

On Aggregators

DAVID JOSELIT

The term *contemporary* has shifted from an adjective to a noun. Once a neutral descriptor meant to indicate recentness, *the contemporary* is now widely claimed as a period, composed of loosely related aesthetic tendencies, following and displacing modernism. In this regard, it enters a tradition of now discredited movements that includes “pluralism” and postmodernism.”¹ Unlike these predecessors, however, which took Euro-American art as their primary archive, *Contemporary* encompasses the temporally coeval but geographically diverse expressions of a global art world—a point critics often emphasize by noting that the literal meaning of *con-temporary* is “with time,” which in turn is sometimes poetically glossed as referring to “comrades in time.”² A framework for global art is thus furnished through the undeniable and ostensibly value-free contention that work so designated occupies the same moment in time. There is, however, a paradox in rendering the adjective *contemporary* as a noun: When packaged as a period, *the contemporary* unconsciously reinscribes a model of temporal progression that was fundamental to modernism. While discussions of the contemporary typically emphasize its synchronic dimension—calling upon, as I’ve mentioned, the *con* to suggest simultaneity across different locations and perspectives—by definition it is always advancing. Like an avant-garde, the contemporary doesn’t have an *avant*: Its forward movement does not carry the productive shock of being in *advance* or, perhaps more appropriate, of being out of sync with its time. In its discursive structure, the contemporary is a kind of blank or denatured modernism, one that is only ever “with” its moment. And this seemingly innocuous “with” masks the dramatically uneven development of globalization. For being together in time does nothing to redress economic disparity, as the victims of collapsed Bangladeshi garment factories producing inexpensive clothes for Western corporations can attest.

In their book, *Anachronic Renaissance*, Alexander Nagel and Christopher wood argue that the artwork’s temporal heterogeneity—its capacity to introduce both future and past into material form—began to be recognized and manipulated during the Renaissance. For Nagel and wood, “No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or a bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation

¹ For two of the best accounts of contemporary art as a period, see Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), and Alexander Alberro, response to “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary,’” *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp-60.

² See for example Boris Groys, “Comrades in Time,” *What is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Julieta Aranda et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 22-39.

to time is plural.”³ Under conditions of globalization, where the critic’s challenge must encompass acknowledging how economic profits and political gains are extracted from the “plurality of time” (as when labor in “underdeveloped” parts of the world is exploited to produce wealth in “developed” regions), the bland pluralism of the “contemporary” is not enough. Uneven development carries with it asynchrony, not contemporaneity.⁴ This is due not only to wide disparities in life opportunities in general but also to the different local histories of modern and contemporary art across the world that have carried an artist from Germany, China, or South Africa, for instance, to the present moment.

Period, or International Style?

Sometimes, as in the theories of Suhail Malik, “the contemporary” is described with little if any reference to art practices themselves—an understandable, if to my mind, problematic, move given the proliferation of biennials, art fairs, museums, and other exhibition spaces that marked the intensified globalization of the art world in the 1990s.⁵ Conversely, critics and academic historians of contemporary art express consternation privately, and sometimes publicly, at its daunting scale. On the last page of his 2012 book, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, for instance, Richard Meyer voices his exasperation:

In 2012, as this book goes to print, the culture of contemporary art seems to be burning more intensely than ever. But the glare of now-ism—of the latest international art fair, *e-flux* posting, hot young artist, and auction-house record—can be found fairly blinding. The spectacular immediacy of the contemporary art world threatens to overwhelm our ability to think critically about the relation of the current moment to the past.⁶

It is precisely such fear of blindness in the face of “spectacular immediacy” that motivates the transformation of the word *contemporary* from a contingent adjective to a stable container. But this blindness is self-imposed. We must—and I think we can—sketch a historical framework through which to see contemporary art. It is urgent to do so, if only because the art of our time is so deeply imbricated in the accelerating economic inequalities of a world shaped by globalization. I have grown convinced that

³ Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p. 9.

⁴ As this article is going to press, a special issue of *Texte zur Kunst* (September 2013) was published on globalism, in which questions of asynchrony and the global art world are extensively addressed, especially by Susanne Leeb. Unfortunately, because of timing, I cannot take these arguments into account.

⁵ In a series of four lectures at Artists Space in New York during the summer of 2013, Malik developed a theory of the contemporary that intentionally avoided any inductive analysis from practices of contemporary art. According to him, the two fundamental structures of contemporary art include its anarcho-realism (a desire to escape the confines of the art world and make a difference in the “real” life) and its fetishism of the present.

⁶ Richard Meyer, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), p. 281. It must be said that the purpose of Meyer’s book is not to describe contemporary art but rather to demonstrate how “the contemporary” functioned already in debates around modern art during its institutionalization in the United States. This passage, however, gives the impression that the move to historicize is directly related to contemporary art’s perceived annihilation of history.

the concept of an “international style” may be of use in such a project. This category, typically associated in the Anglophone world with the dissemination of modern architecture in the 1920s and ‘30s, is now largely out of favor, not least because the very notion of a style has long been eclipsed in the visual arts by a logic of avant-garde movements (and more recently, as I have asserted, succeeded by the placeholder “contemporary” in lieu of an identifiable movement). The distinction between a “period” and a “style” may sound purely academic, but there are important distinctions: Periodization suggests a succession of visual languages, a string of new paradigms, whereas an international style encompasses the adoption and adaptation of an existing idiom by a culturally and geographically diverse, even unlimited, array of producers. Put slightly differently, an international style accommodates a wide variety of utterances *within* an existing language. What’s more, an international style arises when an visual language has reached a point of saturation, when its dissemination has allowed it to become legible throughout the global art world.