Women's Lib?  yes  no

7) Are you male, female?  male  female

8) Do you have children?  yes  no

9) Would you mind busing your child to integrate
schools?  yes  no

10) What is your ethnic background?  

11) Assuming you were Indochinese, would you
sympathize with the present Saigon regime?  yes  no

12) In your opinion is the moral fabric of this
country strengthened or weakened by the US
involvement in Indochina?  strengthened  weakened

13) What is your religion?  

14) Do you think the interests of profit-
oriented business usually are compatible
with the common good of the world?  yes  no

15) What is your annual income (before taxes)?  $

16) In your opinion are the economic difficulties
of the US mainly attributable to the Nixon
Administration's policies?  yes  no

17) Where do you live?  city  county  state

18) Do you think the defeat of the SST was a step
in the right direction?  yes  no

19) Are you enrolled in or have you graduated
from college?  yes  no

20) In your opinion should the general orientation
of the country be more or less conservative?  more  less

Your answers will be tabulated later today together with the
answers of all other visitors of the exhibition. Thank you.
In retrospect, we can see turning points of similar significance for art in South America. In the context of increasingly repressive regimes during the 1960s, the focus of critique tended to be less directed to "the system" and more to interventions in the public sphere. In Argentina, for example, with what became known as the Itinerary of 1968, a number of experiments pushed the limits of politics, institutions, and radical art practice. Shouting "Yankees Out of Vietnam!" artist Eduardo Ruano destroyed one of his works that included a photograph of President Kennedy at an exhibition opening at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires. This was followed by the Experiences exhibition at Instituto Torcuato di Tella—a key venue for experimental practice in the 1960s under the direction of Romero Brest—that included Oscar Bony's La familia obrera (The Working Class Family), an actual real-life family—worker, wife, and son—sitting on a platform on public display for the duration of the exhibition. The itinerary culminated in the exhibition/event Tucmán Arde (Tucman Burns) in the industrial city of Rosario. Here, artists aimed to create an information event about the social situation in the northern province of Tucmán to counter government publicity and to reveal the socioeconomic realities of poverty and unemployment exacerbated by the closing of the sugar refineries that were the population’s mainstay. Planned to take place both in Rosario and Buenos Aires, the exhibition/event was open for less than a day in the nation’s capital, due to a citywide clampdown after the military coup. The reaction of the government and police and the continuing repression led to the dispersion of many of the artists involved. Some went underground and joined the guerrilla movement, some were “disappeared,” and at least one (Eduardo Favario) died in action after joining the Revolutionary Army of the People. Others, including Roberto Jacoby or Leon Ferrari, continued to be active, developing techniques of indirection, but the repression of the Tucmán project effectively silenced experimental and political art practice in Argentina for years afterward.

In Brazil, a series of participatory Happenings, Domingos de Criação (Creation Sundays), at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, presented at the height of the military repression in 1971, could be seen to be a similar turning point. They followed several years of fervent experimentalism amongst artists and the museum both in the galleries and surrounding gardens that had been designed by Roberto Burle Marx. At the opening of the exhibition Opiñao 1965 (Opinion 1965), Hélio Oiticica had launched his performative capes and standards, Parangolés. This performance, involving people from the favela Mangueira, went too far: Oiticica was asked to move them into the museum gardens. Domingos, organized by critic Frederico Morais, who was director of courses at the museum (the term “curator” was not used for such activities then), capitalized on this experimental participatory spirit and the effective use of the museum’s surrounding...
gardens, creating six major events over the course from January to July 1971, attracting thousands of participants and involving many artists from that generation including now well-known Brazilian artists such as Lygia Pape, Antonio Manuel, and Carlos Vergara. While artists continued to work with and present exhibitions at the museum, few events featuring this type of broad public engagement occurred after 1971.  

Art & Language artist Mel Ramsden was the first to use the phrase “institutional critique.” His argument, in his 1975 The Fox magazine essay “On Practice,” is worth a closer look. He was fiercely for dedicated individual commitment to building “a community practice (language... sociality...) that does not just embody a commodity mode of existence.” He was arguing against metaphysical affirmations of art’s transcendent qualities and against liberal warnings about the power of “the military-industrial complex” as well as against Leftist slamming of every existent institution and way of thinking as being inevitably in the service of capitalism. To him, the first was “undialectical idealism,” the latter two “undialectical materialism.” It was in this sense that he argued: “To dwell perennially on an institutional critique without addressing problems within the institutions is to generalize and sloganize.” The Art & Language collective, especially the New York branch, was at this time moving from conceptual self-critique toward forms of social and political engagement. After the group broke apart in 1976, some members left museum and art world structures altogether for active and often highly effective engagement in public sphere politics. Meanwhile others—particularly those based in England—soon took up painting and tackled the most paradoxical subject imaginable: their own works displayed in a major museum, to the radical, albeit symbolic, transformation of both.

Having spent decades imagining the antimuseum, critical conceptualists such as Hans Haacke and Joseph Kosuth seized the opportunity, when it came, to install their contrarian vision inside an actual museum. Not only was their analysis the most theoretically sophisticated and politically trenchant available, outstripping that then being offered by critics, historians, and curators, but they were also able to draw on their superior, radical design skills. They did so by presenting a display that would be simultaneously an exhibition entirely of works by other artists and an exhibition of their own work, while at the same time an installation artwork and a reinstallation of (part of) a museum. The Brooklyn Museum Collection: The Play of the Unmentionable, staged at the Brooklyn Museum in 1990, was introduced by the caption: “An Installation by Joseph Kosuth.” The design idea might be summarized as Gilded Age Grand Salon meets Entartete Kunst. Treating statements like pictures and pictures as statements, it was a

searching, subtle, and confrontational exploration of censorship of the visual arts, juxtaposing works of art from many periods and places that had been deemed politically, religiously, or sexually objectionable with utterances about the role of art in society by pundits ranging from Oscar Wilde to Adolf Hitler.\(^{15}\) It made unavoidably explicit two issues that are present in every curated exhibition, but that usually remain implicit. Cathleen Chaffee states them with admirable concision: “How does exhibiting a work change it, and how does the knowledge of its history change us?”\(^{16}\)

A year earlier, at the Weiner Secession, Vienna, and at the Palais de Beaux Arts, Brussels, Kosuth had staged installations of works by modern artists alongside statements from Wittgenstein’s writings on the relation between philosophy and the aesthetic. Entitled “The Play of the Unsayable: Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Art of the 20th Century,” it took as its premise the philosopher’s famous final sentence in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” For the rest of his life Wittgenstein devoted himself to contradicting this advice, a fact that Kosuth recognizes in his notes on “The Play of the Unsayable”:

One of the lessons for art that I believe we can derive from the Philosophical Investigations is that I believe the later Wittgenstein attempted with his philosophical parables and language-games to construct theoretical objects—texts that could make recognizable (show) aspects of language that, philosophically, he could not assert explicitly.\(^{17}\)

Kosuth recognizes that exhibitions—even those with the kind of explicit philosophical intent that informs his museum interventions—operate in a similar, but not exactly the same, way. “The work included in this exhibition becomes meaningful, like language, on the surface of its play... (unlike a direct assertion, or a truth statement, in philosophical discourse) the potential of art lies in putting before us a manifestation concretized as a cultural formation.”\(^{18}\) This is an important insight into the ways in which ideas are...
exhibited and thought is curated. It is one of the essential components of contemporary curatorial thought.

In his comments on “The Play of the Unsayable,” Jean-Hubert Martin acknowledges the impact of artist-as-curator exhibitions upon curators such as himself:

> The works were installed with a freedom that conventions of hanging have made us forget. Kosuth used the whole surface of the walls, from floor to ceiling. Some works were juxtaposed to provoke unexpected formal comparisons, and others were brought together for meaningful conceptual encounters. Because many works were ready-made objects, he found a subtle balance, avoiding an odds-and-ends effect and creating visual and imaginative associations to open up the way for imaginative ways of seeing.19

Martin’s installation of Magiciens de la terre in 1989 was triggered by his fascination with the inclusion of “primitive” artifacts in the collections of the Surrealists, such as André Breton, and the revival of this interest in the work of Nouveau Réaliste artists such as Daniel Spoerri and Fluxus artists such as Robert Filliou. His exhibition juxtaposed works by Euro-American artists who were interested in what were vaguely (that is, with the built-in, blinkered Eurocentrism of long-term colonizers) understood as “spiritual” issues, with ritual objects, artifacts, and performances by artists and shamans from indigenous cultures all over the world. While the style of hanging on the fifth floor of the Centre Pompidou was relatively formal, the taller and wider spaces of the hall at La Villette permitted more dramatic contrasts. It also enabled certain significant works—such as the ritual-based sand paintings by the Yuendumu elders from the Central Australian Desert, works by New Mexican Navajo Joe Ben Jr., and Tibetan monks Lobsang Thinie, Lobsang Palden, and Bhorda Sherpa—to set their own terms of reception. Works such as these exceeded the curatorial framework that aimed to leap across the yawning gap between indigenous and Euro-American worldviews by recourse to a generalized notion of “magic” and a string of poetic speculations concerning “spirituality” around which each of the sixteen subsections of the exhibition was organized.20 Despite these elisions and excesses—for which the exhibition was attacked, not least by Benjamin Buchloh21—Magiciens de la terre must be acknowledged as offering the first European foothold to artists from outside the West, one that they and many others have since built into a global platform.

A broader artistic scope and a more focused political perspective inspired the second
Bienal de la Habana in 1986. While the first iteration, in 1984, had been confined to Latin America, the second included artists, critics, scholars, and curators from across the Third World, which then accounted for eighty percent of the world’s population. A key member of the curatorial team, Gerardo Mosquera, claims that it was “the first global contemporary art show ever made: a mammoth, uneven, rather chaotic bunch of more than fifty exhibitions and events presenting 2,400 works made by 690 artists from 57 countries.” It laid the groundwork for the third Bienal in 1989, arguably the most successful realization of its organizers’ aims to date and the model most resonant in subsequent curating of art emerging from the transnational transition. While the idea of a central exhibition (“Tres Mundos”) was retained, it was opened out by a sprawling constellation of small exhibitions (“nucleos”) at sites all over the city, each with a theme and a mix of artists in terms of nationalities, mediums, and status, or just a random addition based on a particular initiative. Looking back, Mosquera insists that it was “not conceived as an exhibition but as an organism consisting of shows, events, meetings, publications, and outreach programs.” In this sense, it anticipates many of the changes in curatorial practice that these essays have been tracing. It broke the Venetian model by rejecting national representations in favor of an overall theme, “Tradition and Contemporaneity,” that was explored, controversially, in the “new Cuban art” and by art from around the Third World (plus in a small exhibition of work by black artists from Britain), meanwhile mixing in shows of African wire sculptures, cult altars, and statues of Simon Bolívar. It also stopped the practice of awarding prizes, an important feature of biennials to that time (and still present in Venice). This second Bienal was the outcome of years of research, travel, archival work, worldwide communicating, and intense, continuing dialogue among the curatorial team, led by Lilian Llanes Godoy and Mosquera. Subsequently, the idea caught on that the complex structure and broad scope of the biennial was best conceived and executed by a team of curators (a curatorium), rather than one omniscient orchestrator: this is now the norm. In 1989 in Havana, however, it was in dynamic gestation: contradictions in Cuban cultural policy, contestations between the curators, differences of approach among the artists, and the widely divergent attitudes of the discussants added up to an extraordinary event, the substance of which was the continuities, tensions, and
potentialities of contemporaneity as it was then understood.²³

THROUGH THE EYES OF ARTISTS

During these decades, museums responded to the inventiveness in modes of display that directors and curators saw in the work of contemporary artists—above all, their reconceptualization of the “installation,” a term previously reserved for the hanging of a collection or a temporary exhibition by a curator. With increasing frequency, museums invited artists to curate small exhibitions of works in the museum collection that might have a special meaning to them. The National Gallery, London, began its series The Artist’s Eye in the late 1970s, while MoMA introduced an Artist’s Choice series in 1989. Begun by Scott Burden’s focus on the bases of Brancusi’s sculptures, it has waxed and waned at MoMA, the ninth in the series being the 2009 exhibition Rebus by Vik Muniz. Since the early 1990s, the Prints and Drawings Department at the Louvre has commissioned a series of one-off curatorial interventions into its collections from non-curators (known as “Parti Pris”) that have led to strikingly original exhibitions and catalogues that prioritize the exploration of an idea proposed by the invitee. These include philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, filmmakers such as Peter Greenaway, and artists such as James Coleman.²⁴ Outstanding exhibitions of this kind include Les Immatériaux, curated by philosopher Jean-François Lyotard at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1985, and a series—including Dramatically Different (1997), Weather Everything (1998), and Coollustre (2003)—curated by Éric Troncy. Each was an exception to the usual rule that curating be unobtrusive and done in the general interest (of Art, of the museum, of “the public”) rather than in the name of an idea, an ideology, or an idiosyncratic point of view.

Relatively comfortable alliances of this kind were disrupted by Fred Wilson’s installation Mining the Museum at the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, in 1992–93. The then-contemporary context is important: conservative radicalism, led by Ronald Reagan and pursued by a rampant Republican Party and business leaders bent on recasting the economy in neoliberal terms, was rapidly unpacking the Great Society promoted by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Not least of the social compacts under threat was that with African Americans.

It is also relevant that the project was timed to open for the 1992 American Association of Museums (AAM) annual conference, held that year in Baltimore. We should not forget that turning points of this kind are often long in the making. After some years of
consultation, the AAM published Excellence and Equity: Public Dimension of Museums in 1992. Critical publications also followed conferences at the Smithsonian: Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display (1991) and Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture and Exhibitions (1992). The profession was ready to shift. It took an artist/museum educator to give this shift compelling form in this country.

Wilson’s installation was not confined to a small section of the museum. Rather, displayed through eight rooms across the main (third) floor, it entailed the whole institution. His starting point was the recognition that institutions, such as historical societies and museums, which are presumed to outline a general narrative and to present their materials in as objective a fashion as possible, consistently fail to do so when it comes to socially contentious matters, such as, in this case, the history of slavery in the U.S. Wilson deployed curatorial display techniques to make visible the African American stories that the museum had previously rendered minor or invisible. He did so literally, by bringing up from storage items that had not been exhibited for years, if ever, and figuratively, by repurposing art that was regularly shown.

Visitors entered to be greeted with “Busts and Empty Pedestals,” an installation that contrasted a set of black pedestals (captioned for Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, and Benjamin Banneker, all from Maryland, but whose busts were not in the collection) with a carved marble set topped with portrait busts of prominent white figures (Henry Clay, Napoleon, Andrew Jackson). These were arranged on either side of a vitrine containing an array of empty plastic display stands captioned “Artist Unknown c. 1960s.” The largest stand supported a silver globe with the word “TRUTH” embossed across it in gold (actually, an advertising trophy from 1913). The word, in this context, stands not only for the general value, so elided in the museum normally, but also for Sojourner Truth, the great abolitionist and women’s rights advocate. The absenting of names of the makers, not least African American artists, in museum and art-historical narratives was evoked throughout the exhibit. Portraits of white families by forgotten black artists such as John Johnson were placed near family portraits in which a black slave was included as a sign of local “color.” Wilson added tapes of the children in the paintings speaking to viewers, asking questions such as “Where’s my mother?” and “Am I your friend, am I your brother, am I your pet?” Landscapes were renamed for the black figure within them rather than the area depicted.

In one vitrine, captioned “Metalwork
Fred Wilson, Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson, Maryland Historical Society (MHS), Baltimore, 1992. Installation view, Pedestals with Globe

1793–1880,” crudely made slave shackles are placed among elaborately wrought silverware jugs, goblets, and tankards. Within “Modes of Transport 1770–1910” Wilson juxtaposed the governor’s sedan chair (that would have required slaves as carriers) with a baby carriage in which he placed a Klu Klux Klan hood. In the room labeled “Cabinet Making 1820–1910” a set of elegant Victorian sitting room chairs is arranged in ideal viewing position around a roughly hewn whipping post, used as recently as 1938 in the Baltimore City Jail.

Not confining himself to African American matters, Wilson expanded the critique to include the treatment of Native Americans. A row of cigar store Indians, their backs to the viewer, face off a run of photographs of Native Americans pictured in everyday circumstances and a map of duck decoy sites to which he added captions with the names of local Indian tribes. The final room showcased the research of astronomer Benjamin Banneker along with extracts from his diaries chronicling abuse directed toward him. The last image in the show is Banneker’s statement in a book to President Thomas Jefferson: “Dear Sir, I freely, cheerfully acknowledge I am a member of the African race.”

The impact of this exhibition on museum professionals everywhere has been great, and it remains (in the U.S. at least) a model for bringing the world’s complexities into the museum’s halls. A smaller version of the show stayed up for eight years. In 2003 the Maryland Institute College of Art presented What’s It To You? American History is Black History, a direct response to Wilson’s show. Its rebuilding program incorporated these lessons into subsequent displays, and the board continues to include black and minority Americans.

MUSEUM INTERVENTIONS

Wilson’s projects raised the level of possibility for the artist as curator. They also shifted such exhibits from the “Artist’s Vision” model to that of the critical intervention. In this changing climate, artists such as Haacke accepted invitations to rehang museum collections and did so—notably in AnsichtsSachen/Viewing Matters at the Museum
Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, in 1999, and Give & Take: Hans Haacke, Mixed Messages at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 2001—in ways that, like Wilson’s installations, made manifest the exploitation and exclusions on which museums were based. This was achieved not only in the selection of artworks collected and displayed but also in their upstairs/downstairs banishing of the labor (of artists, workmen, custodians, and curators) that built them and sustains them.

Andrea Fraser’s formula—that the critique of institutions inevitably turns into institutional(ized) critique—is elaborated by her and many others as an explicit function of reformist insiderness.\textsuperscript{27} It recognizes the historical shift from artworks that used the museum as a site to critique social inequities, including those embodied in the museum’s governing structures and its social roles, to those that emphasized the mystifications perpetuated by conventional display protocols within museums. While the museum qua institution proved that it could transform itself sufficiently to absorb the latter—and display such critiques as an ongoing phase in the history of art (for example, The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect, at MoMA in 1999)—it had much more trouble with the former. Nor was such reform on this scale encouraged by rightward swings in many countries or by the increasing and continuing dependence of art museums on monied elites.

Fraser’s insistent refrain is that there is no outside to the system. While this is, in important senses, true, it is limiting when taken literally. To me, aspects of her practice actually exemplify a more radical option than she seems able to articulate. The oppositional artist whose art is entirely a practice of critiquing institutions may well become absorbed by an institution that welcomes critique of itself (for the pragmatic, flexible management reasons already mentioned). But the artist who maintains a nonutopic, partial, and paradoxical, yet also critical complicity with everything, including his or her own motivations and achievements, is always already partially institutionalized, though maybe at the same time sufficiently otherwise engaged to be substantively uninstitutionalizable. Despite her protestations, Fraser is one such. She adds a dimension to the critique of artists such as Haacke, in that she enters
the museum, at its invitation, to perform the critique, not as a still object that can be passed by but as a living being. Yes, she is performing; we know that. And, yes, she is performing her own artwork. Yet it is precisely the overt nature of performance as such that enables her to instantiate the working conditions of those involved in presenting the museum’s apparently seamless, effortless, labor-free spectacle within hallowed halls devoted to celebrating the outcome of the work of the absent, mythologized artist (and, in some even more mythical sense, art). Her contribution to the 2012 Whitney Biennial was confined to an essay, “No Place Like Home,” in which she turned her sharply critical lens on art discourse itself.  

In general, as it enters the exhibitionary spectrum, especially the museum end of it, institutional critique becomes absorbed through recognition, historicization, and modification, and its critical edge fades. This is true for institutional critique as art. Some artists are utterly embedded in the art museum system and some (for example, Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset) have developed a practice dedicated to making that embedment explicit, attractive, or at least amusing.

Reviewing this history, it is not surprising that Alexander Alberro’s introduction to Institutional Critique, written in 2009, echoes that of Allan Kaprow, two generations earlier. Alberro wrote:

> With the ideals of the institution of art, and other Enlightenment institutions of public subject formation, in ruins, artists who continue to work within the legacy of institutional critique are left to choose between contemplating the moribund cultural apparatus and engaging with social conflicts far beyond it. The more interesting art being produced today fuses these irreconcilable positions.

“Fusing” is the hard part. Sometimes, more often these days, it is done in concert with curators, as a process of co-curating.

ARTISTS AS EXHIBITION MAKERS

A second model of what it is to make an exhibition as a work of art has emerged in the practice of artists such as Martin Beck, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzales-Foester, Pierre Huyghe, Goshka Magua, Philippe Parreno, Walid Raad, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Each of these artists, in related, but distinct, ways, makes the exhibition his or her core medium. In the late 1990s this type of enterprise was dubbed “relational aesthetics” by curator
Nicolas Bourriaud; since then Bourriaud and others have gone on to develop curatorial practices that entail working closely with these artists to realize their ambitions, often as a participant within the team of producers of the work. Committed to making manifest the flows and fissures of everyday life, these artists seek to exhibit these flows and open out these fissures in whichever settings seem most appropriate. Sometimes, as in the case of Tiravanija’s convivial cooking and eating works, this involves transforming a gallery space into a dining hall, at others it entails a temporary event at a remote site (Jeremy Deller), or an exchange of imagery in brand-space (Huyghe and Parreno), while in others it has meant a return to the museum, now understood as just one potential place among others where an exhibition might be staged. While curator at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, Bourriaud encouraged this attitude by stripping the museum interior so that it resembled a concrete warehouse or abandoned factory of the kind used for raves.

Some of these artists are more interested than others in the languages of visual display used not only in museum and gallery settings but also commercially and elsewhere in capitalist culture. Attentive to the ways in which managerial thinking is shaping our lives, the ways in which our lives are thought for us, and the ways in which we think we think them, Liam Gillick exhibits settings that reveal aspects of these processes in all of their normalizing ambiguity, as with “scenario thinking,” a process of role playing in imaginary settings, of exploring possible outcomes, that is used in business and government when consensus cannot be reached by more regular channels. Drawing together décor from such settings, official-looking documents and other paraphernalia, and inserting film of staged discussions as well as fragments from his own texts that interrogate the work itself, Gillick builds display environments in which these kinds of group thinking have occurred, could happen, or may be taking place. He also transposes them into ordinary leisure settings where such exchanges might be expected to take different forms and into quasi-cinematic scenarios. The What If? Scenarios and Discussion Island works of 1996 take all of these forms. Suzanne Cotter credits Gillick’s series with announcing “a new field of the discursive that has seen artistic production and the curatorial field merge into an expanded terrain of critical practices.” While this may be an exaggeration, we will see that Gillick’s model does indeed resonate strongly in contemporary curating.
For the sake of completeness, one other model of the artist as curator should be mentioned: when the entire museum becomes a Gesamtkunstwerk or, in contemporary terms, a domain of totalized, saturated spectacle, an analogy to a glam-rock show. In recent years, few have matched Matthew Barney's consummate takeover of the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2003, to present his entire Cremaster series of performances, films, videos, installations, and sculptures. Just how profoundly this Baroque Now style will resonate within curatorial practice remains to be seen.

CURATORS AS ARTISTS

If we take a long view across this same (now fifty-year) period, we can see that some, but not many, curators matched these efforts by artists as curators. They did so mostly by acting as quasi artists, by envisioning museum spaces as if they were studios, staging places for artistic ideas-in-formation, or as if they were museums from another time and place, past or future. Sometimes they were not museum spaces at all, but rather environments that housed an alternative, parallel world. In his profession-shifting role of “curator as artist,” Ausstellungsmacher Harald Szeemann certainly did each of these things, in exhibitions such as Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Processes-Concepts-Situations-Information (1969), The Mountain of Truth (1978), and Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk (The Inclination toward the Total Work of Art) (1983).

The curator-as-artist approach meant foregrounding one’s vision in the publicity for the show and in its presentation in the gallery, thus making the curator’s thinking a conscious factor in the visitor’s experience. It also meant that exhibitions came to be understood as works-in-progress, subject to change by the artists involved (many works transformed over time, others changed via visitor participation, thus the whole ensemble could be in constant motion) and by the curator’s evolving conception of what he or she wanted to convey. Temporariness became as much an element as temporality.

To a marked extent, a rather conventional, even populist, mid-nineteenth century,
Romantic-era notion of the artist as an alienated, inspired genius underpinned these initiatives—ironically at the very time that many visual artists were moving to erase that picture of their vocation in favor of a more distanced professionalism. This was not, however, the case in European theater and cinema: perhaps “director theater” and “auteur cinema” were equally inspirational for Szeemann? It is no surprise that innovations in the time-bound arts should serve as models for rethinking temporary exhibitions nor that the frenetic swapping between artistic mediums that was occurring at the time (the transmedial condition) should have impacted upon the shaping of exhibitions. All of these changes have continued to resonate within curatorial practice across the spectrum. Artworks and exhibitions have become increasingly alike.

Identity-sharing has not, however, meant sameness, not least because of the ever-accelerating diversity of art practice since the 1960s. If the overtly theatrical staging of the work-in-progress style of exhibition became the marker of cutting-edge exhibition making for temporary shows, something quite other emerged as a paradigm for those of longer duration. The careful, measured, high-skill tradesmanship that served as an ethical model for Minimal artists such as Donald Judd in the planning, execution, and display of their “pieces” also inspired what might be considered a distinct school of curating. As is demonstrated above all in his own curatorial oversight of the installations of his work and that of selected other artists at Marfa, Texas, Judd developed a set of principles that, by minimizing all distractions between the work and the spectator, would honor the artist’s intent and maximize the spectator’s experience. These principles can be stated as ethical imperatives. Undertake a journey, expend valuable time, and take some trouble, before approaching the place where the work is to be found. The place should be dedicated exclusively to showing just that work or work of its kind and type and not be contaminated by other kinds of art or by any other purpose. Each specific object is to be shown by itself, in a space specifically designed for it (or suitably modified for it) and for a specific period of time (ideally forever). Exiting the space should be the same sort of experience as entering, except in reverse—that is, it should be absolutely open-ended, untrammeled by any other experience. Each step in this process should be known in advance and be legible throughout. It should be undertaken in a steady, straightforward manner, with distractions put aside. No interruptions, no extraneous noise; nothing but the work, and you, and....

These procedures look like ritual sui generis, stripped of all trappings. Indeed, they have the same purpose: to precipitate an experience of the unsayable. Resolute structural symmetry in every aspect of the staging of the exhibit is dedicated to generating...
Donald Judd, 100 untitled works in mill aluminum, 1982–86. Mill aluminum. 104.1 x 129.5 x 182.9 cm

transcendent outcomes for the viewer. The point of showing specific objects in this overdetermined style is, paradoxically yet precisely, to bring about an experience of that which cannot be specified.

The minimalist curatorial ethos is evident in a number of small-scale, special-purpose museums in Europe, such as the Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, and the Müller collection at Insel Hombroich. In the U.S., it has been at the heart of the Dia project since its inception (although that seems to be undergoing significant revision under its recently appointed director, Philippe Vergne), above all in its sustained commitment to the work of a specific number of selected artists, especially their projects that require large initial investment and perpetual maintenance at dedicated sites outside of museum or gallery settings. In its programming from 1987 until 2009, the Dia Foundation exhibition building in the Chelsea art district in New York followed a version of Judd’s prescriptions: one artist, one floor, one year. Dia: Beacon offers a judicious mix of long-term spaces dedicated to one work or group of works by one of the artists from the Dia stable as well as temporary exhibitions by these artists. The latter are presented in the same carefully crafted and understated style. Aspects of this interplay between a stripped-down, fixed structure and free-flowing, external movement have been widely adopted in museums all over the world, especially for showing art of this period and since. In contrast to the highly performative Ausstellungsmacher such as Szeemann, few practitioners of this style have emerged as “starcurators” (analogous to “starchitect”), although some, such as Lynne Cooke now at the Reina Sofia, but for many years at Dia, are highly respected exponents of it.

CURATORS ARE NOT ARTISTS

Robert Storr puts his finger on the confusion that follows when a curator takes literally what is or should be in essence a mutually respectful exchange of ways of showing art and telling stories with it to various publics.

In the current climate a significant number of exhibition makers simultaneously
underestimate and overestimate their status in relation to the artist. This confusion is revealing of the present plight of their calling. On the one hand they operate contrary to all that they know or should know as if the artist was always right; and then, having surrendered their authority as specialists, claim in other facets of their activity that, at bottom, they too are artists and deserve special deference. But exhibition makers are not artists, and deference, mixed with envy, is an unhealthy inclination in any dealings based on shared information and passion.\(^35\)

This is a timely warning. It highlights the fact that a mistake in logic is being made when “acting like x” is (mis)understood as “being x,” in the sense of “being the same as x.” If, as I have been arguing throughout, curating is the exercise of curatorial thought within the practical exigencies of making an exhibition, then whenever anyone does this, they are curating—artists included. Artists will do so, preferably, in a unique and distinctive way, one that shares certain qualities with the works of art that they usually make. Their individual approaches to curating may have much in common with that of their contemporaries who also curate and perhaps with some earlier artists or curators who have attempted something similar, but most of what they do will have much more in common with what curators do or would normally do in such circumstances.

Especially now that art institutions across the spectrum have taken careful note of the innovations of curators as artists and artists as curators during the past fifty years, and the slowly evolving convergence between these two sets of already contingent practices. Instead of falling into the category mistake of collapsing one into the other, are we not approaching a situation in which curators will work closely with artists and vice versa, rather than persist with the one or the other, always unequal, relationship that has obtained for centuries?

Historical perspective is also telling us that the idealism of early institutional critique has subtly saturated art’s institutions—subtly because, while the art-viewing public must of course be made aware of these latest impulses among artists, museum directors and curators take extraordinary pains to ensure that the contract of care between themselves and the museum’s public is not broken. In a museum, this contract is like the “fourth wall” in a theater; it is the shared fiction that art is not fungible, it is just the beauty you see before you, it is a world that you can observe from close up, but never enter. The curator in an institution, even an alternative one, cannot challenge the public to the degree and
in the ways that artists such as Wilson have done. At least, they cannot do so given the current understanding of what constitutes that public or, frankly, the prevailing rule of the dollar, which reduces museum visitors to sheer numbers. This need obscures many things: one relevant to us is that it makes almost invisible the critical work done inside institutions by what is now two generations of curators inspired by both radical artists and independent curators. While the groundbreaking shows staged by curators as artists and artists as curators are rightly fabled, this internal achievement—one that has reformed, to varying degrees, many art institutions from within—remains a story asking to be told.

Perhaps the most important potential of the curator/artist convergence is the working with model of artist-curator exchange. The deep ethical import of all of these approaches pivots on conceiving the artist as in part, fundamentally, an outsider to art’s institutions, a stranger in the place ostensibly devoted to his or her unique creativity, a foreign visitor whose otherness is the essence of the entire city. Does contemporary curating also aspire to this role, to a kind of insider outsiderness? A small but increasing number of curators find themselves, by choice or circumstance, forging careers outside the major art exhibiting institutions, and apart from corporate and major private collections. While of course this figure of the “outsider within” courts incorporation, the question remains: Does it have the same potential for subversion that Basualdo identifies in the relationship between the mega-exhibition and the museum and between the biennial and the art system as a whole? Wherever you are in the exhibitionary complex, can you be simultaneously reformist, critical, and out there? Is this not what contemporaneity most urgently requires of us?

2 Marcel Broodthaers, “A Conversation with Freddy de Vree,” 1971, in Alberro and Stimson, Institutional Critique, 135. There are a number of other resonances for contemporary curatorship in Broodthaes’s presentation of consciously multichronic settings (or décors, as he called them), and then his curation, toward the end of his life, of a number of “retrospectives” that reworked much of the earlier material. For an illuminating account, see Cathleen Chaffee, “Situating Michel Broodthaers’s Final Exhibitions,” Manifesta Journal, no. 7 (2009/2010): 40–49.
4 The best introduction to the Museum of Jurassic Technology remains Lawrence Weschler, Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder (New York: Pantheon, 1995). Other museums of this kind exist: the most recent is the Center for PostNatural History, which opened in March 2012 in Pittsburgh, brainchild of Richard Pell, who bills himself as the “Curator of PostNatural Organisms,” www.postnatural.org/index.php.
5 Peter Wollen, Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth Century Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 168. The actual title of the exhibition was Raid the Icebox 1 with Andy Warhol. It was drawn from the vaults of the museum at RISD, shown first at Rice University, Texas, and at Isaac Delgado Museum (now the New Orleans Museum of Art), finally at RISD in April–June, 1970.


11 Ibid., 176–77.


16 Chaffee, “Situating Michel Brookthaeer’s Final Exhibitions,” 42.


20 See Jean-Hubert Martin, Magiciens de la terre (Paris: Musée national d’art moderne—Centre Pompidou, 1989), 12–13. The catalogue includes a preface by Martin, an extraordinary “museum without walls” album of stereotypical colonialist imagery, as well as standard profiles of each exhibitor. The petit journal takes the visitor on a schematic guide through the sixteen speculations and is the most revealing profile of the curatorial thinking that shaped the exhibition.


23 These are discussed at length in Rachel Weiss, “A Certain Place and a Certain Time: The Third Bienal de la Habana and the Origins of the Global Exhibition,” in Weiss et al., Making Art Global, 14–69. This volume, first in a series of which the next focuses on Magiciens de la terre, also contains an important introduction by Charles Esche, essays from the 1989 catalogue, papers from the conference, interviews with some of the artists and the curatorial team, as well as contemporary reviews. Fantastic! The most thorough study is Miquel Rojas-Sotelo, “Cultural Maps, Networks, and Flows: The History and Impact of the Havana Biennale 1984 to the Present” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009). See also Luis Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); and Rachel Weiss, To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). For my reading of the 2003 Bienal, see What is Contemporary Art?, chap. 9.


At this time, there was a widespread interest in archives among artists. Mining is the most obvious metaphor for entering such spaces. See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," October, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22; and, for example, "Mining the Archive," Artlink 19, no. 1 (1999), guest editor Zara Stanhope, www.artlink.com.au/issue.


32 I devote chap. 8 of What is Contemporary Art? to a detailed discussion of this exhibition.


34 I discuss Dia in detail in chap. 2 of What is Contemporary Art?.

4. Curating Contemporaneity

My own definition of the field is more or less seat-of-the-pants (i.e., a rolling, continuously filtered aggregate of what I see in galleries and contemporary art museums, plus the same for what I read about it in periodicals and online).

—Peter Plagens, “The Art of Being Contemporary,” Art in America, December 2010

To be present total all at once that is the purpose of Art.

—Anish Kapoor, Notebook entry next to sketches for Cloud Gate, 2004
When it comes to the contemporary—as it seems to, ubiquitously, in art discourse these days—some misconceptions (easy-ways-out) should be immediately challenged. A major one arises if we take current forms of being contemporary or up to date as constituting an all pervasive, implicitly coherent description of the present as a whole. Or, as Plagens’s too-busy-to-think-about-it-anyway remark illustrates, we reject any generalization and thus allow anything-goes pluralism to rule by default. Swallowed whole, or left alone, “the contemporary” performs, simultaneously, two quite antithetical tasks: it accepts the seemingly most up-to-date instance as definitive of all present (and immediate future) possibility and, at the same time, it insists on a relationship of equivocal temporizing concerning everything that constitutes this up-to-datedness. While pragmatism might want these options to be available and applicable depending on the situation, a blind contemporaneity (as Agamben warns) puts them into play at once. The result is that the openness to possibility that should be the leading quality of contemporaneity is foreclosed, and a weak, mindless presentism rules the roost. However vibrant and vivid this contemporaneity may seem to those immersed in it, melancholy impotence and the rule of repetition haunt it.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the fashion industry, where novelty of innovation at its peak is swamped within days by massive, diluted imitation. The whole point of that industry is to generate such recursion. In art discourse, where the opposite should be the case, a similarly disabling situation is obvious in the use of the phrase “the contemporary.” To me, this phrase conjures a (nervously) conformist—or, at best, a (coolly) complicit—contemporaneity, a mood entirely familiar to the fashion industry. (William Gibson’s Zero History is a mildly interesting riff on the interplay between these two situations, while Lady Gaga’s ongoing project is a spectacular one.) It is true that, at the margins, this is a mood scarcely distinguishable from genuinely contemporary différance, yet the difference increases as one slopes away from the other until it becomes huge, then total. This distinction was implicit in “A Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary,’” circulated by the journal October in 2009, as may be seen from this extract from the lead question:

The category of “contemporary art” is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment.... At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, “contemporary art” has become an institutional object in its own right.... Is this floating-free real or imagined?"
The distinction between dazzling and deep contemporaneity was not picked up by many of the thirty-four respondents, only three of whom had curating as their primary profession. Almost everyone who is subject to the bedazzling glare of the contemporary seems inclined to wait for it to come to them, to mirror the present through the lens held up by certain artists, collectors, and dealers. Curators are fading as agenda setters. Critics have almost entirely disappeared into the role of art reviewers and reporters. Most art historians seem content to hover in the wings, waiting to describe the fallout. None of this is healthy, nor is it good for art.

An equally disabling mistake is to assume that “contemporary” is a term that applies exclusively to the present. Kapoor’s remark is in one not helpful sense universalist, but in another, useful sense, it is an assertion about art’s necessary attachment to its own times and an affirmation of the demand that each particular work of art makes on our time (that of each individual viewer). If we are contemporaries with the artist, the artwork makes its claim upon us in the name of our times, that is, our shared temporality. If we are not contemporaries with the artist, the artwork invites the possibility of such a sharing—in a past time, or an imagined other time—as an act of empathy that we know will be partial, temporary, but perhaps no less valuable for that. These exchanges occur in concrete ways and in particular places, at particular times. They have always done so. They always will.

Today, contemporaneity (in the complex sense defined earlier that includes the saturation of the present with many different kinds of pasts, both as memories and expectations) is significantly more powerful than historical determination as the definer of contemporary life. It is, therefore, one of the key signs that we are no longer wholly modern. Yet these qualities of contemporaneity are not confined to today, nor can their current forms be back-projected without falling into misleading anachronism. Specific kinds of contemporaneity have been present since the dawn of human consciousness. Each needs to be identified to its time and place. The unusual concentrations of red ochre in caves across Africa, some dating back 160 thousand years (that is, to the earliest Homo sapiens), may indicate the beginnings of human consciousness of temporal differentiation. Recently it was announced that ochres blended with binding fat from mammal-bone marrow had been found, along with container shells and stone tools for pounding and grinding, in Blombos Cave, South Africa. They have been dated to one hundred thousand years ago. The suites of paintings in the Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc Caves, dated to around thirty to thirty-four thousand years ago, may have been produced by just a few “artists,” working individually or as part of small groups, yet five hundred to
thousands of years apart. Such specific authorship explodes our primitivizing preconceptions that this type of imagery had entirely generic or collective origins. The message is that contemporaneity has a history—perhaps many histories, variously connected or disconnected—that we are just beginning to trace. These histories would belong alongside those of other cultural formations, such as tradition, disruption, and everydayness, or histories of mediums, or of kinds of relationship, or of sexualities. In this quest to understand past contemporaneities, there is a great task for art curating, as there is for art history and perhaps for a kind of projective art criticism—a quest that clearly expands beyond art to curatorship of all kinds and to historical research in general.

Awareness of the historicity and the temporal complexity of contemporaneity is a crucial step toward overcoming the narrow conception that contemporary curating must be devoted to the concerns of contemporary art, or the Contemporary Art world, or some vague sense of “the demands of our times.” It should never be a matter of applying the presumed priorities of “the contemporary” to the showing of art, present or past. The challenge is more interesting than that. Let me try to show how, beginning with a review of exhibitions that explore the actually existing contemporaneities of art’s past. It will emerge that many curators, mainly working through city and regional museums, university galleries, and contemporary art spaces, are charting the multilayered ways in which late modern art became contemporary. This is a huge collective enterprise, one that is being undertaken by the contemporary exhibitionary spectrum, as if at the level of a historical reflex of the system itself.

EXHIBITING HISTORICAL CONTEMPORANEITIES

Many of the most interesting art exhibitions of recent years have been contributions to this quest. While they often seem to arise due to individual initiative, donor interest, or as supplements to the usual mix, such exhibitions are also frequently responses to real and pressing social needs. They stand out amidst the normal policies of museums, galleries, or art spaces: to survey major trends—stylistic, medial, thematic—in art past and present, to stage retrospectives when they are due, and to introduce young artists. It should not be necessary to say that the continual staging of these kinds of exhibitions—to rotate the collection, to enrich the historical record, and to recognize the work of living artists—remains a core function of curating and should continue to be valued as such. Meanwhile, especially since the 1980s, all kinds of museums have been obliged to attend to the boom in the market for contemporary art, the exhibition of which has become,
quantitatively, the chief task of most curatorial practice throughout the world. Yet we should not overlook the fact that this focus on current currency has been accompanied by an urgent wish to revisit repressed, unknown, or forgotten prehistories of the present precisely to ascertain why the forgetting occurred and to find out how valuable insights and energies from an earlier moment might be reshaped into a current relevance.

Focusing on the period immediately prior to the recent past, to explore it before it detaches fully from the present and is then recuperated as “retro,” is to pay attention to an involuntary yet natural gulf in memory, one that resonates through the present, although usually out of sight. While I will cite large survey shows that were mostly exhibited at major museums, this urge can be seen at work in all kinds of exhibitionary spaces, venues, and occasions. For example, Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980, mounted at the various campus galleries of the University of Toronto in 2010, was a bold attempt to rethink the recent history of the art of a whole country. Sometimes this urge can consume the art scene of an entire city, as Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980 did throughout 2011 and for much of 2012 in Los Angeles.

Perhaps the strongest and most persistent exhibitions of this type have revisited histories of feminist art, or art by women, seeking to relate it, directly or by implication, to the contemporary situation both then and now. Some have been national in focus, most have had an international component. They include the First International Women’s Art Festival in Taiwan, Women, Art and Technology (Taiwan, 2004); Life Actually (Tokyo, 2005); Konstfeminism (Helsingborg, Sweden, 2005); Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (Bilbao, Spain, 2007); Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution (Los Angeles, 2007); Global Feminisms (New York, 2007); the Incheon Women Artists Biennial (Incheon, Korea, 2007, 2009, 2011); Rebelle (Arnhem, the Netherlands, 2009); Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe (Vienna, 2009); Med Viljann ad Vopni: Endurlit 1970–1980 (Reykjavik, 2010); Donna: Avanguargia Femminista Negli Anni ’70 (Rome, 2010); Goddesses (Oslo, 2010); and elles@centrepompidou (Paris, 2009–11). Hilary Robinson notes that these exhibitions share four qualities:

First, they all purport to be surveys, as distinct from the many themed feminist exhibitions or exhibitions of women’s art that also occurred during these years (such as It’s Time For Action [Emily Davis Gallery, University of Akron, Ohio, October to December 2006]). Second, they all intersect with feminist thought, in either the stated curatorial impulse for the exhibition, and/or in much of the art selected, and/or in the ancillary products of the exhibition such as the catalogues. Third, they have occurred at the time when the lived experience of
the women’s movement is turning into the subject of History, its disciplining impulses are being written, and, in the art world, are beginning to be canonized. Many of the works exhibited were created around twenty years before today’s art students were born, yet at the same time many of the artists who made those works were still living and making new work at the time of these exhibitions. Fourth, these exhibitions were all shown in major national or regional museums or galleries.

These exhibitions also register the fact that the aspirations of the 1970s have had a marked quantitative impact (in the proportion of women regularly active as artists), but more ambiguous qualitative outcomes (art institutions and structures remain as subject as others to antifeminist pushback and business as usual). In the New York area, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum is a plus; so is the Modern Women project at MoMA, which has led to major shows of painting, prints, and photography by women artists and to an increased inclusion of art by women in more general exhibitions, such as On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century (2010–11), in which the contributions of women artists predominated. In a parallel move, Daniel Birnbaum, recently appointed director of the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, determined that art by women would be prioritized in the museum’s exhibitions, in both displays of the permanent collection and temporary shows. During my visit in September 2011 the majority of women photographers in Another Story: Photographs from the Moderna Museet Collection shifted the tone and texture of what is usually a historical survey of iconic images. Such shows make visible the contribution of extraordinary artists, such as Eva Klasson, who are not known outside their immediate circle.

Attention should be paid to less obvious moments of inclusion. The exhibition Abstract Expressionist New York at MoMA (2010–11) posed a number of challenges to its curators. For reasons of historical accuracy, they were obliged to convey a sense of the overtly masculinist ethos of the leading artists and the relative downgrading of the women artists at the time. Yet they also needed to reflect the subsequent revaluation of the work of the latter, as well as recent awareness of the ambiguous, changeable senses of sexuality at play in the work of some of the male artists. This complex psychic and temporal layering was handled with some subtlety. Instead of placing works by Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and others alongside iconic bravura pieces by Pollock, de Kooning, Still, Newman, and Kline, we were taken from a room full of jostling canvases by the big boys into the next main space, the tone of which was set by a major painting by Krasner, placed alone on a facing wall, with strong works by Mitchell to one side and Frankenthaler to the other,
which manifested their singularity among lower-key works by de Kooning, Leslie, Tworkov, and others. Exhibitionary flow of this kind picks up differences that existed, however distasteful they might have come to seem, while at the same time allowing us to see what these works have to offer to present possibility. Whether the current emphasis on women artists will outlast the initial funding remains to be seen. As I have noted, MoMA is dedicating itself to becoming a contemporary art museum in everything but name. Curator Sabine Breitwieser explained the recent purchase of a group of works from the 1960s and 1970s by Valie Export and Martha Rosler: “All of their thinking is so present.”

Like all other critical perspectives, feminism thrives on institutional critique and seeks structural transformation, not simply a seat at someone else’s table. Forty years of struggle, however, has produced significant gains and some outstanding practitioners. The lineaments of a history of feminist curating are becoming visible. The terms of the current struggle are, however, quite different from what they were in the 1970s. Just how these terms might be formulated is a pressing challenge.

Art exhibitions played a major role within the anticolonial and national liberation struggles that took political form in the non-aligned movement of the 1950s and appeared in art contexts in occasional ways before the 1980s. Since then decolonization has burgeoned as one of the major drivers of social, political, and cultural change in the world. Survey exhibitions in major galleries and the biennial form itself became an important medium to both manifest and examine this world-transforming force. Prefigured as a potential in Magiciens de la terre (Paris, 1989), The Other Story (London, 1989), and explicitly in Cities on the Move: Contemporary Asian Art at the Turn of the 21st Century (various venues, 1997–78) and Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s (New York, 1999), decoloniality became a game changer at Documenta 11 (platforms around the world, 2000–2002). Documenta 11 had been prepared for in Okwui Enwezor’s earlier exhibitions, including Trade Routes: History and Geography (Johannesburg, 1997) and, with Chinua Achebe, the traveling show The Short Century:
To this list of pathbreaking exhibitions we must add others relating to Africa by other curators, including A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad (St. Louis, 2003), Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora (New York, 2003), Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes (London, 2003), 10 Years 10 Artists, Art in a Democratic South Africa (Cape Town, 2004), A Decade of Democracy, South African Art 1994–2004 (Cape Town, 2004), and Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent (London, 2005, and Johannesburg, 2008). It is striking that few of these were seen in Africa and that few were produced by curators based in Africa—if so, South Africa was the venue and the base. This topic, among others relevant to curating historical contemporaneities and contemporary art, was discussed in an illuminating roundtable moderated by Chika Okeke-Agulu for Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art in 2008. I will detail the topics that came up, because curators everywhere are confronting similar challenges in balancing the need to build local infrastructure while at the same time, in a world that is both local and global, securing appropriate international recognition for the achievement of local artists.

Roundtable participants lamented the huge mismatches in arts infrastructure between most African cities and those available in most cities in Europe, the U.S., and, increasingly, Asia. As Okeke-Agulu suggests, such inequity has negative implications for the development of curatorial thought: "If African institutions cannot afford to produce these exhibitions, does it matter if African-based scholars are not part of the debate elicited by these shows? Does it matter that Africa-based (critical) reviewing publics are marginal to what has become the effective discursive horizon of contemporary African art?" The call for “representativeness” in international exhibitions was debated. It can itself represent little more than “dunderheaded nationalism” (as exemplified, egregiously, in the Italian Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale) or it can be a generalized expectation on the part of distant audiences that the work look evidently “authentic.” Both views,
participants felt, are based on the mistaken belief that exhibitions are meant to be evenhanded anthropological surveys of the art of a place, people, or region rather than what they actually are—curators’ arguments about the importance of certain kinds of art and its relationships to certain existential issues. While concern was expressed that “big all-Africa” exhibitions were becoming repetitive, which implies that “smaller, more rigorously focused thematic or one-person shows” should be prioritized, most participants favored going on with a judicious mixture of both, not least because the continent-wide shows bring emerging and developing artists to notice, theme shows advance the discourse, and one-person shows can reveal the depth of an artist’s achievement. The patchy history of biennials in Africa was remarked upon: the continuing relevance of Dak’Art contrasted to the cessation of the Johannesburg Biennial after two editions. Given their value as vehicles for intercontinental and international exchange, suggestions about building on the example of the Trienal de Luanda were made.

A variety of audiences were identified in the course of the discussion and objections were raised against dividing them into “Western” and “Other.” Rather, “an audience located in cosmopolitan conurbations around the world” was envisaged. Johannesburg Art Gallery director Clive Kellner questioned the preponderance of externally based curators and the “parachute curating” of African art, asking “Is the diaspora the new West?” This provocation elicited a number of responses; perhaps the most subtle—and the most explicitly relevant to my overall argument—was that of artist/curator/educator Colin Richards. He notes that “contemporaneity (for all that has been written) remains a critical term for discussions such as this” and that “if one takes engagement, relation, willful openness, worldliness, and strangeness seriously as key experiences in contemporary art, we begin to think of what we do slightly differently... a different cultural politics becomes possible.” Applying these insights to the situation in Africa, he states:
There is an odd replication or echo of some fundamental questions at the concrete microlevel of actual artworks, the curated shows as experiences in space, the relation of a given show to others in the country, between institutions, the country and the continent, the continent to the rest. What happens in situ, on the ground (to use a definitely overused metaphor), seems surprisingly accurately reflected throughout the system and its discourses, even at a high level of abstraction. Just the fact that the West, and the non-West, and their complex mergings and entanglements, is everyday reality here (conflicted to be sure) ensures that we grapple continuously with such questions at every level.  

These remarks alert us to the connectivity of contemporary life, to the multilayered, nested settings in which art is created and exhibitions are made, and in which curatorial thought takes shape. This is also the context in which an artist such as Meshac Gaba developed his ongoing Museum of Contemporary African Art project in which he celebrates a do-it-yourself approach to showing art that is shot through with the qualities Richards values, while at the same time highlighting the provisional, chancy, and volatile conditions in which such art is made.  

The Center for Historical Re-Enactments, established in 2010 in Johannesburg by a group of curators, artists, and writers led by Gabi Ngcobo, is a parallel project that encourages site-specific artworks that “investigate and create dialogues between artistic practices in order to reveal how within their constellation certain histories are formed or formulated, repeated, universalized and preserved.” The promising yet stillborn experience of the Johannesburg Biennial has been a topic. It is not only histories of art that are questioned, nor only the elusive infrastructure for the arts in South Africa and elsewhere, but art’s relationships to broader contextual forces and to prevailing understandings of historical forces. Projects have included Kemang Wa Lehurle’s Echoes of a Rehearsal, an exhibition on Xenoglossia: The Unknowing Grammar of Inhabiting a Text, and a performance by Tracey Rose.

Euro-American perceptions of other decolonizing regions have been changed for the better by a number of survey exhibitions that have tackled key issues within the old-fashioned basket of the continent-wide survey. For South America, these include Carlos Basualdo’s Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture 1967–1972 (São Paulo, 2005) and Mari Carmen Ramírez and Hector Oléa’s Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America (Houston, 2004). Ramírez and Oléa are continuing this work in a manner that is highly suggestive for the problem of infrastructural inequity so disabling in Africa and for curating within the African diaspora. The International Center for the Arts of the
Americas is not only housed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, it is seen as a vital component of the museum’s activities. In 2005 it began its Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art project, an ongoing archival and publication enterprise that scans key primary documents relating to the arts, artists, culture, history, and politics of the region (the Americas), which it makes available freely on the Internet. Prior to this initiative, documents and other materials were frequently lost or maintained in fragile circumstances and were difficult to access, even for local researchers. This situation fed local forgetting and ignorance abroad not only regarding the work of specific artists but Latin American and Latino art in general. Under the guidance of a region-wide, representative editorial board, the center poured considerable resources into assisting local archives throughout South America, training archivists and researchers, and building collaboration between the one hundred participants, thus creating research networks in the region. A selection of the documents will be published in English in a series of books that will be framed critically by the editors. They consider this as a “curatorial approach” to the issues confronting them.

Although not emerging from direct colonization, the eruption of contemporary art in post–Mao China is a fascinating story that has been interpreted in the West and in China itself through a series of important exhibitions that have tracked its history as it has been happening. Interestingly, the Chinese word for curator 策展人 [cèzhanren] is made up from the characters for a person (ren) who plans or manages strategically (cè) the presentation of exhibitions (zhan)—presumptively, art exhibits. This reflects the word’s first coming into usage in China during the 1990s. Unlike the European root in curare, Latin for “to care,” there is no connotation of custodianship. With the exception of Japan, which has had a long and sustained history of cultural exchange with Europe and the U.S. since being forcibly obliged to do so in 1853, it was not until the 1980s that other Asian countries introduced biennial exhibitions to show international art to local audiences and local art to international audiences. This has never been a simple matter of showcasing art from abroad to awed local artists and audiences. In 2000 curator Hou Hanru opened the Shanghai Biennale, initially reserved for Chinese artists using traditional techniques and materials, to international participation, thereby precipitating a number of reactions that insisted on the value of the work of local artists and a critical response to Western art values. Reactive exhibitions included Fuck Off, in which Ai Weiwei had a leading role, and, in 2001, Post-Sense and Sensibility: Spree, a one-night performance curated by Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun that likened the commercialized fabrication of contemporary Chinese art to Babylonian excess. Qiu Zhijie’s vivid account of the evening, its motivations and its bizarre pageantry, takes the form of a dialogue
The Long March Project, initiated by Lu Jie in 2003 as a reaction against the “outer-directedness” of certain contemporary Chinese artists, was a sustained attempt to focus attention on forms of art making that were widespread within China itself. A group of artists retraced the ten thousand-kilometer route that the Maoist insurgents walked in 1934, making works to distribute for free to interested locals and inspiring local artists and craftspeople of all kinds to share their own productions. Collections of these works were displayed later in national and international exhibitions. Long March now runs a successful commercial gallery in the 798 Art District of Beijing.

Retrospective contemporaneity was also used by exhibitions that sought, in the wake of the Cold War, to establish alternative histories of modern art in areas previously within the Soviet sphere. They used it as a vehicle for connecting the contemporary art of their region to the presumed circuit of “international art.” Early examples include Beyond Belief (Chicago, 1995), After the Wall (Stockholm, 1999), Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present (Ljubljana, 1998), Aspects/ Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe (Vienna, 1999–2000), Blood and Honey (Vienna, 2002), and In the Gorges of the Balkans (Kassel, 2003). Again, only some of these traveled in the countries of origin of the artists, but they were known, mainly through their catalogues, to which local curators made important contributions. Contemporary art centers (not least those supported by financier George Soros’s Open Society Foundation) played a major role in building visual arts infrastructure in this region before the collapse of state Communism. Curators have been crucial to its sustenance ever since; now they must face down the reemergence of ultranationalist ideologies.

Artists have also been key players in the construction of art-historical memory. Initiated in 2004 by Irwin, an artists’ collective based in Ljubljana, East Art Map is a research, exhibition, book, and online project that enabled artists, critics, and curators from Eastern Europe to map a fifty-year history of the art of their region. It experienced an inspiring start, but those involved are aware that it has not progressed into a full-scale, ongoing research program. It has, however, precipitated a sustained output of multilayered,
absorbing art. A somewhat similar, although more intensely personal perspective emerges in the CAA (variously named Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis), established in Bucharest by Lia Perjovschi in 1985. In parallel to her own distinctive sculptures and performance art, Perjovschi uses materials gathered archivally to create installations that track, for example, the impact of globalization on Romania, as well as wall drawings that constitute timelines of the interaction between artistic and social change in her city, region, and the wider world.²⁷

Recently a number of exhibitions have sought to deepen understanding of alternative art practices during the later years of the Communist regime in Russia, highlighting the contribution of the Moscow Conceptualists, among others. These practices included secret gatherings, apartment exhibitions, private reading groups, distant performances, and ad hoc events. A series of exhibitions at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Jersey, supported by Norton Dodge, have shown this art in the U.S. as an instance of the thirst for liberation within an unfree society. A more nuanced picture is being developed by Boris Groys in a number of exhibitions, notably Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960–1990 (Frankfurt, 2008) and Empty Zones at the Russian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. It is pursued in his writings as well as in curated events, such as the conference “Global Conceptualism: The Case of Moscow Conceptualism in an International Context,” Center for Russian Writers, Moscow, sponsored by the Stella Art Foundation.²⁸

One set of implications for contemporary practice is evident in the impact of the Moscow Conceptualist model on the e-flux project, led by Anton Vidokle, Julieta Aranda, and Brian Kuan Wood. E-flux offers artists and cultural producers an interactive website, a journal compiled quickly from articles about pressing issues freshly written, low-cost booklets with similar content, a meeting place for organizational activity, links to similar sites everywhere, a time and skill barter bank, and an exhibition space open to curatorial initiatives such as repeats of unjustly neglected shows or realizations of unrealized projects. These might be construed as offering—within a nominally “free,” but actually highly conventional, society—heuristic models of creative infrastructure.²⁹

Taking all these exhibitions and activities together, it becomes clear that they were not simply concerned with filling in the art-historical picture (although they were that, too), and were only superficially driven by generalities, such as a spirit of fairness. Decolonization will take decades to run its course if—given the proclivity of certain nations to build empires when they achieve a certain scale of economic power—it ever
Enwezor is working on an exhibition that will explore apartheid as it was negotiated, through photography, in South Africa; in his new role as director of the Haus der Kunst, Munich, he will follow up his interest in the postwar history of Europe, within which decolonization plays a crucial, although underacknowledged, role. He recently organized Meeting Points 6, a series of talks, performances, and films by a number of artists from many countries that reflected on civic antagonism in the Middle East and North Africa. Many years in the planning, it traveled in various forms to Amman, Beirut, Brussels, and Berlin during 2011 and 2012, the months of the still-unfolding Arab Spring, a kind of social transformation anticipated by the artists in the exhibition and by its curator.

Every exhibition I have cited was shaped in contestation with other perspectives on the same issues, viewpoints held at local, regional, and global scales. While the format is a familiar one—the exhibition as argument—the stakes are specific to a time and place: the curator wants to offer a clarified view, retrospective yet realistic, of how a certain body of artists (a variety, a group, even an individual) wrestled with their contemporary circumstances, or are doing so now. She or he does so, not only for the record, or to counter then-poisonous ideologies and imposed misinterpretations, but also, perhaps more so, in order to shape future possibilities—to oppose certain emergent directions, to support others, and to keep still other (as yet unseeable) options open. Curating is—in this sense, within the domain of the symbolic—a first-order activity. Here, curators join artists, public commentators, politicians, expert scholars, and many others as definers of the public discourse. This is an ideological domain in which nothing is neutral.

THE CONTEMPORARY GOES GLOBAL

What happens when contemporary out-of-jointness itself becomes the subject of a survey exhibition? To explore this question was the main purpose of the exhibition The Global Contemporary: Artworlds after 1989 that opened at ZKM in Karlsruhe in September 2011. It was the culmination of the five-year Global Art and the Museum project, undertaken since 2006 by art historians Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg. To me, GAM is a research project that is exemplary in most respects: conducted in the most open-hearted fashion, it was carried out by brilliant theorists, artists, critics, curators, and historians, from different generations, with a variety of perspectives, usually of a critical kind, and built around conferences arranged according to local priorities at venues all over the world. Everyone involved was acutely aware of the groundwork laid in the exhibitions that I have just mentioned; and of controversial precedents such as ‘Primitivism’ in 20th
The series of volumes edited by the project leaders (Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel) testify to the success of the enterprise on this level and are a unique, and critical, resource. The Global Art Museum project was pitched against the conformist contemporary.

A pivotal section of the Karlsruhe exhibition, entitled “Room of Histories: A Documentation,” was devoted to outcomes of the analysis. Using wall charts, photographs, and documents, it displayed the range of museum types that have arisen since 1989; it profiled key exhibitions and publications that redefined relationships between Western and other art (including a room, designed by Rasheed Araeen, featuring every issue of Third Text); it quite properly highlighted contemporary Aboriginal art from Australia as a special kind of contemporary art; and it concluded with a dramatic, panoramic digital projection that profiled the rise and rise of biennials since 1895, but especially from 1989. One did not, however, get the message that there exists something that might be called “the global museum” or even “the museum in, within, or under globalization.” Rather, there was a general sense of the spread of stereotypes and a resistant pushing back, a sense that art museum types had multiplied to the point of incessant variability depending on local conditions, and that the main connector between them was the growing and now ubiquitous biennial form. It is in the introductions to the volumes published by the project and in the chapters within them that these connections are most strongly and critically drawn.

When one turned from the “Room of Histories: A Documentation” to the main exhibition spaces, the first impression was of passing from a learning environment into one filled with striking works of art. They were arranged in groupings according to relevant themes: “World Time: The World as Transit Zone,” kicked off by the Raqs Media Collective, “Life Worlds and Image Worlds,” “‘World Art’: The Curiosity Cabinet from a Postcolonial Perspective,” “Boundary Matters: The Concept of Art in Modernity,” “Networks and Systems: Globalization as Subject,” “Art as Commodity: The New Economy and Art
Markets,” and “Lost in Translation: New Biographies of Artists.” In between, a film by Manthia Diawara, Édouard Glissant: Un monde en relation, provided a profound conceptual bridge to those who immersed themselves in it. It followed the recently deceased philosopher on a journey through the scenes of his life as he expounded his ideas about slavery and history, the Relation and meaning. Its placement invited us to view the exhibition themes as archipelagos, Glissant’s signature metaphor for the global contemporaneity of cultural difference.

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To me, the zones of the exhibition formed into an archipelago within the same current. From the perspective of the three currents that I discern as most prominent in contemporary art—indeed, in art since (around) 1989—there was only one on display here: the postcolonial turn, or the transnational transition. This enables us to read the exhibition as showing the connectivities within this current, between cultures “outside” the West. A “global” exhibition of art in the age of globalization—what else can The Global Contemporary mean?—would, however, have included artists from my first current, its most prominent representative and prime beneficiaries: remodernists such as Richard Serra and Jeff Wall and retro-sensationalists such as Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami. At minimum it would have included acute explorers of the aesthetics of globalization such as Andreas Gursky. The Global Contemporary did include some artists who figure globalization and its effects from critical positions within their own (dominant) cultures, such as SUPERFLEX, Ashley Hunt, and Christian Jankowski. But artists such as Allan Sekula, Thomas Hirschhorn, Zoe Leonard, Santiago Sierra, Isaac Julien, and Steve McQueen, to name just some of the most prominent who do exactly this, were missing. Few artists from my third current were visible; exceptions include Sommerer & Mignonneau, Bielicky and Richter, and Hito Steyerl. Nor does the exhibition include “bad object” artists of the postcolonial, such as Ashley Bickerton, whose work veers from the distasteful to the egregious, then collapses into the plain awful, reveling in his own incorrectness—gross, but indicative nonetheless.

When allied with these omissions, the focus on art that has “the global” as its overt subject—that moreover seeks some critical distance while recognizing its own immersion within globalization’s constraints—pushes the exhibition as a whole dangerously toward a general idea of “global art.” The Global Contemporary shows a wide range of transnational work outside of the biennial context, as if this art were the subject of an ordinary, European, temporary exhibition (that is, one based on topic, style, theme, or medium). This is unusual to the point of being unfamiliar and somewhat shocking. The white walls, regulated rhythms, and repeat floors of the ZKM Museum, despite their open
lines of sight across great courtyards, inevitably reinforce this impression. It is difficult for a view from one place in Europe to avoid becoming The View from Europe.

Of course, some works broke out from these constraints, surprising us by their sheer oddity: Pauline Curnier Jardin’s Ami (2009) was a small booth that could have been located anywhere. A dark form, it seemed to turn its back on the museum. It housed a slideshow of highly personal photographs of seemingly random details as well as camera accidents from shots taken in a range of museums (classical, high art, natural history, at Hiroshima) that slowly faded into each other with an understated, yet acute, uncanny irrationality. It is as if we have chanced upon a window into the unconscious of postcoloniality.

What, in the case of The Global Contemporary, intervened between the conception and the creation? The curators had one local agenda, to insist on a “global practice that has changed contemporary art as radically as ‘new media’ had done previously.” At ZKM, locus classicus, if there is one, of new media and digital art, this is a highly pertinent, even somewhat subversive move. Seen on a worldwide scale, however, “new media” has proven to be one medium among others in the “postmedium condition.” Its initial promise of transforming the bases on which art will be made seems to be fading as fast as photography’s implied promise of ubiquity during the later 1980s. To some, however, including myself, it remains a slowly unwinding spring that is propelling visual communication, including art, cinema, and social media, into dimensions as yet unimaginable. This is a large question, with many sides to it, not resolvable here.

Instead I am going to place most of the blame for the obscuring of the critical goals of The Global Contemporary onto the pernicious pervasiveness of the idea of “the contemporary.” At Karlsruhe, it is claimed in the name of these postcolonial artists, but unfortunately, and I am sure unintentionally, it revives their old (1990s) desire to be contemporary with the art of the West, not their actual achievement since then, which has been (as the exhibition rightly claims) to change the terms within which art is made all over the world, primarily through their challenge to Euro-American art and though their lateral connectivity with each...
other. Thus the comment by Peter Weibel in his "Preface": “These artists from Asia, Africa, South America, and so on, do not want to integrate into Western culture; at most they want to break down these mechanisms of exclusion.”

Far from enabling global equity of access, “the contemporary” is just such an exclusionary mechanism, above all because it is an idea vitiated by the disabling double that I described earlier. There was, simply, no need to appeal to it in the presentation of this show. (It sounds like a publicists’ title tacked on at a late stage in the process.)

Is there a tension, or at least a relevant distinction, between content (curatorial thought) and mode (an exhibition form) at play here? Inspiring The Global Contemporary was a curatorial idea as important at those that I earlier attributed to Varnedoe, Enwezor, and Bourriaud. Namely, that the art exhibited at Karlsruhe demonstrated the emergence of a “global practice that has changed contemporary art as radically as ‘new media’ had done previously.” If we put aside the “new media” comparison, the claim is close, indeed identical, to that I make about what I call the transnational transition: in the many art-producing centers in the rest of the world outside Euro-America, a variety of local negotiations between indigeneity, tradition, modernity, and globalization led to the forging of distinct kinds of modern art and, in artistic exchanges within nearby regions and with distant centers, the emergence of specific kinds of contemporary art. These developments have been underway since the 1950s in Africa, the 1960s in Latin America, the 1980s in Central Europe and China, the 1990s in Southeast Asia, the 2000s in India and the Middle East, etc. Taken together (as a world current) they amount to a substantial reorientation of the way art is made in the world: they claim value for the making visible of local issues and they have become an important way in which global inequities on the level of culture are renegotiated toward respect for difference. In doing both, they are artists’ contributions toward the coming-into-being of what has been called a “new internationalism” or a “global cosmopolitanism.”

This is what The Global Contemporary set out to profile. The introductory essay by Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg in the broadsheet that was issued in lieu of a catalogue at the opening is an excellent analysis of the concept of contemporaneity in the art of what they see as a “globalized world.” Marry its arguments more fully to the hypothesis of contemporary currents and we have, I believe, a basis for tackling most of the questions that face us.

In general terms, we can see that survey exhibitions such as this one (in the wake of Documenta 11 and the many listed earlier) have demonstrated that the second current I identified is a major force in the world’s art. They have helped us see the shape of its flow through the regions that they treated and in some of the nations that constitute
Each region. They alert us to the connections between regions and those that reach across to what were the colonial centers. In some cases, these old centers remain important forums through which art must pass to have international purport. Among the next steps to be taken is the staging and circulation of retrospectives of major artists from the decolonizing regions, such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye and El Anatsui, who have made breakthroughs of world relevance.\(^{38}\) There are many challenges facing artists and curators alike who are active in this current; not least is the seduction of easy exoticism, the invitation to fall for aesthetic tourism of the Other, to simplify the local specificity of work—in other words, to become the stereotype that uncritical audiences in the West instinctively desire. If you think that European culture at its heights has arrived at a mental state beyond colonialism, a visit to the Musée Quai Branly—where a vision of primitivist paradise begins as soon as you leave the street and enter the gardens—will quickly cure you of that illusion.

**THE LIVES OF THE NON-CONTEMPORANEOUS**

What about contemporaneity in the art of the past or in non-contemporary art of the present, the topic with which I began this essay? Exhibitions that focus closely on the careers of individual artists or the achievement of certain schools in the history of art in such a way as to take us to their moments of origin have been a staple of museum programs for over a century. Their limitation, from the perspective of contemporary needs, is that these exhibitions have tended to return the artist or the school to their allotted place within a rather linear narrative of the history of art or to demonstrate that that place should be elevated or modified in some way. Rare indeed is a focus on how the artist or the school grappled in their work with the multiple challenges of contemporaneity in their own time. Exceptions include the string of recent exhibitions of Chinese art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, that range from general treatments such as Anatomy of a Masterpiece: How to Read Chinese Paintings (2008) to quite specific studies such as Eccentric Visions: The Worlds of Lou Ping (1733–1799) (2009–10), Mastering the Art of Chinese Painting: Xie Zhiliu 1910–1997 (2010), The Yuan Revolution: Art and Dynastic Change (2010–11), and Chinese Art in the Age of Revolution: Fu Baoshi (1904–1965) (2012).
Quite another approach to the multiplicity of ways of being in time that is at the core of contemporaneity is to apply this to works of art themselves—to explore them for how they might have been uncanny in their own times, to show their inherent anachronism. In some periods, this becomes a highly conscious topic for artists, as we saw in Kenneth Silver’s Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany 1918–1936 shown at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (October 2010–January 2011). More generally, retrospection is a common effect in art’s history: an innovation at one point in time will precipitate a fresh reading of certain works from the past. In a famous example, the apperception of Mannerism as an art-historical movement occurring in Italy between the High Renaissance and the Baroque was a direct outcome of the impact of contemporary expressionist painting and sculpture on German art historians in the early years of the twentieth century. In a reverse effect, contemporary experiences can be infused with connotations carried by past art. A notorious instance occurred at the United Nations in 2003 when officials realized that the announcement by the U.S. Secretary of State (at that time, Colin Powell) that Iraq was hoarding weapons of mass destruction and that military invasion of the country was justified would be made in a room decorated by a tapestry based on Picasso’s famous antiwar, antifascist painting Guernica. The hasty covering of the image matched, metaphorically, the delusory nature of the announcement. Picasso’s critical commitments continue to resonate: thus the fallout when, in June 2011, the Van Abbemuseum responded to a request that it lend its Head of a Woman (1943) to the International Academy of Art in Ramallah, Palestine.39

In a complex response to the imagery of 9/11 in the general visual culture—still pervasive, still repressed, ten years later—MoMA PS1 curator Peter Eleey brought together a number of works, only one of which (Ellsworth Kelly’s Ground Zero, 2003) addressed the events of that day and its implications directly or indirectly, all others being made before the event. The works were chosen because their formal qualities or inherent connotations could be seen to resonate with mediated visual registrations of that day and with visual memories associated with it: Sarah Charlesworth’s image of a woman jumping from a building; a Christo wrapping of an obscure architectural ornament. This was a rather contrarian way of realizing the curator’s goal, described thus: to consider “the ways in which 9/11 has altered how we see and experience the world in its wake.”40 One of the most striking effects of 9/11 as it impacted the U.S. has been to inhibit visual artists (and indeed curators) from engaging with it in any degree of depth or subtlety. A perverse response still prevails: to defend art’s withholding of itself from such an engagement.41
Layered temporalities were evoked with greater subtlety in After Nature, curated at the New Museum, New York, in 2008 by Massimiliano Gioni. The theme and title were taken from W. G. Sebald’s great prose poem—or rather, his collection of three poems devoted, in turn, to the lived experiences of the sixteenth century Flemish painter Matthias Grünewald, the nineteenth century botanist Georg Steller, and the author himself growing up in Germany after World War II. These experiences become vividly present for the reader and seem to exchange qualities across time, especially the sense in each case of the protagonist feeling displaced from currents in his own time. Gioni aimed at a similar effect, saying that his exhibition “aspires to a similar hallucinatory confusion, a conflation of temporalities, a blurring of facts and fiction—an exhibition as a visual novel or as a wunderkammer.”

The catalogue continued this sense of a blasted space-time by taking the form of a printing of Sebald’s book, around which a wrap announced the title of the exhibition, carried the curator’s essay and other details, listed the works in the show, and into which were inserted, randomly, postcard-sized images of each of the works including stills from many of the films in the show.

As for non-contemporary art being made in these contemporary times, it is of course constantly being exhibited, often with claims for its contemporary character (that are routinely ignored or mindlessly flagged as a return to the “purity” of a medium, usually painting) or for the relevance of its deliberate anachronism (as in the case of ink painting in China). Recognition of its complex relationship to contemporary currents rarely becomes the subject of an exhibition: an exception is Sidetracks: Painting in the Paramodern Continuum, curated by Peter S. Myer at Stavanger Art Museum in January 2012.

In the next essay, I will return to this parallax instinct toward layered temporalities and temporal escape within contemporary art and curating.

An enormous amount of work remains to be done by art historians and curators if the historical lacunae, infrastructural shortfall, and mistakes about the present that we have discussed are to be addressed. Work of this kind continues to make more and more possible the curating of contemporaneity in general and of contemporary art in particular—if both are to be imaginatively grasped, thoroughly thought through, and historically grounded.

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3 Werner Herzog’s The Cave of Forgotten Dreams (2011) highlights the stranger aspects of these paintings and, entertainingly, the innate
weirdness of those concerned with their contemporary reception.


5 I thank João Ribas for drawing my attention to this moment. A similar effect may be observed in the "Singular Vision" rooms at the Whitney Museum currently, in which one room is devoted to a single work. Both Krasner and Eva Hesse are handsomely treated, their rooms flanked by one holding a Jasper Johns flag painting and another centered on a kinetic sculpture by Len Lye.


10 Ibid., 160, 187.


12 Ibid., 165.

13 Ibid., 187.

14 Ibid., 171.


17 Ibid., 173.


29 See Anton Vidokle, Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2009).

30 On this history, see Reesa Greenberg, “Identity Exhibitions: From Magiciens de la terre to Documenta 11,” Art Journal 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 90–94, and in that issue by Anthony Downey, Norman Kleeblatt, Elisabeth Sussman, and others.

31 See Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel, eds., Contemporary Art and the Museum (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007); and Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009). Curated by Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel, and with Hans Belting playing a major role, co-curators of The Global Contemporary were Jacob Birken and Antonia Marten, and members of the curatorial committee were N’Goné Fall, Patrick D. Flores, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Jim Supangkat.


34 Peter Weibel, “Preface,” The Global Contemporary, 5.

35 I track them in the central chapters of Contemporary Art: World Currents.

36 InIVA (the Institute for International Visual Arts) has argued the first since the 1990s; Marsha Meskimmon profiles the latter in her book Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination (London: Routledge, 2010). See also Nikos Papastergiadis, Cosmopolitanism and Culture (London: Polity Press, 2012).


40 Exh. brochure, cited in Hal Foster, “September 11,” Artforum 50, no. 5 (January 2012): 210–11, a rather trenchant review of the show that pays attention to its struggles with anachronism.

41 This contrasts the depth and variety of response by filmmakers and architects, the latter discussed at some length in my The Architecture of Aftermath (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).


5. Curatorial Practice Now

It provides a platform for artists’ ideas and interests; it should be responsive to the situation in which it occurs; and it should creatively address timely artistic, social, cultural, or political issues. It could be said that the role of the curator has shifted from a governing position that presides over taste and ideas to one that lies amongst art (or objects), space, and audience. The motivation is closer to the experimentation and inquiry of artists’ practices than to the academic or bureaucratic journey of the traditional curator.

These are the “key factors in curating today,”¹ according to Kate Fowle, writing in 2005 while Chair of the MA Program in Curatorial Practice at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. The recent growth in academic courses in curatorship is one of the factors (some say a major factor) precipitating a need to articulate principles hitherto confined to ICOM statutes and codes (where curators are not named as such, but presumed to be included with “museum professionals”), many internal museum documents, and a few trade books.² Mostly, such principles have had informal status or have been simply taken as read. Now, it seems, they must be spelled out for the increasing numbers attracted to a profession that promises a life close to where the culture is changing fastest and with the most style.

Fowle’s remarks highlight many of the values that stand out amidst the talking, showing, and writing that constitute contemporary curatorial discourse. In the Introduction, I listed a set of items for action that resound loudly these days. How do they look after our track through the issues raised in the previous essays? They still feel like instructions-to-self, but perhaps with some sharper edges. Let me list them, roughly according to their current prominence. Historicize curating; Innovate within exhibition practice; Reimagine museums; Turn curatorship; Co-curate with artists; Commit to outside-the-art world, participatory, activist curating. Less voluble, but just as important, are issues such as rethinking spectatorship, engaging viewers as co-curators, and the challenge of curating contemporaneity itself—in its present, recent and past forms. All of these result from giving priority to curatorial praxis, to the revivification of institutions, the proliferation of alternatives, and the creation of open-ended connections. This is not simply reformist or oppositional, it is infrastructural activism across and beyond the exhibitionary spectrum that I earlier identified. Modern kinds and styles of curatorial practice are being reshaped by these ideas and approaches. Curators all over the world now know that things really are different than they were before; they are responding to the demands of contemporaneity; becoming, in a word, contemporary. Each of these new “turns” is a contemporary kind of curatorial thinking, but are they modes of thought that are distinctive to curating? Do they add up to a coherent body of ideas? Do they need to do so?

THINKING ON THE PAGE

As I have often noted, it is rare for curators to reflect, in a sustained way, in print, on their professional practice—certainly there is some distaste for academic forums such as
the theoretical debate or the historiographic essay. We have noted a constant recourse to
the view that the exhibition is the statement, one that speaks for itself. Yet curators are
frequently invited to talk about art and do so in a variety of venues. The inventiveness,
acuity, and prominence of curatorial ideas about contemporary art since the 1990s that I
have tracked in these essays has led some publishers to make curatorial thinking the
basis of their output. These texts are invaluable records of articulated curatorial thought,
so, before exploring the “turns” listed above, I want to examine one recent instance,
treating it as a snapshot of the question: What is contemporary curatorial thought?

Promoting itself as “A revolutionary history of the past twenty-five years in art,” it boldly
asserts that the contemporary period is unique in the history of art:

Rising from the ashes of modernism and encompassing a staggering diversity of
new forms, the twenty-five-year period beginning in 1986 is one of the most
vibrant episodes in the history of art. It is also one of the least understood.
Interpreting recent events is seldom easy, but making sense of today’s advanced
art—decentered, complex, and contrarian—requires innovative techniques and
new approaches. ³

Ignoring certain other recent and current publications, it goes on to say that Defining
Contemporary Art is “the first comprehensive account of this period” and a
“groundbreaking study of the emergence of art as we now know it.” Fully embedded in
the discourse of contemporary art and curating, Defining Contemporary Art knows that:

The book’s radical approach to art history starts with its structure. Assembled
and written by eight of the most highly respected curators working today, each
of whom has both witnessed and shaped the period in question, Defining
Contemporary Art tells the story of two hundred pivotal artworks from the past
quarter century. These works, from the well known to the quietly influential,
share one achievement: they have irrevocably changed the course of art.
Collected here, they provide a chronological depiction of art in our era, a mosaic
in which readers may find their own patterns. ⁴

We are being invited to experience this book as an exhibition. Phaidon has published a
number of series that take this approach. Its Contemporary Artists series, begun in 1995,
is based on the format of a mid-career review exhibition: a well-illustrated survey of key
works to date, a commissioned interview with the artist and an artist’s statement,
relevant readings chosen by the artist, an illustrated exhibition list and bibliography, plus a review essay by a sympathetic yet independent scholar. Reviewing this series in 2000 Blake Stimson worried that the strong resonance of the spectacularized exhibition in the format of these books would work against the hard-won critical perspectives then being introduced by “the new art history.” On balance, I believe that they have come to serve as invaluable introductions to the work of the artists selected. Stimson’s concern is more obviously born out in Taschen’s Art Now series: one hundred artists, a double-page spread for each, a few images, minimal info, a one-liner for an “ideas” hook. Cultural industry values prevail: Taschen has flourished by serving the thirst for instant information on the part of the barely attentive. It is dismaying to see bookshops everywhere ceding the entrances to their art sections to displays by this one publisher that is hell-bent on monopolizing the category of the art book and replacing it with the compiled image collection.

Punning on the idea that the best art of the time will rise to the top and punting on the fact that curators are the best spotters, Phaidon launched its Cream series in 1998. Distinctive packaging distinguished each of the volumes: Cream (1998), Fresh Cream (2000), Cream 3 (2003), Ice Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture (2007), and Creamier: Contemporary Art in Culture (2010). (We await Creamiest. After that, presumably, contemporary art will go off, spoil—in a word, turn.) The one hundred artists whose works are illustrated in each volume are chosen by ten curators—the emergent curators of contemporary art at the time—not by art critics, theorists, or historians. Although each of these curators offers arguments for his or her choices and reflects on developments in contemporary art, some of the buzz of the books arises from their formats (augmented by inventive, sexy, designer packaging). No editors are credited as primary authors: the publisher itself is the orchestrator, the artistic director, or, perhaps, “curator” of the project. The books themselves argue that the most cutting-edge, most contemporary art is the art chosen by these curators. Curators are, after all, closest to art’s production, to artists, its producers. This is the least mediated access you can get. The reasons for choosing this or that artist are just what they are, whatever the curator says that they are. There is no requirement that the curators be consistent in their arguments or that what they offer amounts to an art-critical intuition, an art-theoretical idea, or an art-historical narrative. You are invited to make up your own mind about the work—accepting that it has, in the opinion of the curators, something of value in it—and to draw on such information as is made available. All ancillary information has the status of fact or opinion, none of it is presented as definitive. Like the Judd model of an exhibition or, in the case of Dia, a program of exhibits, the structure itself is doing the defining. Turning
the pages generates meanings that are absorbed, subliminally, like the experience of an observer walking around an exhibition.

The structure of Defining Contemporary Art echoes that of Art Since 1900: a year-by-year coverage, one artwork or art exhibition each year, the items chosen by the book’s “authors.” Defining Contemporary Art covers twenty-five years—with 1986 chosen, presumably, for no other reason than it is twenty-five years (one generation) prior to the date of publication (no explanation of the choice is given). With no introduction, as if we have just walked into the first room of an exhibition, it starts right in with Jeff Koons’s Rabbit (1986). The first words we encounter, like a wall text (one piece of information, one descriptive remark, one evaluative pointer: discuss), are those of curator Massimiliano Gioni: “An archetypical image and an icon of the entire decade, Jeff Koons’s Rabbit has the coldness of an object not built by human hands.” Also like Art Since 1900, there is a roundtable discussion at the end. At least the authors of the former had the honesty to frankly admit that they did not, in 2004, feel able to confidently characterize contemporary art, let alone define it. Perhaps, by 2011, the word “define” has shriveled in meaning or perhaps it is meant only in a weak sense. Whatever, the titling of the book implies that curatorial thought is ambiguous in this sense: it offers instances of what may become definitive.

Given the quality of curators assembled for this project, does the discussion offer us a seat-at-the-table view of the best contemporary thinking about curating? The blurb says, “Completing the book is a roundtable discussion in which the eight authors deliberate the historical conditions and principal themes of this period.” Moderator Craig Garrett from Phaidon reminds the curators that they were asked to select “twenty-five works from this period that you consider pivotal, the works you look at now and say ‘After this, everything changed.’” On my reading, two distinct perspectives emerge from the discussion between the eight curators. A clear statement represents each perspective. Gioni: “What I’ve particularly enjoyed about this book project was the premise that the artwork is the place where art is defined, transformed, and changed. It is a history of artworks rather than just a history of art.” Enwezor: “My decisions for selecting the artworks I have were made with full awareness of the shifting grounds of the contemporary, the way the postcolonial and global conditions have inflected our awareness of art produced throughout the twentieth century, but also by the fact that I have invested my career making these arguments unambiguously in my exhibitions and writing... with the distinct outcome that the works, at any rate, are great works of art that have survived the test of analytical interpretation over all these years.”
Gioni’s remark seems to suggest that it is the artwork that somehow does the thinking and implies that the curator’s task is to put the work in front of a viewer so that he or she can somehow see that happening. Responding to Enwezor, he goes on to present his core belief as a question about how “a single material (or immaterial) object or cultural artifact can actually change the history of art, the very definition of art. Is it in its materiality that the art object can transform history itself? Is it in its reception or institutional position, as Okwui seems to suggest?”

He obviously prefers the former, but does not say how (although he does specify what in his descriptions of each work elsewhere in the book). “I do believe that the unique power of the artwork (and again I don’t want to sound like a formalist) is that it can exist within different exhibitions and presentations and be itself and yet be completely different. It is the power of the artwork to produce a space around itself, its ability to ‘make worlds’... that makes it exist beyond the confines of the exhibition.”

Reflecting the book-as-exhibition blurring inherent to the project itself, he opines: “The exhibition, I am afraid, does not have the same power as the artwork in this sense; the exhibition to me is the cover of the book, its layout, its fonts. The artwork is the novel, and, as with the novel, it is quite unclear where the artwork really resides.”

Enwezor rejects this approach: “The artworks in Defining Contemporary Art are in conversation with many other artworks, both inside this forum and outside it, and, due to this, the history of their being accumulates and accommodates many layers of meaning. Each work of art is part of a multiplicity, not a singularity... [the exhibition] helps construct an analytical structure through which we can experience and judge the unique nature of each work.” Enwezor is the only speaker who deliberates with any depth on “the historical conditions and principal themes of this period.” Given the claims of the title of the book, this is disappointing, but it is perhaps a function of the roundtable format, poorly moderated and confined to exchanges of opinions of what might be happening and what could be done, rather than a close focus on what the exhibitions made by these curators and others have, in fact, been saying about what is happening in art and in the world and what art can do about it.

Returning briefly to an earlier theme, it is interesting that another of the interlocutors, Daniel Birnbaum, believes that, “nobody in our generation has been able to develop a theory as strong as Hal Foster’s systematic attempt to theorize postwar art in terms of repetition as a productive power.... I have wondered about the lack of models to make sense of more recent forms of repetition and return.” Given the large-scale curatorial ideas pinpointed earlier, this is untrue. It may, however, be true for most of his
generation of curators, although more and more are joining their art historian contemporaries in exploring the 1960s and 1970s as, at once, the moment of late modernism and the originary moment of contemporary art. Included within this recursion is a recuperation of certain curators as major agents of change during this transformatory moment. The urge to historicize curating is one of the key “turns” that is making it contemporary.

HISTORICIZE CURATING

Establishing an independent history of curating would contribute greatly to a sense that it is an autonomous profession. It might also help to identify what is traditional, modern, and contemporary within it. Of course, we would expect curating to remain closely aligned with contingent interests—those of artists, art historians, art critics, art’s audiences; and those of museums, collectors, gallerists, publicists, and so on—but it would no longer be subservient to them. Current thinking about this seems to switch back and forth between the history of exhibitions and the history of curating.

Exhibitions have been at the center of critical responses to art since Diderot’s Salons, his pamphlets on the annual Academy exhibitions in Paris, most written between 1759 and 1779. Exhibitions were pivotal during the 1850s, when the independent exhibition, contra the Salon, became the vehicle for Realism (Courbet in 1855) and, later, courtesy of well-heeled artists such as Manet and Caillebotte, for the Impressionists. Exhibitions have dominated both specialist art-historical accounts and popular stories about the twentieth century avant-gardes for the obvious reason that, along with the manifesto, the self-staged group exhibition was the primary means through which artists defined themselves and challenged their publics. Most British studies of the history of exhibitions reach back into the mid-nineteenth century—no surprise given the boom in public displays of art, design, and manufacture at the time, and their palpable resonances in Britain and its colonies ever since. Curators, critics, and historians elsewhere—in Europe, the U.S., and Latin America—are more interested in 1960s and 1970s precedents, the frontier days of the curator as artist. More generally, the fascination everywhere is with the beginnings of what is now experienced as one’s current, contemporary situation. There has been a boomlet in attention to the history of exhibitions for the obvious reason that they have become, since the 1990s, the major interface between art’s primary producers, disseminators, and interpreters and its continually growing and increasingly diverse crowds of consumers.
Recently interest among art historians in the role of exhibitions in the history of art has been matched by deep curiosity among curators in the history of curating, one in which their predecessors can be seen to have played leading roles. Hans Ulrich Obrist has led this enterprise, as much in his dedication to oral history as in his multifarious exhibition making and programming. His *A Brief History of Curating* is unabashedly devoted to offering a platform for a number of pathbreaking exhibition makers to tell their own stories, to historicize the curatorial networks in which they have worked, or still work, and to add their voices to an ongoing, accumulative, collective memory of curating itself.\(^{19}\) This is very much an enterprise in which curators write—or, better, speak (for this is a never-ending conversation)—their own history, rather than have it done for them by art or cultural historians, as has been mostly the case to date.\(^{20}\) It is interesting that Obrist relies so heavily, even obsessively, on the interview format as the medium for this work. And that his model for the ideal interview process is not a one-off exchange between curators but the interviews conducted over many years (1962–86) with the artist Francis Bacon by British art critic and curator David Sylvester.\(^{21}\)

Sustained attention to the history of exhibitions is, as Jens Hoffmann and Tara McDowell remark, a “rather Herculean” task:

> In addition to attending to the organization, installation, and reception of the exhibition, the historical specificity of the moment in which it appeared, its relevance to contemporary practice, and its material relations with market and site, there are, of course (and most importantly) the works that are in it.\(^{22}\)

Then there are the works left out and questions about why: “the forgotten artists, the failed artworks, the minor or transitional efforts.” To say nothing of the blind spots, or mistakes, of the curator—who will, after all, be the hero or heroine, villain or mediocrity, in such accounts. Nevertheless, to keep perspective in the face of fears created by (impossible, indeed ludicrous) demands for completeness, it should be observed that challenges such as these faced the history of art as it became a modern university discipline in Germany in the mid- and late nineteenth century. Whatever their shortcomings, art historians have, as members of a vast collective enterprise, met such challenges many times over.

A crucial, constitutive part of this collective enterprise has been the art-historical groundwork undertaken by curators in museums everywhere. Establishing the art-historical facts is a standard reason for rehanging a collection display and regularly drives
temporary exhibitions based on institutional holdings, which are often augmented by appropriate borrowings. Broad public education in the story of art is often advanced as a justification for blockbuster exhibitions of works loaned from a famous museum. Adding depth, detail, or variation to the story of the oeuvre of a well-known artist is the classic purpose of monographic exhibitions. Scholarly essays in hefty catalogues have become staple output in major museums everywhere. For some publishers, such as Yale University Press, exhibition catalogues have come to outnumber their strictly art-historical studies. Accumulating information on, around, and about works of art in the collection is fundamental to museum work and a core component of curatorship that is tied to either museum or private collections. How essential is such art-historical knowledge to curating within other parts of the exhibitionary complex?

During the 1980s and 1990s, as the biennial form flourished around the world, its primary purpose of bringing contemporary art from elsewhere into juxtaposition with local work was frequently augmented by “historical” exhibitions, usually of earlier avant-garde art that the curators believed was important to the theme of their show and to the aesthetic education of local artists and audiences. Beginning with European Dialogue in 1979, Nick Waterlow’s Sydney Biennales did this as a matter of course, most notably the 1988 edition entitled From the Southern Cross; A View of World Art c. 1940–1988, in which “For the first time, a small number of key Australian antecedents will be shown side by side with their peers from other countries.” This inclusion was essential to his curatorial purpose: to show that innovation in Australian art grew from its own roots as well as resulting from the impact of art from elsewhere. This might seem odd, but two centuries as a British colony and the more recent impact of U.S. culture meant that reorientation toward the obvious was necessary. Given the almost entire absence in Australian collections of art from the early and mid-twentieth century European avant-gardes, historical precedence was a frequent inclusion in later editions of the Biennale, for example those of René Block (1990), Lynne Cooke (1996), and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (2010). Similarly specific deployments of historical precedent for local purposes have been a common feature of
biennials throughout the world, for example, the display of key works by Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and other Concrete and Neo-Concrete artists during the Bienal do Mercosul (2005). Documenta 12 (2007) was memorable, to many, for lacing its survey of current work with key examples of early feminist art (Jo Spence), contrarian eccentrics (Lee Lozano, Juan Davila), and lesser-known minimalists (Charlotte Posenenske).

What about the uncertain, hoped for, or unanticipated consequence? This is a key quality of many exhibitions: an opportunity that the best curators take advantage of when it presents itself and seek to underscore for visitors. It is one of the factors that distinguish curating from art criticism and art history, although not of course from art itself. Unexpected connections present themselves when works are hung within sight of each other. The narrative of an exhibition changes, in subtle and sometimes major ways, when it is installed in another venue. Taking a risk on showing a work not yet complete, or one not fully known, can skew the impact of the whole. In the 1988 Australian Biennale, Waterlow focused on the provincialism problem (a problem for white artists). He only partly anticipated the impact of The Aboriginal Memorial, an installation of two hundred hollow log coffins painted by indigenous men from Ramingining, a small settlement in the Northern Territory. These were being made in the months before the exhibition and had their first showing there. They amounted to a countermemorial, an oblique, but quite deliberate, critique of the yearlong official celebrations of the Bicentennial of the settlement of the continent by British colonists. They evoked the subsequent suffering of the Aboriginal people as well as affirming their persistence, not least through such flowerings of their visual culture.24 Added late in the planning via the intervention of Djon Mundine, an indigenous art adviser, shown in one of the Piers that extends out over Sydney Harbour, and mediated by a ceremony that the painters performed on opening night, The Aboriginal Memorial became, as Waterlow acknowledged, “the single most important statement in the Biennale,” highlighting his belief that “for many artists, particularly in this century, the Aboriginal presence is the most civilizing and creatively challenging element in our world.”25 While this instance of curatorial openness to a crucial artistic manifestation of a key factor in contemporary life is at least documented, how many other moments of similar consequence have disappeared from the record because of the strange reluctance of curators to record the results of their labors?

Yet even this moving example could be seen as adding to the general narrative of the relationships between artworks and between artworks and their “times” that art historians typically offer. That narrative consists of facts from the exhibition history of particular works, from the reception history of certain artists’ works, or that of an art
movement. This brings us back to the question of just what is the difference between conceptualizing, researching, and writing the history of exhibitions and doing the same for the history of curating? An obvious difference on the ground at the moment is one of style: Obrist’s approach is intensely conversational; it researches through dialogue, through DIY strategies that, again, parallel those of his artist contemporaries. These are early days, so we cannot expect the variety of competing approaches—the strengths of which have been refined over time, and the weakness exposed as raw wounds—that characterize art criticism and art history, both of which are disciplines two hundred years in the making in their modern forms. We cannot expect the deep and revivifying interest in art historiography—the theory and history of writing histories of art—that is itself becoming one of the ways in which art history is done these days. But we can expect that taking a curatorial perspective toward the history of curating might lead to a different kind of historical recollection, unlike that which an art or cultural historian would produce while attending to the history of exhibitions.

**RECURRATION**

Some curators interested in the exhibitions/events that, during the 1960s and 1970s, challenged art world/real life divides have revisited them not only to recover forgotten histories or to adjust distorted memory but also to rethink current practice and to do so by restaging past exhibitions or developing a fresh one that reworks aspects of a past exhibition or event. In 1968 Danish artist Palle Nielsen persuaded Pontus Hultén to permit the main galleries of the Moderna Museet to be transformed into a children’s playground for his installation *Modellen: En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle* (The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society). Lars Bang Larsen describes the scene:

Facilities for continued creativity were at the children’s disposal during the entire course of the manifestation, in the form of tools, paint, building materials, and fabrics. The Royal Theatre donated period costumes from different epochs to be used for role-play. To this day, the noise level of the pedagogical art project is
surely unparalleled in art history: loudspeaker towers were placed in each corner of the exhibition space and the young museum-goers operated the turntables with LPs from every genre, playing dance music from the Renaissance at an ear-splitting level. In the restaurant, a number of TV screens with live transmission offered a panopticon for uneasy parents and enabled more sedate visitors to take in the active study of children’s contact language. The playground architecture made concrete the pedagogical aim: a protected, but pedagogically empowering, milieu, to be accessed freely by all Stockholm’s kids (adults had to pay 5 crowns to get in). During its three-week exhibition period the Model received over 33,000 visitors, 20,000 of whom were children.27

He interprets its affect in the light of his theory of “social aesthetics,” within which the museum has a crucial role as a social connector or, in this case, a slingshot:

The notion that a child’s early social relations form the adult individual was investigated by way of the Model. Creativity and experiential contact were thus incited as ways of assigning new priority to human needs which acknowledged the “qualitative human being” as an individual of society. The great need for group relations and the necessity to work collectively as an alternative to authoritarian society was made evident. The Model accepted the white cube as a “free” topological premise: free in the sense of public access, accentuated by the anti-elitist stance of the Model; free in the sense that what is inserted into art institutions automatically legitimates its existence (or that is what they tell us, anyhow). Hence the Model embraced the art institution as a vehicle positioned in such a way in culture that the statements it conveys are catapulted into society.

For a current project, entitled The New Model, Larsen and Maria Lind are revisiting the legacy of this project at another venue in Stockholm, the Tensta Konsthall. It takes the form of seminars, discursive events, exhibitions, and artists’ residencies from which new artworks and ideas will emerge.28 Perhaps a reflexive account of the meanings for the present of such revisiting will result. Perhaps it will be a specifically curatorial one.

In a similar spirit, the Experimental Nucleus of Education & Art at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, coordinated by curators/educators Jessica Gogan and Luiz Guilherme Vergara, is constructing a dialogue with the museum’s institutional history and
its unique location. The museum was a key center of experimentation in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s. The Nucleus, in operation since 2010, seeks to revisit this past, not to repeat it but rather to recuperate forgotten institutional histories and seek inspiration from previous experimental art, as the preferred ground for possibility in the present. These are urgent needs in a context where history is often overlooked and infrastructure is fragile.29

In late 2008 Eastside Projects—that describes itself as “a new artist-run gallery as experimental public space, set in the heart of Birmingham’s City Center Eastside regeneration zone”—launched its program with This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things. Over nine weeks, the gallery presented a series of accumulating installations, all of which took their inspiration from three earlier examples of “the gallery as an ongoing artwork.” The first was El Lissitzky’s Abstract Cabinet, designed for the 1926 International Art Exhibition in Dresden and subsequently installed at the Hannover Museum, a famous example of an avant-garde artist designing a space for the work of others. The second inspiration was the British anarchist anti-artist Peter Nadin. In 1978, for a project entitled The work shown in this space, Nadin, Christopher D’Arcangelo, and Nick Lawson invited artists such as Daniel Buren, Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Louise Lawler, and others to make works that responded to those that were on show. The third exhibition supplied the title, This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things. Curated by Bart de Baere and presented at the Museum van Hedendaage Kunst, Ghent, in 1994, it was at the time exceptional in that the exhibiting artists planned the exhibition jointly by workshopping possibilities. Eastside Projects takes as its motto a 1978 statement by Peter Nadin: “We have joined together to execute functional constructions and to alter or refurbish existing structures as a means of surviving in a capitalist economy.”30

Is there an emergent tendency manifesting itself here, however tentatively, one that we might name, in parallel to the current vogue for reperformance, a kind of recurating? If so, its goal does not seem to be antiquarian repetition but rather to make a contemporary exhibition, one recommended as relevant to current concerns. While of course there would be an inclination to evoke the ambience of the original exhibition, there is also the necessity of shooting it through with contemporary presence. Just this double-play inspired Marina Abramović in her managing of her exhibitions at MoMA in
2010: a retrospective of fifty of her performance works were reenacted (in an approximated, sanitized fashion) by a team of younger performers trained by her and was accompanied by a renewed work that she herself staged in the main second-floor gallery for the duration of the exhibition. Entitled The Artist is Present, the latter restaged the format of a piece entitled Night Sea Crossing that she and Ulay did on twenty-two occasions in a number of museums in Australia, Europe, and elsewhere between 1981 and 1987, some of which also involved a Tibetan Buddhist lama and a member of the Pintupi tribe from the Central Australian Desert. The artists sat facing each other across a simple table for seven hour stretches. At MoMA, Abramovic’s sat still, opposite whomever chose to wait, for as long as that person was able, during the times set for the performance each day. (This pattern was broken just once, when Ulay visited, and both artists reached across the table for a long moment.) In the “repeat” performances, there is no suggestion of antiquarianism—unlike, for example, the mood that pervaded the recreation of Marcel Broodthaers’s Section Cinéma (1972) at 12 Burgplatz, Düsseldorf at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, in September 2010. (Antiquarianism was, of course, not absent from Broodthaers’s original décors. It is just that it was not made contemporary in the Goodman show. Perhaps because the goal was to sell the original exhibit in a form as close as possible to its initial object status.)

We are talking about exhibiting the layering of memory, the counterpoints of time, as they have been and are manifest in exhibitions. Artists such as Tacita Dean pursue these concerns in a variety of ways and with extraordinary subtlety. One of her pathways is through the working lives of artists of an earlier generation (such as Marcel Broodthaers, Joseph Beuys, Mario Merz, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham), including the kinds of exhibition spaces that these artists preferred. Dean’s Darmstädter Werkblock is devoted to a careful examination of the rooms in which Beuys, beginning in 1970, created his famous installation Block Beuys, an informal museum of his own work, including such major pieces as the Auschwitz Demonstration (1956–64) and the props for his performance The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated (1964). In the film and booklet versions
of Darmstädter Werkblock, Dean avoids imagery of Beuys’s works (she was forbidden to reproduce them because of the estate’s insistence on copyright), focusing instead on the setting, including wall surfaces, insulation, display stands, heater, and architectural details. The movement of time is suggested in a close-up of a dead fly, the evident decay of these elements, and the endearing efforts of staff to patch them up with bandages. Uncannily, every color, texture, and gesture of repair echoes elements of Beuys’s work, including his constant efforts to curate his own work, to reexhibit it in slightly and sometimes drastically modified versions.32

Anticipating retrospect is something we saw in the work of Liam Gillick. It is also a core concern of artists such as Josephine Meckseper.33 Does this change when a curator is the temporal remixer? To consciously recreate an earlier exhibition and at the same time insert contemporaneous elements into it might have the effect, not necessarily intended, that the contemporary elements become strangely distant in time, uncannily distinct from their own placement—rather than appear as a “natural” spin-off of a merely present interest, the contemporaneity of which would “normally” become evident later. Jens Hoffmann attacks this problem in When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes, a “script and display” (exhibition, book, and series of discussions) intended to “take on the history and the myths around” Harald Szeemann’s famous 1969 exhibition Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information. Subtitled A Restoration/A Remake/A Rejuvenation/A Rebellion, the exhibition at the CAA Wattis Art Institute, San Francisco, in the fall of 2012, features sixty-nine artists (the same number as in the original show) “working within the legacy of Conceptual Art.” According to the press
release, from which I am quoting, the artists were invited to present “both existing and commissioned works and bring together archival material, floor plans, and installation images from When Attitudes Become Form with ephemera sought from the artists [originally] included.” All of these elements are to be shown simultaneously: “As this exhibition does not make the distinction between what is past and present, but rather considers When Attitudes Become Form as a living past, the documentary and historical material will not be separated from the contemporary artworks.” Within the dialectical logic of modernity, if When Attitudes Become Form is a “living past,” the risk is that When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes might find itself commemorating a dead present. Or, perhaps, embalming a living present that is haunted to the point of saturation by retromania. Yet, if popular culture, especially pop music, seems addicted to its immediate past, contemporary art and curating—which certainly shares the remix instinct—nonetheless tends—in its consciously critical moments—to subject this instinct to a more historically conscious comparativity. In projects such as When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes, the goal is to address the complex contemporaneities in play when one highly reflexive, Late Modern exhibitionary event is revisited, in order to occasion another, contemporary one. Projects like these are specific, meta critical instances of the more general enterprise of curating contemporaneity that I discussed in the previous essay.

An instinct toward recurating the recent past also appears in Massimiliano Gioni’s inclusion of a partly, imperfectly recreated work by Mike Kelley in his Gwangju Biennale 2010. Gioni wished this work to act as a historical counterpoint to the range of contemporary work in his exhibition. As we noted earlier, a more general comment on the state of the biennial form was made in Okwui Enwezor’s 2008 edition, a major part of which consisted of reinstallations of exhibitions that he had seen throughout the world during the preceding twelve months. In the context of Vilnius, a “European Capital of Culture” in 2009, Simon Rees curated Code Share: 5 continents, 10 biennales, 20 artists, an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Centre that brought together works shown at ten biennials around the world during the previous few years in order to picture the exchange system within international art and its curating. I discuss some of Charles Esche’s projects along these lines in my remarks on reimagining the museum. The exhibition spaces established by e-flux in New York are often devoted to recurated exhibitions or shows of unrealized projects, including exhibitions that were planned, but did not happen.

These initiatives seem to share an implicit wish to establish a history of curating that makes explicit the dialogue between exhibitions, the constant learning from the example
of another curator that constitutes the substance of most curatorial talk. More than any written record, exhibitions themselves are the intertexts that curators use to speak to each other. This is an exchange that has been going on for at least two centuries. It has usually done so, however, in textual silence, and without leaving much in the way of written traces. Recuration makes the exhibitionary exchange visible, exhibits it, brings it to publicity. Let us hope that recurated exhibitions will continue to add meaning to the subjects they evoke and broach. Let us hope that they will apply the reflexivity that inspires them to themselves as exhibitionary events—that their curators will archive their own processes, and the responses to their efforts. It is not Holy Writ that the exhibition is over when the exhibits are taken down.

Where does the nascent history of curating stand now? One useful indicator is the call for the conference “TIMING. On the Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting,” held at the Cultures of the Curatorial and Studio International Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig, in January 2012. The call reads as follows:

Processuality and performativity, and more recently even dramaturgy and choreography, are often mentioned in analyses of exhibitions and other artistic and curatorial formats. Still, space remains the main category of reference; the temporal dimension of exhibiting has yet to be researched in any depth. This is all the more surprising if one considers that current discussion on the subject focuses in particular on the ways exhibition practice has changed over the past twenty years in the wider context of cultural and economic globalization—a context closely linked to notions of acceleration, processuality, action orientation, and mobility. In this light, the exhibition appears as a transdisciplinary and transcultural space, as a public and social sphere. It manifests itself as a set of spatio-temporal relations, a medium that is already time-based by its very nature: as a form of presentation that is of a specified duration and as an event bringing together different actors—from the exhibits to the artists and curators through to the audience and the institution. It is clear, then, that key aesthetic, social, and economic issues of the early twenty-first century run through the field framed by the axes of exhibiting and the temporal.

Although it is, perhaps, too soon to comment on where these experiments in recurating are leading us, everyone interested in repetition and its affect would benefit from consulting the authority on this matter: Søren Kierkegaard, whose Repetition: A Venture
Documenta 11 (2002) is widely recognized as a paradigmatic reinvention of the biennial format, above all through artistic director Okwui Enwezor’s use of “platforms,” four of which took the form of conferences, debates, and workshops, followed by publications, on key issues of global concern—“Democracy Unrealized,” “Experiments with Truth,” “Créolité and Creolization,” “Under Siege: Four African Cities”—with leading intellectuals in cities around the world (Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos), followed by the fifth platform, the exhibition at Kassel. Enwezor was explicit about his goal: to challenge the Eurocentric, Westernist conception of avant-garde art that, he believes, is institutionalized in mega-exhibitions. He aimed to do this not merely in the weight and nature of his selections and not only via overt interrogations at the forums but also by questioning the exhibition form itself. “As an exhibition project, Documenta 11 begins from the sheer side of extraterritoriality: firstly, by displacing its historical context in
Kassel; secondly, by moving outside of the domain of the gallery space to that of the discursive; and thirdly, by expanding the locus of the disciplinary models that constitute and define the project’s intellectual and cultural interest.” The project’s effectiveness may be gauged by the depth of initial reaction against it and its underlying, persistent presence as a paradigm.

Under the heading “The Dictatorship of the Viewer,” 2003 Venice Biennale director Francesco Bonami divided the exhibition sites into eleven sections and invited that number of curators to develop independent yet connected exhibitions at each venue. He was inscribing into the design of the Biennale the critical interpretation, advanced by the philosopher Édouard Glissant, of the homogeneity sought by Euro-American globalization and his counterpicture of mondialité as an array of contiguous archipelagos. In the same spirit, Obrist (who, with art historian Molly Nesbitt and artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, curated one of the Venetian archipelagos, “Utopia Station”) recalls that:

Many of our traveling shows since the mid 1990s—Life/Live (1996), Nuit Blanche (1998), Uncertain States of America: American Art in the 3rd Millenium (2006–7), and, more recently, Indian Highway (2011–12)—have tried to achieve it, which creates the idea of travel almost as a crazy algorithm. The exhibitions are learning systems. They involve a lot of self-organization, a lot of grassroots research. They are not imposed homogenous structures, yet they do participate in this potential for global dialogue that hopefully produces a difference. That’s why when these shows happen twice they are never the same.

Why should exhibitions stay the same from the moment they open to the day they close? Why should they be available for standard periods, usually three weeks for small-scale shows, two or three months for larger ones? Can they not be events, constantly changed by their visitors, and available at times and in modes that are responsive to need? Obrist’s career is full of such initiatives, not least the do it series of exhibitions (happening
since 1993) based on instructions written by artists for anyone to present a work of theirs. Curators are being inspired to derive exhibition structures from purpose, rather than fit purpose to conventional modes of exhibiting. This is how the exhibitionary infrastructure is being rethought.

Obviously the communicative conditions under which curators work are constantly changing. This is having profound effects on the nature of the exhibition. We might ask, for example, why should an exhibition be presumed to end when the exhibits are removed? On a commonsense level, this question is nonsense. Installing and taking down an exhibition are acts that mark certain limit conditions of exhibiting as such when compared to mounting a permanent, or long term, display, for example. The room is vacated for the next exhibition, otherwise the museum, the space, the webpage, becomes frozen in time, and visitors see fewer reasons to return. In this regard, museums and galleries share structures with theaters and concert halls: performances have seasons, while exhibitions have dates. We do not attend concerts only to hear a particular performance; we go to add breadth or depth to our experience of a particular type of music—indeed, of music as such. For this essential activity, turnover is essential. Yet we also hear music on the radio, through players of various kinds, on iPods, and watch performances on portable screens. In spectacularized economies, consumers increasingly expect to be able to select, listen, and look across all of these formats, and to do so whenever they wish. They also expect access to a seemingly limitless archive of past performances and to new ones as soon as they are made available. Openness to the new does not, any longer, mean the erasure of the past. Both are accessible through the same page, hovering in the cloud, just a few clicks away. The success of sites such as YouTube and others in expanding access to all kinds of music suggests, by analogy, that, while a particular art exhibition or event at a physical site may indeed be replaced by another, then another, and so on for as long as the museum is able to keep mounting them, each exhibition is not erased by the next. Rather, it can live on through its traces (under the link “Past exhibitions”). At the moment, these are small and relatively short-lived kinds of connection (as is most consumption of music on YouTube). Yet they suggest that curating exhibitions across this range of formats, and through this type of contemporaneous time, is a challenge to be met and an opportunity to be grasped.

It is now quite common for an exhibition to be distributed into venues all over the city, as was done by the group What, How & For Whom, curators of the 2009 Istanbul Biennale. The 2011 edition, curated by Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa, returned to museum settings, orchestrating five group exhibitions and fifty solo presentations, all of which took
their cues from one of five “Untitled” works by the late Félix González-Torres. The “platform” idea is the actual subject of the 12th Gwangju Biennale that will stage exhibits, discussions, and events under the heading “Roundtable.” All six artistic directors are women. The topics they have identified typify the issues now prevalent as concerns held by curators: “Forms of Collectivity and Their Critique,” “Individual Spirit in Identifying Alternative Logics and Horizons of Connectivity,” “Belonging and Anonymity,” “Re-Visiting History,” and the “Impact of Mobility on Space and Time.” However lost in translation this language might seem, there are real issues at stake here. Let us hope that they will surface.

What general lesson might be drawn from this inclination to reinvent the exhibition itself every time? Surely the point is not to rework the biennial format, the museum, or the shape of “the exhibition” for the sake of it. It is, rather, that the world is asking everyone to rethink their relationships to their times—“without any illusion and without any possible alibi”—an undertaking that seems intractably difficult when one is immersed in the mess. Among the array of interzones between public citizenship and private selfhood that have evolved in recent centuries, exhibitions of all types, and art exhibitions specifically, offer sites of negotiation, a bounded space, usually with at least relatively open access, that is occupied for a stated amount of time (and with the potential to expand that time across new communicative formats). Exhibitions constitute a venue in which objects, images, and ideas can be arranged in forms that prefigure aspects of reality reimagined, framed by a “what if?” provisionally, and that can be visited on a basis, usually, of choice rather than coercion. In spectacularized and coercive societies, these fundamentals of the exhibition are rare, invaluable commodities, not to be taken for granted.

REIMAGINE MUSEUMS
Who among museum curators today matches institutional critique artists in making their critical institutionality explicit in the way they present their “permanent,” as distinct from “temporary,” exhibitions—in particular in how they do away with that distinction? Charles Esche, currently director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, would be a candidate. To him, the twenty-first century art museum should be “something close to that mix of part community center, part laboratory, part academy, alongside the established showroom function” that “encourages disagreement, incoherence, uncertainty, and unpredictable results.”

Along with Van Abbemuseum curator Annie Fletcher, Esche led a team of collaborators that attempted to realize this ideal on a nationwide scale from 2007 to 2009 through the Be(com)ing Dutch project. The core question was “whether art can offer alternative examples of thinking about how we can live together today... to put our ideas of cultural identity under pressure and examine the process of inclusion and exclusion in the world today.”

An interesting indicator of the core ideas underlying this project is the “Dictionary” link on the associated website: in Wikipedia fashion, it is open to participants to offer definitions of key terms—such as “be(com)ing,” “dutch,” “diversity,” “modernism(s),” “art”—although most of them seem to have been written by Esche and Fletcher.

With Dutch national identity an issue of overt public debate due to intense division along racial and religious lines, especially concentrated in the figure of the immigrant, the project ran into a roadblock when two of the participating artists, as part of their work Read the Masks: Tradition Is Not Given, staged a public demonstration that questioned the ideological baggage of Zwarte Piet, a popular traditional pre-Christmas character. Intense reaction from certain offended members of the public, and news media pressure, pushed the museum into a retreat position.

If the Be(com)ing Dutch project offered the museum as a base from which a nation could interrogate itself, the Play Van Abbe project turned the microscope on the museum itself. For eighteen months from late 2009 the museum organized its entire range of activities according to a scripted yet open-ended opera in four parts, in each of which distinct issues were explored, one after the other. Part 1, “The Game and the Players,” asked, “Who are the ‘players’ within a museum and which stories do they tell? How was the collection presented in 1983 and how is this perceived in 2009? How does the current director present the
collection? In what way does an art museum position itself—both in the present and in the past?” These questions were explored through a re-creation of the 1983 summer display of the collection curated by then-director Rudi Fuchs, accompanied by an exhibition of recent acquisitions and one on contemporary political art practices, with the goal of posing yet more questions: “Which story did the original curators want to tell and how do we perceive this part of history in our time? Does the presentation in this new context become a new exhibition or a copy of an exhibition?” Part 2, “Time Machines,” focused on historical alternatives to the white cube display format that dominated modern exhibition spaces and that persists, awkwardly, in contemporary conditions. “Time Machines” consisted of mini-exhibitions by contemporary artists and filmmakers inspired by historic room installations from famous museums around the world, such as MoMA during the 1930s; the Museu de Arte de São Paulo in 1968; an unrealized design developed in the 1920s by Alexander Dorner (Raum der Gegenwart); and André Malraux’s Musée Imaginaire (Museum Without Walls), a collection of reproductions gathered in the 1950s.

When I visited during this period—without prior knowledge that I was walking in partway through a performance by the museum itself—these installations struck me as an exciting example of recuration, of meta-exhibiting, one that revisited a set of roads-not-taken during modern times and made them open to the present, as resonances available for taking up and running with. The most contemporary aspect of these eddies and billabongs in the flow of history is that they are shown together, close in time to each other. The feeling in the museum as a whole was that sequential temporality had been suspended in favor of an aggregated ensemble of pockets of time. (The thoughtful guides were invaluable to discombobulated visitors, as is the director’s forthrightness about what is going on in his online video responses to frequently asked questions.) The museum showed itself to be conscious of what it was doing, especially in the tower room, where a reflexive, critical commentary on the project was on display, a place where visitors could add comments.
Part 3, “The Politics of Collecting/The Collecting of Politics,” was devoted to the following questions: “What does it mean to collect and keep works of art? What kind of world is perceived when viewing a collection? Who decides and why?” Finally, Part 4, “The Tourist, the Pilgrim, the Flaneur (and the worker),” investigated the role of the public and its expectations of the museum, the pleasure of a visit and how might that experience be intensified. The entire play required the museum to continually rehang its collections, recalibrate its usage of space, and involve its audiences more thoroughly than is normally the case, so as to ask, “Are there new roles that the museum can develop for and with the public, in such a way that the museum becomes a genuine platform for exchange and inspiration?”

This invitation applied to artists as well. Each of the many artists invited to exhibit during this period created installations that reinstalled the galleries in unexpected ways or displayed their own works in a similarly reflexive manner.

Museum directors in many parts of the world are turning to reflexive recuration as a means of addressing the multilayered temporal and ethical complexities occasioned by the ever-more-blatant contradictions of contemporary societies. In Lodz, Poland, the Museum Sztuki—historic home to a major collection of Polish Constructivism, above all the great Neoplastic Room designed by Władysław Strzemiński in 1948—has developed an interesting response to a very specific set of such challenges. In Poland, contemporary art does not occupy the prominent place in spectacle culture that it does in the U.S. and elsewhere in Europe. As neoliberalism advances, this presents an opportunity for Poland to take a different path from that taken elsewhere. It is not, however, one that all will welcome. Having moved into a warehouse that was part of a nineteenth century weaving plant, the museum precipitated a revival of the area that now includes shops, restaurants, cinemas, theme parks, and a theater. Directly opposite, however, remnants of deindustrialization persist in the form of buildings occupied by homeless squatters. The contradictions between spectacle and scarcity are instantiated, literally, in the exact social location of the museum. Acutely aware of these, director Jarosław Suchan introduced policies resonant of those instituted at the Van Abbemuseum. Under the rubric of “the museum as a Happening,” Suchan set out to dismantle the framing spectacle of art history by prioritizing the “here and now” of a viewer’s interaction with the works that are displayed within a “continual movement of contexts.”
permanent exhibition was replaced by “exhibition-sketches, every one of which presented the collection from different perspectives... viewed together, the exhibitions were to make the recipients aware that no interpretation can claim to be exclusive.” This included restaging the Neoplastic Room as a setting for encounters between works by artists, such as Katarzyna Kobro and Lygia Clark, who themselves transformed Constructivist art. Neo-avant-gardist Józef Robakowski turned his show over to two-day exhibitions of works by his artist friends and of works from the collection. Reaching beyond those interested in contemporary art, the museum commissioned a skateboarding rink based on a sculpture by Kobro and opened the exhibition rooms to local residents and visitors to the shopping complex to display whatever they chose, or whatever they created while at the museum.\(^48\)

The major challenge posed to museums by reflexive recuration is how might it be sustained? These exhibitions raise profound questions the answers to which take some time to search out. Asking them all at once or over a short period of time might leave most of them as merely rhetorical questions. In her comments on these projects at The Now Museum conference, Annie Fletcher asserted that the Van Abbe Museum no longer made exhibitions, rather, it reexhibited its collections so as to reveal the instability of the objects shown and to trouble the linearity of art-historical approaches (via “plug in” shows), as well as to offer an alternative to the event-oriented, spectacularized, or commodity priorities of other spaces (large museums, art spaces, art fairs, etc.) that presented works of art. Believing that art is made to be encountered, anywhere in the world, so why not in a museum of this type, she insisted that the key question is not “What is contemporary?,” rather it is “What is urgent?” However, to go only for the immediately, obviously urgent is to invite superficial contemporariness. A more measured, layered take on our contemporaneity would show that these are the same question.

So too, it seems, for Obrist:
While Gertrude Stein said that the museum couldn’t be both a museum and modern, under Hultén it could either be time storage or a laboratory; he showed us it could be both. And it’s combining these two elements—this oxymoron condition—which makes museums particularly interesting.\(^49\)

The Serpentine Gallery, London, led by director Julia Peyton-Jones and co-director Obrist, is one example among many of museums now committed to constant, visible, reflexive reinvention. At the Serpentine, this is most evident in the annual commissioning of a
pavilion adjacent to the eighteenth-century building. An architect who has not built elsewhere in Britain is invited to design a temporary structure to shelter a café and serve as a meeting place. Designs by extremely innovative architects, including Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, and Peter Zumthor, have attracted worldwide attention. Exhibiting artists have routinely reimagined the gallery by reorienting viewers through “backstage” spaces (Doug Aitken) or shifting spatial reach via the use of spilled sound (Philippe Parreno, Anri Sala). The gallery presents linked exhibitions off site—in the case of Félix González-Torres, at twelve places around the city. It regularly stages discursive events, especially in the pavilions, including twenty-four-hour interviews and marathon readings of important texts. Its nearby Center for Possible Studies is devoted to orienting aspects of curating in a globalized world toward neighborhood needs (notably those to do with multiculturalism). 50

As contemporary curators move out of traditional museums, then back into the reimagined museum, thus generating an increasing variety of new roles and revitalizing old ones, their activity is spinning off a plethora of names for what is happening. “New Institutionalism” was one, articulated by the Office for Contemporary Art, Norway, in 2003. 51 As they speculated, in 2010, about the dreams, ambitions, missteps, and achievements of their three-year-long exploration of the concept of Utopia, the director, staff, and adjuncts at the ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen, came up with an interesting list: “the Open Museum,” “the museum as generator,” “the polyphonic museum,” “the dialogic museum,” “the negotiating museum,” “the critical institution,” “the Nobrow Museum,” and “the third space” (between high culture and everyday life). Each of these emerged from within their experience of what they called “utopic curating.” 52 These terms typify current searching by arts professionals for a “tactical museology” through which the museum might remain a space apart from the commercialization and immediation of contemporary life, yet also operate as a critical institution in relation to everyday realities. 53 While many modern art museums have, on occasion and often for long periods, maintained this delicate balance, contemporary circumstances require considerable rethinking of how these and other fresh purposes might be pursued.
Despite profession-wide protestations of admiration for the Szeemann-style auteurAusstellungsmacher, in practice most curators attracted by the curator-as-artist model have tended to devote themselves, selflessly, to facilitating whatever the artist wants to do. Of course practical, personnel, and financial limits must be spelled out, but the mood is do anything, persuade everybody, move mountains, so as to make an exhibition that gets as close as possible to the artist’s projective fantasy. This recalls the Walter Hopps ideal of the curator as an invisible hand, willing to do everything necessary to show art in whichever way attracts most interest. A recent example: Nancy Spector reflecting on Maurizio Cattelan’s insistence that his retrospective exhibition take the form of all of his works hanging from the ceiling inside the famous rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum, New York:

To work successfully with Cattelan means to become complicit with his schemes and take institutional and personal risks—whether allowing him to break into galleries, steal the contents of another exhibition, or plan an escape route from the show. A lot of curators, museum directors, and gallery owners before me have aligned their vision with the artist’s to achieve remarkable and memorable projects that have tested the limits of their respective institutions. In accepting his dramatic proposal or, perhaps I should say, his dare, we needed to reconcile our institutional standards and best practices with the outrageousness of his ideas. This exhibition and the accompanying catalogue attest to both the power and provocation of Cattelan’s concept and the museum’s ability to remain agile and responsive in the face of the truly experimental.

As we saw in a previous essay, in recent years the mutual relationship between professionals with contingent yet essentially distinct tasks in the exhibition of art has been increasingly overlaid by the figure of the artist as curator, the artist whose medium is the exhibition, whose work is, precisely, the making of exhibitions, and whose work of art is an installed exhibition. Spector leaves us in no doubt that Cattelan is the originator of the idea of this exhibition and that the role of the institutional curator is to accede to the artist’s curatorial conception, with alacrity and gratitude. After four pages of acknowledgments, she concludes her preface to the catalogue with, “Lastly, and again, I must thank Maurizio Cattelan for his profoundly serious art, which, at first glance, may seem humorous, but in the end, will make you cry.”
The opposite side of this slave/slave relationship is described by Boris Groys:

When it comes down to it, the independent curator does everything the contemporary artist does. The independent curator travels the world and organizes exhibitions that are comparable to artistic installations—comparable because they are the results of individual curatorial projects, decisions, actions. The artworks presented in the exhibitions take on the role of documentation of a curatorial project.56

In this situation, the artist as curator and the curator as artist occupy an equivalent position in terms of power, status, and creative potential when it comes to making a contemporary exhibition. In some cases, this is doubtless true: for example, the relationship between Groys himself and Andrei Monastyrski in the design of the Russian Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale. It obviously does not apply across the board—to, for example, the extreme opposite case, that of the junior “curator,” grateful to be one (lowly paid, on-call) member of a production unit. And in the case of an institutional curator challenged by the trickster double plays of institutional critique artists, it can lead to confusion or abject surrender and result in a superficially attractive, but ultimately compromised, exhibition.

In instances where the interaction is one of parity, the hand of the curator should be shown, for the reasons Groys goes on to note.

Indeed, curating acts as a supplement or a “pharmacon” (in Derrida’s usage), in that it cures the image even as it makes it unwell. Like art in general, curating cannot escape being simultaneously iconophile and inconoclast. Yet this statement points to the question: Which is the right kind of curatorial practice? Since curatorial practice can never entirely conceal itself, the main objective of curating must be to visualize itself, by making its practices explicitly visible. The will to visualization is in fact what constitutes and drives art. Since it takes place within the context of art, curatorial practice cannot elude the logic of visibility.57
There is, in these remarks, a perverse logic of equivalence, and of reverse paradox, that many will resist. As we have noted, a majority of curators do not thrust their creative vision as curators to the forefront but rather prefer the spectral presence of hiding in the light of the artist’s manifest intention. They see their task most fully realized when all signs of traditional curatorial labor have been erased and all that is left are markers—visible only to their peers—that the curator has performed a creative act that parallels, but remains subservient to, that of the artist, especially the artist as curator. Far from managing the situation from above, the curator “lies amongst art (or objects), space, and audience.” The highly visible, self-aggrandizing curator-as-artist model has been superseded, for most practitioners, by that of curating with artists. The desired relationship is close to the model of that between the film director and the producer on the set of a movie, thus the self-description, often heard these days, of the “curator as producer.”

Another example, one among thousands, will point these thoughts in the direction of contemporaneity. Julie Rodrigues Widholm, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Chicago, describes the impact on her of artist Gabriel Orozco’s curation of the satellite exhibition Everyday Altered at the 2003 Venice Biennale: “Orozco’s curatorial rules—no walls, no pedestals, no vitrines, no video, and no photographs—emphasized a heightened awareness of the quotidian objects that surround us and our direct experience of them in shared space.”

Some might say that Orozco was countercurating or seeking to present a nonexhibition. Correctly seeing this as a kind of reverse supplement, Rodrigues Widholm, like many of her peers, takes up the artist’s example as a positive model of exhibition making. For her exhibition Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art From Mexico City at the MCA in 2007, Rodrigues Widholm framed the work of twenty artists—ranging from architect Fernando Romero through installation sculptor Abraham Cruzvillegas to participatory artist Pablo Helguera—within terms derived from Orozco’s highly personal, even idiosyncratic, yet nonetheless unmistakably contemporary Mexican perspective. She cites the artist: “We could say that this practice
of transforming the objects and the situations in which we live everyday is a way of transforming the passage of time and the way we assimilate the economics and the politics of the instruments of living.... The irony of thinking, the immediate gesture, the fragility of intimacy, and the meticulous violence of transforming the familiar make these artists’ work relevant to understand a powerful tendency in the art practice of today.”

Contemporaneity—its actualities, its fissures, its challenges, its potentials—are described as succinctly in Orozco’s words as they are embodied in his actions, objects, and interventions. (Here I, too, cede to the artist.)

Of course, these two approaches—curator as artist and curating with the artist—are choices from within a wider range of options. For most curators, wherever (and whenever) they are situated across the infrastructural spectrum, the ideal is to strive to work from an independent, relatively autonomous professional perspective based on a passion for art itself, an approach that balances respect for the vision of particular artists against commitment to developing audiences for art and that brings these two together in exhibitions that enable shared insight into the contemporary world—its dark, its dazzling, and even its dull ways of being. But there is no consensus along these lines. While some of the various elements that might, eventually (perhaps soon) add up to relative autonomy have been identified, they have yet to come together into an overall theory of contemporary curating. Less ambitiously, but perhaps more appropriately, what we are looking at is a set of distinctively contemporary approaches to curatorship.

**TURNING THE CURATORIAL**

Obrist recalls that Szeemann once described the exhibition maker as an “administrator, amateur, author of introductions, librarian, manager and accountant, animator, conservator, financier, and diplomat,” to which Obrist adds the functions of “the guard, the transporter, the communicator, and the researcher.” Fowle summarizes these roles in language that highlights relationships rather than specific roles. For her, the contemporary curator is a “mediator, facilitator, middleman, and producer.” It follows that:

> Actively engaging with artists is central to practice, which is an aspect of the role for which there are no guarantees of immediate or quantifiable outcomes. This requires a kind of creative “maintenance,” as opposed to Foucault’s “care,” as it
involves supporting the seeds of ideas, sustaining dialogues, forming and reforming opinions, and continuously updating research. It could also be said that exhibitions are not the first or only concern of the curator. Increasingly the role includes producing commissioned temporary artworks, facilitating residencies, editing artist’s books, and organizing one-time events.  

Throughout these essays, we have noted a growing sense that the nature of curating has moved so far beyond its traditional focus on care of collections and the making of exhibitions that an expanded conception has become inevitable. Attempts to define this change more closely, however, jump back and forth between additive lists of specific roles and more abstract statements about readjusted relationships between art world players, including participatory audiences for art. No surprise, given the embedding of curatorial thinking within the practice of making exhibitions, the latter now expanded to include all types of showing.

The term “paracuratorial” sounds like a simple extension of Lind’s “curatorial” into an expanded and more wide-ranging set of roles. Yet if we look closely at the intention of the coiner of the term, curator Jens Hoffmann, it is clear that he aims to acknowledge, but also put into their proper place, activities that sit outside the idea of curating as tied to exhibition making:

Exhibition making is a craft, and I treasure that. Too many curators seem to think that exhibition making is a thing of the past and that today it has to be all about what I call the paracuratorial: lectures, screenings, exhibitions without art, working with artists on projects without ever producing anything that could be exhibited.

Lívia Páldi expands this slightly to say that it “implies an intertwining net of activities as well as diverse modes of operation and conversation based on more occasional, temporary alliances of artists, curators, and the public.” For Hoffmann, these activities are like curating, close to it, associated with it, but are not it (the analogy is obviously to paramedics, para-teachers), so his strategy is to acknowledge the interest in these matters, but relegate them to a somewhat lesser status. But Páldi is hardly alone in suggesting that, in the mix of curatorial and paracuratorial programs pursued in recent years at such institutions as the Rooseum, Malmö, the Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius, the Kunstverein, Munich, and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, educational goals have led the way with such success that they might stand as models for curating in general.
We already have noted many such examples, not least the Documenta 11 “platforms” and the initiatives by Esche in Sweden and Holland. Others do not have even an anchorage in a museum, however reimagined. In 2006 Manifesta 6 set out to be an exhibition in the form of an art school and an associated book, Notes for an Art School. For a mix of accidental and intentional reasons, it became entirely event driven, as was its follow-up in Berlin during 2007, unitednationsplaza.64 Pálđi reminds us that in some countries, notably those in which repression rules in public institutions of every kind, including in apparently alternative spaces, paracuratorial activity may be the only mode in which critical thought can be exercised.65 In more secure situations—where the paracuratorial is, as Emily Pethick points out, “a useful tool to think through practices that have shifted away from conventional exhibition formats and refuse to be contained”—the term, in her view, “still posits a boundary and sustains an unnecessary dualism.”66

The “Educational Turn” is a recently emergent form of art making and curating that precedes identification of the paracuratorial and may (hopefully will) outlast it, at least in form if not in usage. In their anthology Curating and the Educational Turn, Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson add a string of further examples, including protoacademy, Cork Caucus, Future Academy; The Paraeducation Department; “Copenhagen Free University”; A.C.A.D.E.M.Y; Hidden Curriculum; Tania Bruguera’s Arte de Conducta in Havana; ArtSchool Palestine; Brown Mountain College; Moana Free University; and School of Missing Studies.67 Although they eschew attempts to define such efforts as amounting to “a new medium,” as Kristina Lee Podesva proposes, they definitively state that “Educational formats, methods, programs, models, terms, processes, and procedures have become pervasive in the praxes of both curating and the production of art and in their attendant critical frameworks.”68 To them, the “turn” takes on predominantly “educational” or, more narrowly, “pedagogical” forms and purposes. These manifest its contemporaneity.

Having moved, since the late 1960s, from an activity primarily involved with
organizing exhibitions of discrete artworks to a practice with a considerably extended remit, contemporary curating may be distinguished from its precedents by an emphasis on the framing and mediation of art and the circulation of ideas around art, rather than on its production and display.\textsuperscript{69}

Just how these activities differ from the directly educational work of curators in education departments of art museums throughout the world during the past forty or fifty years is, at times, difficult to discern. Many of these latter can take intensely creative forms: for example, the “Museum as Artist” model deployed at the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, since 2000, and the linking of contemporary art and multiculturalism by the educational and outreach program at the New Museum, New York, since 1996.\textsuperscript{70}

Ideas about the processual rather than the procedural character of curating echo those of Irit Rogoff cited earlier, and indeed her influential essay “Turning” is included in the anthology.\textsuperscript{71} While some of the artists involved, Anton Vidokle for example, accept that their activity is one of knowledge production and dissemination, but deny that it is educational in any of the senses usually associated with the academy or the museum, other artists, such as Pablo Helguera, move seamlessly between museum-based projects and those, such as The School of Panamerican Unrest (2006), that are entirely community based.\textsuperscript{72} Everywhere today the deeper aspirations driving the educational turn are being absorbed, in their turn, by museum directors and museum-based curators. We noted earlier, for example, the ARKEN Museum’s trial of “utopic curating.” The utopic, or at least hopeful, question (How might we live better?) takes us beyond the museum to the edges of the exhibitionary complex, into curating that is engaged with the exigencies of contemporary life, and does so via kinds of infrastructural activism that are animating everyone involved.

ENGAGED, ACTIVIST CURATING

For the exhibition This is What Democracy Looks Like! at New York University’s Gallatin Gallery during October and November 2011, space was shaped by offering an expansive
interior wall opposite huge windows that face 4th Street to the Zuccotti Park protesters for them to display whatever they wished, however they wished, for as long as they wished. Live video streams to the park and to other Occupy sites around the country played on monitors around the space. It became one among many meeting places for the protesters, especially those from the university itself. To director Keith Miller—honest to a fault about the ethics of the relationships between galleries and real life, between representation and activism—this was his most “successful” effort to date to resolve the ethical dilemma that arises whenever there is a gap between social demand and those of curating itself. Wishing to create a “theater of the streets” while remaining an art gallery, his “process” mirrored that of Occupy Wall Street (OWS). He had stepped back so that OWS could “curate” itself. His open-handed offering of a display space augmented a community of narrators and translators. Now the gallery was occupied.

All of the approaches that we are reviewing respond, in various ways, to the key factors that Fowle identified in her remarks, cited earlier, to the effect that contemporary curating “should be responsive to the situation in which it occurs; and it should creatively address timely artistic, social, cultural, or political issues.” Many cities have spaces dedicated to doing exactly this. Curators have recognized that building local infrastructure is a necessary condition for encouraging and enabling artists and audiences to think away from the vertical structures of local and international art worlds. Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta has been pivotal to the development of contemporary Indonesian art. Sàn Art is playing a similar role in Ho Chi Minh City, while the Arrow Factory in Beijing seeks to connect the activity of the known art districts to that of a remnant hutong in the heart of the old city. Connecting such centers through lateral or regional networking is the next important step. Since 2004 tranzit has been coordinating the activities of independent artists’ initiatives in Austria, the Czech republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, as well as showcasing its network model at venues elsewhere. From Hungary it has also launched a research project, Parallel Chronologies, that displays archives of exhibitions and events that have achieved legendary status in local art worlds, but about which little is known. Vasif Kortun, Istanbul-based curator of the innovative UAE Pavilion at Venice in 2011, prioritizes links between the Platform Garanti in Istanbul and, say, Ashkal Alwan in Beirut and the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, over European or U.S. connections. Residencies for artists, curators, writers, and administrators have become a key medium for such network building.

In circumstances where the institution of even the most fragile infrastructure is impossible, persistent curating is nonetheless achieving important gains. Responding to a
situation in which Al-Ma’mal Foundation for Contemporary Art—established in 1998 in the Old City, Jerusalem—found itself with an accumulating collection of contemporary art by Palestinian artists, but no prospect of exhibiting it, in 2007 director Jack Persekian conceived the Contemporary Art Museum Palestine (CAMP) as a source of exhibitions shown elsewhere by partner institutions (among others, the Van Abbemuseum). The goal is to “reflect one of the core Palestinian experiences—displacement—without illustrating a political narrative.”

Similar concerns underlay the contribution “Palestine c/o Venice,” curated by Salwa Mikdadi for the 53rd Biennale in 2009. It may be that we are seeing here intimations of the creation of a support structure for art that does not follow Western infrastructure models, notably the exhibitionary complex that I have described. It should not surprise us that the fragility, the extending, and the stretching of that structure has geopolitical dimensions.

These dimensions mean that activist infrastructural initiatives are important, too, in centers where the exhibitionary complex is well established. In the U.S., engaged curating has long been inspired by the example of Mary Jane Jacob’s emphasis on art in public domains, especially the legacy of that work in the parks and public spaces of Chicago. A number of outstanding curators are committed activists. These include, in the U.S., Nato Thompson and Greg Sholette, co-curators of The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere (2004). Thompson has also curated Democracy in America: The National Campaign (2008), artist Paul Chan’s Waiting for Godot (in New Orleans) (2007), Experimental Geography (2009), and Living as Form (2011). In Houston, the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, led by James Harithas, emphatically addresses timely issues; Lauri Firstenberg has driven LA><ART in Los Angles since 2005, while Eve Fowler and Lucas Michael initiated Artists Curated Projects at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena three years later; in New York, the 16 Beaver group is one of many alternative, critical, and political platforms. Meanwhile, activists such as Brian Holmes make interventions—such as Holmes’s Continental Drift series of workshops—at whatever place seems open and appropriate, as well as, of course, online.

While exhibition formats undergo constant reinvention, museums are reimagined, and venues proliferate, the exhibition visitor is rapidly ceasing to be the passive, quiescent, abstractly projected object of the efforts of all the other agenda-setting actors within the
art world. This is What Democracy Looks Like! was significant in that it solved, in the
most direct and inherently dramatic fashion, an issue that has become front and center
for art making and curating: the role(s) of the spectator(s). The infrastructural shift that
we have been discussing and the entire push of all the renovations within contemporary
curating, everything that makes it contemporary, moves in their direction. Spectatorship
is the next big category of agency in the art world. At this point art world commentators
reach for Jacques Rancière’s The Emancipated Spectator with as much alacrity as they
grab Agamben on “contemporariness” when confronted with thinking through
contemporaneity. What is contemporary spectatorship? What are its kinds, roles, hopes,
and responsibilities? That everyone is everyone else’s translator is the bare beginnings of
an answer.

As artists and curators reach for Utopia, seek to survive, or, in most instances, search
together to understand the perplexities of contemporary being, consumers of art become
participant producers (“prosumers”) and audiences become co-curators. More than at any
time to date, the exhibitionary system has expanded to include viewing activity before
going anywhere near the gallery space, and often begins days before the event. It may
be prefigured in a variety of ways: online imagery, printed information, word of mouth,
posted pictures. Experiencing the exhibition in the display space now mixes actual and
virtual, direct looking and apps-based responses. Postvisit, after the event activity, is
likewise expanding and merging with other, similar experiences. Some art is now made in
the expectation that it will be seen only online. Given this dispersal of information across
so many mediums, the sense of loss, sometimes exclusion, felt by those who for good
reason could not actually visit an exhibition—who obtained some sense of it through
reading about it in the press or in magazines or by consulting the catalogue—is
lessening. Spectatorship is diversifying, curating itself. Of course, spectacle
subjectivization is predominant, but it is not historically inevitable, especially as
globalization implodes all around us. Although anticipated for decades, this is relatively
new territory and is a challenge to curatorial thought on everyone’s part.

CURATING CONTEMPORANEITY—
PRESENT, PAST, AND FUTURE

How does the challenge of curating contemporaneity, discussed from geopolitical
perspectives in the previous essay, look when we place it, as I argue we must, among the
impulses driving curating now? South African artist/curator/critic Colin Richards offers a
timely caution. Recognizing the value of “contemporaneity” as a critical term, especially in that it renders problematic our inheritances from modernity, he nonetheless worries that, “Putting things this way, though, however pragmatically useful, tends to reduce complex, intimate individual imagination and creation to so many responses to the conditions of existence, and this seems exactly what art (almost uniquely) is not about, or not entirely.”81 Quite so; art is not about reduction, except of course when it takes reduction as its topic and subjects social stereotyping to the complexity required by individual imaginations. I have, many times in these essays, evoked the multitemporal, multidirectional, and inherently multiplicitous nature of art making in contemporary conditions—never better than the way it was expressed by Gabriel Orozco, in remarks cited earlier in this essay. Contemporary curating shares in these characteristics, of necessity. Otherwise, it has no urgency and is not contemporary.

Roberta Smith praises the 2012 Whitney Biennial as “a new and exhilarating species of exhibition, an emergent curatorial life form, at least for New York,” because it “places on an equal footing art objects and time-based art—not just video and performance art but music, dance, theater, film—and does so on a scale and with a degree of aplomb we have not seen before in this town.”82 She celebrates the curators (Elisabeth Sussman, curator from the museum, independent curator Jay Sanders, and Light Industry, a Brooklyn film and electronic art space developed by Thomas Beard and Ed Halter) for shifting normal exhibition formats in the service of their themes: documentary, collage, sexual identity, and abstraction. Smith is alert to the energizing effects of role-switching between the various specialized professional practices that, together, constitute art worlds.83 Such switching has accelerated recently to the point where every specialist feels that innovation is most likely to occur in the zones of ambiguity generated by let’s-try-it-and-see exchanges with another specialist.

At the Whitney in 2012, however, the equalizing of visual and performing arts in the spaces and the time of the exhibition did not, in my view, lead to a new kind of show. Instead, it read as a rather formalized conjunction of mostly conservative instances of each form. Tentative paintings (spearheaded—although anything volitional seems too strong a word—by Andrew Masullo), low-
key aggregations of slightly estranged objects, remodern choreography (Sarah Michelson), slide show-like films (including a rather ordinary contribution by the extraordinary Werner Herzog), everything-in-my-studio installations, re-creations of club environments, token usage of social media, etc. The themes listed by Smith were raised, but not pursued with any persistence. The museum itself remained dominant throughout, confusing the made-for-myself-and-my-friends sensibility that actually motivates much of the work. Time to move to Tribeca. Maybe there it will be possible for at least parts of the museum to connect with the street.

Just when I was about to give up on museums as even residual platforms for showing genuinely contemporary art, I went next day to the New Museum, where the second Triennial, The Ungovernables, was stirred up by the critical and creative energy of a generation of artists born between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. That most of them came from outside the United States, while the Whitney Biennial—which showed work mainly by artists mostly of the same generation—remains a survey of “American” art, albeit broadly defined, might have had something to do with the starkness of the contrast. Not much at the Whitney matched the works at the New Museum by Mounira Al Solh, Jonathas de Andrade, Iman Issa, Hassan Khan, Rita Ponce de León, José Antonio Vega Macotela, Adrián Villar Rojas, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, The Propeller Group, or the Invisible Borders Trans-African Photography Project. Curator Eungie Joo opened the museum to the skeptical yet deeply committed, locally specific yet worldly outlook of these artists. This is to curate into a museum setting some ripples in the third current that I have identified, especially those that are responsive to the looming collapse of globalization, the shortcomings of decolonization, and the everydayness of survival within societies whose “governors” continue to act out hollow grand narratives.84

Much that is at stake in curating contemporaneity comes into view when one contrasts the presumptions underlying these two exhibitions. As one looks at the work in the Whitney Biennial, taking (as one must, at first) each on its own terms, quite soon one’s instinct is to compare it to other art, contemporaneous or older, and then, as you move around, to assess the exhibition as a whole against other attempts, past and present, to survey current art. At the New Museum the immediate response to each work by the artists mentioned is to imagine the actual, particular place in the real world in which this work was made, into which it searches, and out from which it reaches. While one scarcely considers the “world out there” at the Whitney, that “world” is almost palpably present in

The Ungovernables does not embody in its form the ungovernability that is its theme, leaving the theme to be stated in very large, banner-like wall texts on each floor. And it remains tied to Unmonumental ruminations on sculpture and assemblage with which the New Museum announced its renewed presence in 2007. Nonetheless, this show strikes out in the right kinds of direction, toward curating contemporaneity.

Which is exactly what dOCUMENTA (13) sets out to do, of course on a more ambitious scale, and on the world stage that this famous survey has become. In the words of its director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the 2012 iteration takes “a spatial or, rather, ‘locational’ turn, highlighting the significance of a physical place, but at the same time aiming for dislocation and for the creation of different and partial perspectives—an exploration of micro-histories on varying scales that link the local history and reality of a place with the world, and the worldly.” Although Kassel is the point of concentration, dOCUMENTA (13) locates aspects of its programming in three other cities: Kabul, Alexandria/Cairo, and Banff. Each is understood as the site for a distinct way of being in the world, a set of differences that (it is implied) together, in their simultaneity, exemplify our current general condition. Christov-Bakargiev sees each place as precipitating, embodying, and representing in the imagination a distinct kind of experience, thus:

On stage. I am playing a role, I am a subject in the act of re-performing.
Under siege. I am encircled by the other, besieged by others.
In a state of hope, or optimism. I dream, I am the dreaming subject of anticipation.
On retreat. I am withdrawn, I choose to leave the others, I sleep.

She describes each position as being a state of mind, that relates to time in a specific way:
While the retreat suspends time, being on stage produces a vivid and lively time of the here and now, the continuous present; while hope releases time through the sense of a promise, of time opening up and being unending, the sense of being under siege compresses time, to the degree that there is no space beyond the elements of life that are tightly bound around us.

Christov-Bakargiev underlines the fact that “Artists, artworks, and events occupy these four positions simultaneously,” and that unpredictable exchange between them is constant. From my perspective, an exhibition built around such premises would stand a good chance of avoiding the self-defeating trap of presenting contemporary art as an effect, however complex and mediated, of the forces of globalization. It would also, perhaps, avoid the opposite simplification: staging a showcase of selections from “world art.” Instead, it would, one hopes, succeed in demonstrating how a number of artists and thinkers are engaging with contemporary conditions, with the multiple contemporalities, and the layered spatialities that constitute contemporaneity within us, between us, and around us. And by doing so, it might evoke for us a glimpse of the larger picture within which these world-making interactions actually occur and might be imagined.

Staged every five years, and drawing on resources matched by few other mega-exhibitions, documenta invites meta-curating. dOCUMENTA (13) follows the past three or four editions, each of which was also an essay exhibition of a particular kind. There is no doubt, however, that it is premised on a deeply thought and felt interpretation that is highly specific to this present. In this sense, it is an advanced example of contemporary curatorial thought. It is an exhibition that shows us striking instances of, and certain crucial approaches to, thinking about the present. It is, in its structure, an exhibition about such thinking, and one that, by all initial reports, requires hard, affective thinking about the present from its audiences. I look forward to finding out whether it is also an exhibition that itself thinks the present in ways that advance current thinking about what it correctly identifies as the key problem of world-picturing today, how to “link the local history and reality of a place with the world, and the worldly”? 

The ambitions underlying dOCUMENTA (13) remind us of João Ribas’s cry, cited in my opening speculations: “It is a fundamental necessity of curating to situate itself within those contemporaneities that remain in darkness, untheorized and unlived.” Is this not the contemporary version of the support for art’s essential anarchism that curating has made available to art since the mid-1850s? Is this not the goal that has been sought, against all odds, since Courbet curated his own show in 1855, right through the early
twentieth-century avant-gardes, then by the curator as artist during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the artist as curator years that worked the tensions between deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization so productively, until now, when we see curatorial open-endedness reaching out in a variety of directions? If so, this legacy commits curating to continuing its long and radical process of unconcealing art precisely by making public, in exhibitions, the concealments that commercial, official, and institutional contemporaneity imposes upon it—the demands of globalized consumption, social conformity, and identitarian fundamentalism. As its definitive form of resistance, its quintessential subversion, curating makes public, in exhibitions, the specific ways in which each artwork, each artist, each image out there accedes to, refuses, or deflects these impositions. The deinhibiting, perhaps we might say the outing, of works of art is what curators must do now. They do so in order to exhibit art itself in the ways that it requires us to do now. For the same reasons, the task facing art critics and art historians is to unmask uncritical, unhistorical, art market ideas such as “the contemporary” and “Contemporary Art” and replace them with ideas that speak from our actual contemporaneity.

3 Defining Contemporary Art (London: Phaidon, 2011). The publisher applies this idea to the art museum itself in its 2011 book The Art Museum, the blurb for which reads: The Art Museum is not like any other museum, it is open 24-hours-a-day, 365-days-a-year. Its luxurious, 2-ft wide page spreads brim with iconic artworks from big name museums and galleries, as well as those hidden away in private collections—some only accessible with a pair of sturdy hiking boots and a map of the more remote parts of the planet. There are Cave paintings and Egyptian sarcophagi, friezes and woodblock prints, stained glass and ceramics, masterpieces by Van Gogh and Vermeer, photographs, contemporary paintings, land art and monumental sculptures by Anish Kapoor and Antony Gormley—almost every form of art imaginable. The Art Museum is not limited to one era, one century, or even strictly arranged in chronological order. Instead, artworks are laid out in 450 “rooms,” within 25 “galleries,” organized next to similar works reflected through time and influence. “Temporary” exhibitions are on show throughout the book for a closer look at themes such as Islamic Mysticism, The Nineteenth-century Body, and Drawing in Space. Whole rooms are devoted to the likes of Picasso, Leonardo da Vinci, and The Tomb of Tutankhamun. See phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2011/september/27/blowing-apart-the-idea-of-an-art-museum/.
4 The curators are Daniel Birnbaum, Cornelia Butler, Suzanne Cotter, Bice Curiger, Okwui Enwezor, Massimiliano Gioni, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Bob Nickas.
7 Defining Contemporary Art, 8.
8 Ibid., 457.
9 Ibid., 456–57.
10 Ibid., 458.
11 Ibid., 459.
12 Ibid, 461.
13 Ibid., 461.
14 Ibid., 462.
15 Ibid., 458.
16 This is the explicit argument I make in chap. 1 of Contemporary Art: World Currents (London: Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice-Hall, 2011).
26 See, for example, the Journal of Art Historiography, online since 2009, at http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com.
28 Over a period of two years (2011–12), The New Model will investigate the heritage from The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society in a number of projects, seminars, workshops, and exhibitions. Participants will include Dave Bullfish Bailey, Magnus Båtås, Ane Hjorth Guttu, Lars Bang Larsen, and Hito Steyerl. See www.tenstakonsthall.se/english.php.
29 For general information on the Nucleus, see also http://nucleoexperimental.wordpress.com.

The Nucleus recently launched a digital publication of its seminar Reconfiguring the Public: Art, Pedagogy & Participation, which also featured a screening of the film documentary by Guilherme Coelho, Um domingo com Frederico (A Sunday with Frederico), followed by a panel discussion on Domingos de Criação, an important series of participatory art happenings at the museum in 1971.

31 On the specifics of the differences between performances intended to be repeated for a season or revived, as is common in theater and visual arts performance, see Adrian Heathfield and Amelia Jones, eds., Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History (Bristol: Intellect, 2012).

32 For a searching exploration of this work, see Christa-Maria Lern Hayes, Post-War Germany and “Objective Chance”: W. G. Sebald, Joseph Beuys, and Tacita Dean (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008).


34. See Simon Reynolds, Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).

35 By some accounts, for much longer, at least as far back as the first “public” openings of princely collections, or perhaps even to ancient times, when the triumphal parades of pillage and tributes from the conquered were accumulated in imperial “museums.”


41 Obrist, in Lynn, “Curators on the Move,” 244.


43 Charles Esche, “What’s the Point of Art Centers Anyway? Possibility, Art and Democratic Deviance,” April 2004, at www.republicart.net/disc/institution/esche01_en.htm. This is his direct response to the post-1989 challenge articulated by Giorgio Agamben, cited earlier: “The fall of the Soviet Communist Party and the unconcealed rule of the capitalist-democratic state on a planetary scale have cleared the field of the two main ideological obstacles hindering the resumption of a political philosophy worthy of our time. . . . Thought thus finds itself, for the first time, facing its own task without any illusion and without any possible alibi.” “Notes on Politics,” in Means Without Ends (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 109.

44 Be(com)ing Dutch, Van Abbemuseum, www.becomingdutch.com/events.


Ibid., 16.


Ibid., 46.


Rodrigues Widholm, Escultura Social, 10.

Obrist, A Brief History of Curating, 27.


Hoffmann, in Jens Hoffmann and Maria Lind, “To Show or Not to Show,” Mousse Magazine, no. 31 (November 2011), www.moussemagazine.it/articolo.


Unitednationsplaza was a project by Anton Vidokle in collaboration with Liam Gillick, Boris Groys, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Nikolaus Hirsch, Walid Raad, Martha Rosler, Jalal Toufic, and Tirdad Zolghadr. See www.unitednationsplaza.org/.

Páldi, “Notes on the Paracuratorial,” 76.


Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., Curating and the Educational Turn (London: Open Editions / Amsterdam: De Appel, 2010), 13.

Kristina Lee Podesva, “A Pedagogical Turn: Brief Notes on Education as Art,” Filip, no. 6 (2007), http://filip.ca/content/a-pedagogical-turn;

O'Neill and Wilson, Curating and the Educational Turn, 12.

O’Neill and Wilson, Curating and the Educational Turn, 19.


See Rodrigues Widholm, Escultura Social, 144–53.

Keith Miller, comments made during “A Symposium of Curatorial Interventions” (Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University, November 17, 2011). See also “The Wall Street Occupennial,” https://occupennial.org/.


“If you can improve the corner of your Street…”, a recent discussion between Kader Attia, Vasif Kortun, Wael Shawky, and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on art in the Middle East, canvasses many of the issues in play from local and regional perspectives. See www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue22/artinmiddleeast.htm.

For the founding statement, see

78 See, for example, Mary Jane Jacob, Art in Action: New Public Art in Chicago (Seattle: Bay Press, 1993).


80 The fifth issue of the journal Reading Room (2012) will be devoted to these issues. See www.aucklandartgallery.com/library/reading-room-journal/reading-room-5-call-for-papers.


83 This phenomenon has been theorized since the 1960s. Classics include Arthur Danto, “The Art World,” Journal of Philosophy, no. 61 (1964): 571–84; and Howard S. Becker, Art Worlds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

84 See Ryan Inouye and Eungie Joo, eds., The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial (New York: New Museum / Skira Rizzoli, 2012). Joo usefully draws attention to James C. Scott’s The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of the Upland Southeast Asia (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), with its path-finding argument about the longevity of cultures that have persisted, deliberately, at the edges and beyond the reach of ancient civilizations, principalities, and modern nation states.

85 Citations from Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted and lasted for a long time,” dOCUMENTA (13) information page, at http://d13.documenta.de/#welcome/.


Contemporary curating desires to locate itself deep inside the changes being undergone by thought itself within contemporary conditions. This desire resonates in the remarks by curators and critics that I have been quoting. Throughout these essays I have been trying to sketch the ways in which they are attempting to do so. As we noted, some are tending, at this moment of all-pervasive uncertainty, to frame their participation in terms of Agamben’s paradox, using it as a holding pattern. Others locate it in a more constructive manner. Fowle, in her notes on “Reflexive Curating,” observes:

As debates on the role of the curator are being further complicated by the notion of “the curatorial” as a methodology, key factors by which “curating” is measured today include the viability of exhibitions, events, and even institutions to be platforms for curators’, artists’, and participatory publics’ ideas and interests. Increasingly, the curatorial position is less engaged in upholding an institutional mandate than trying to transform it, experimenting with processes, functions, structures, and hierarchies in relation to an expanding international art world that is located within ever-widening sociopolitical frameworks.¹

Fowle recognizes, but (rightly) rejects, the “widening divide between two camps—the independent and the institutional,” insisting instead that these new roles reflect the fact that, “The institution is now not just the museum but a whole industry that has grown up around exhibition making.” Just how internally various and externally connected this industry has become has been evident throughout these essays. So has its need to activate its infrastructure.

Paula Marincola’s provocation: “Can we ever get beyond the essential conservatism of displaying works of art in conventional, dedicated spaces?” resonates through the exhibitionary complex, shaking the presumption of each kind of venue that it is a special domain for art. When we move inside these structures to the kinds of exhibitions that curators regularly stage, a widespread contemporary impulse is voiced by Obrist’s regular refrain: “We must experiment with ways beyond objects.” Tino Sehgal glosses this by
pointing out that there is, now, “something reductive and lifeless in the way that the ‘exhibition’ format focuses on the highly static human-to-object relation.”  

His own art is built around person-to-person interactions, as is the whole move to what Maria Lind dubbed “the curatorial.” As we have seen, these cultural producers are responding to the full-scale shift into network culture that has been pervading the arts, as everywhere else, for the past decade, and that seems on course for yet more proliferation. The deprivileging of the artist from her/his position as the core producer within the art system is the third paradigm shake-up resulting from this shift. It is already having its impact on curating. In March 2012 the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia presented First Among Equals, an examination of the interplay between artistic generations and between artists who work individually and those who work collectively. Of course, it took the form of performances, publications, curatorial projects, and artworks that incorporated the work of other artists.

We have reviewed the various ways in which curators have responded to these deep challenges to traditional and modern modes of museum, curatorial, and art practice. In the remarks I have been citing, Fowle adds some more. A key one is the growing commitment among curators to creating international and regional networks devoted to maintaining research capacity that “goes beyond the national or localized mandates of the traditional contemporary art museum and addresses the ‘stop-start’ problem of biennial structures that celebrate a kind of ‘urgently epic temporary scenario’ with a new curatorial team, theme, strategy, and artist-list each time.” Research capacity is as vital to effective infrastructural activism as is choosing the right locations, people, and timing to realize a project.

The endless cycle of exhibitionary events, making every visit into a spectacularized experience—the great drive of twentieth-century museum practice, requiring every venue across the spectrum to enslave itself to incessant programming and reprogramming—may be reaching its end. In some centers at least, its inventive energies have been undermined by the self-exhibiting priorities of artists on the one hand and, on the other, consumed by the overwhelming success of the mass museum. Elsewhere, scarcity still haunts every cultural initiative. These contradictions in our contemporary situation require curating to be a flexible, platform-building practice—tied to the specifics of place as well as appropriate international and regional factors—that pursues “a transgenerational, transregional, multilayered approach to programming priorities and organizational structures.”
It is of interest that many curators involved in these experimental initiatives are taking jobs in institutions, with effects yet to be seen. Others leave institutions for more risky settings. Whereas collection builders and exhibition makers were once the models of curatorial heroism, they have been joined by those—to whose efforts I have returned again and again in these essays—we might dub “process shapers” and “program builders.” Those with the capacity to see large-scale pictures, local needs, and the complex connectivities between these scales, who can track art’s movement and shape its potential as well as its potential effects through the creation of sustained programs that are committed to experimentality, to opening out possibilities for all participants in art making. At times, probably often, these require an institutional location, at others they seek freedom from even the most permissive structure. These people we might dub “infrastructural activists.” New kinds of curating are being imagined everywhere around the world, inside the art world and outside of it, every day. A contemporary model of cooperative caring for art, artists, institutions, and audiences is emerging—on a scale and with a dispersive energy not envisaged before. As an orientation that encompasses the constant, creative reinvention of the settings for artistic, curatorial, critical, and administrative practice within each of these practices—in themselves, and in their increasingly embedded interrelationships—the curatorial has expanded beyond the paracuratorial to become what might be called “the infrastructural.”

These essays have been an inquiry into the ideas that preoccupy curatorial discourse today, including those that preceded current thinking and persist within it. I have tried not only to profile what is being thought and said but also to suggest ways in which contemporary curating might engage with the demands being made upon it and do so in ways that are specific to its peculiar competencies, its driving passions, and its distinctive mission. Waterlow’s testament echoes here. It is, we must recognize, the product of his wide experience as a curator in the second half of the twentieth century. Like all credos, it takes absolute form, but is subject to revision by reality. Let me try to summarize the ways that curators are now encapsulating the imperatives that they feel drive what it is to be a contemporary curator.

Curators feel less subject to the reticence that has—except for the moment of stardom around 2000—characterized curating to date, especially in relation to the other practices that enable and interpret art. While caution continues to be appropriate in many circumstances (for example, building collections or beginning any project), it is not an absolute rule or a “natural” inclination and works least well when engagement with contemporary art and life and with past contemporaneities is the goal.
When it comes to the core purpose of curating—to exhibit art’s work—curators now express intuitions, define nuances, articulate ideas, state hypotheses, all the while comparing and contrasting them with the relevant others that are out there. Each of these steps is, of course, basic to the initial thinking that precipitates any project, including curatorial ones, and gives early form to them. Many curators have already taken the next necessary step: to think with appropriate others so as to change, improve, and stretch the dialogue. These steps are essential moves toward the main goal: to find the figure that is inherent in that which is to be exhibited, a configuration that will shape the flow of movement through the exhibition, a pathway that will carry the spectator’s experience, until we reach the reconfiguration—the exhibitionary act—that, in doing these things, opens art to be seen.

Curating can be reflexive: much of it already is; it could become more so. As I noted in my opening paragraph, every exhibition demonstrates that curators reflect on circumstance, wrestle with ideas, develop research programs, and spark insights. This is the substance of curatorial thought as a discourse. It is not summed up by the rhetorical gestures, knowing asides, and ostensive demonstrations that seem to satisfy many in the profession. As we have seen time and again throughout these essays, curatorial thinking amounts to much more than this. Perhaps the appearance, in the past two or three years, of four profession-oriented, scholarly journals of curating suggests more than a service to university-level courses in the subject. Perhaps it signals the arrival of a discourse ready to reflect on its own history, originate its own theories, pursue its own research programs, and spin off insights that will surprise not only the rest of us but itself.

Archive the achievements. Exhibiting art does not stop with the works on the wall, the program of events delivered, or the catalogue published. The history of exhibitions, of museum displays, and of institutional programming is not adequately served by taking a few uninformative panoramic photographs of each room, collecting the press clippings, adding catalogues to the library, and filing the announcements among administrative records. Nor will online archiving long suffice on institutional websites where quick searches and striking visual images rule the roost (as they must, because they are directed at holding, for a time, the attention of those who are searching or surfing). Archive functions tend to fade in these circumstances. For all its immediacy and attractiveness, doing history by recording conversations, no matter how often they are worked over and re-collected, is only the first step toward developing the interpretive structures that sustain history and, after time, require revision and rethinking themselves. Much more is needed if a reflexive practice is to be built and maintained. I would love to
see curators keeping detailed records of every stage of their thinking and planning and to read statements of how they previsualized exhibitions, including how these ideas changed during the hang. I would love to follow their version of learning by walking through the exhibition and their sense of what various audiences made of it. Of course, it would be great to have records of visitor responses, of the spectator’s emancipation, but it would be a major step forward to see more writing by curators about other exhibitions that have inspired their own, or were curated in response to theirs, or simply were devoted to the same artists or about a similar issue. Making visible this dialogue between exhibitions (the curatorial equivalent of intertextuality in literature) would be to articulate what we have posited as the core, distinctive, unique medium of curatorial discourse. Doing so is essential to the advancement of curatorial thought. None of this is art history per se, nor is it art criticism. It is the history and theory of curating and of exhibition making, both of which are devoted—like art criticism and art history, but before them—to making art public and to enabling the art that is to come.

We have already canvassed a number of other suggestions that would follow in the sequence that is emerging here. To avoid repetition, I will put them (and the ideas just presented) as slogans and ask you, if you wish, to read back to where they have been discussed in earlier essays in this book. Together, they amount to my answer to the question with which I began. These are the constituents of contemporary curatorial thought:


I am aware that to people in many art communities throughout the world—especially those where art making is itself a struggle against scarcity and every infrastructural element is daily threatened with evaporation—these recommendations will look like indulgent solutions to problems they wished that they had. The options set before those who would be curators in well-served societies pale in significance against the challenges facing those who would be curators elsewhere. Societal crisis engulfs the Middle East; the Chinese government moves in mysterious ways to reign in the creative energies unleashed by Deng Xiaoping three decades ago; austerity measures are imposed across more and more of the member states of Europe (with immediate impacts on the major
form of arts infrastructure, the non-profit sector), and authoritarian governments return to many of its peripheral states. Meanwhile, in South America, people’s governments prioritize, as they must, the needs of the people. Africa resists even this level of generalization. Yet artistic and curatorial activity has been pivotal in the bringing about of positive social change in these parts of the world and in others. It will be important to building futures everywhere. The West versus the Rest, North versus South, divisions, while real and persisting, are fading. As I have tried to show, models appropriate to each time and place are emerging and are constantly being tested. Given the pressing need for all of us, in the face of climate change, to participate in the development of a planetary consciousness, it is no surprise that being alert to initiatives of all kinds, wherever they may be being trialed, is something that is shared by artists and curators everywhere.

In the introduction to these essays I asked you take the three words “Thinking Contemporary Curating” as if they were spelled out in neon in a work by Bruce Nauman, somewhat like his 100 Live and Die (1984). We have mostly thought of them as three ideas, each flashing independently, but also, often, as combined into a number of almost sentences—some very clear, others ambiguous, while still others seem to await their time to make sense. I have been trying to track the directions of contemporary thinking in current curatorial thought. Many kinds of thinking have become visible and, despite convergent fashion following by some, they amount to a vital, open-ended discourse—one that works by thinking in/through/during exhibiting—in the broad sense that I outlined in the first essay and have sought to expand, constantly, ever since. Only one combination of the three words is ruled out: curating contemporary thinking. That kind of “curating”—the preserve of spin doctors, propagandists, media managers, and commercial persuaders—goes against the nature of art, the critical spirit essential to anything worthy of the name “thought,” and against the differing that drives contemporaneity itself. It is the antithesis of the kind of curating that is admired in these pages—themselves, perhaps, a somewhat contentious exercise in curating contemporary thinking about curating.

2 Tino Sehgal, in April Lamm, ed., Hans Ulrich Obrist, Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating* *But Were Afraid To Ask (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 11.

3 The most thorough analysis may be found in Manuel Castells, The Rise of Network Society, vol. 1 of his trilogy The Information Age: Economy, Society, Culture, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: 2000). For an essay relating changes in art to this culture, see Kazys Varnelis, "The Immediated Now: Network Culture and the Poetics of Reality," in networked: a (networked_book) about (networked_art), http://networkedbook.org/.

It is early days; profundity will take time, although Seth Price’s remarkable essay "Dispersion," under revision since 2002, is a powerful example of an artist thinking this change through as it is happening. See www.distributedhistory.com/Disperzone.html.
First Among Equals (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2012),
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