IS CONTEMPORARY ART HISTORY?

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I would like to start by setting two models of contemporaneity against each other. The first is the presentist model: the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking. This is the dominant usage of the term ‘contemporary’ in art museums today; it is underpinned by an inability to grasp our moment in its global entirety, and an acceptance of this incomprehension as a constitutive condition of the present historical era. The second model, which I want to sketch here, takes its lead from the practice of three museums (the Reina Sofía, the Van Abbemuseum, and the MSUM Ljubljana): here the contemporary is understood as a dialectical method and a politicized project with a more radical understanding of temporality. What I will call a ‘dialectical contemporaneity’ does not designate a style or periodization of works of art so much as an approach to them.

The presentist model is the one we attach to the contemporary art museum boom that has taken place so aggressively since the 1990s. Whether we look at recent museums in the US, Latin America, the Middle East, Europe or Asia, what they all have in common is an economy of privatization: private collectors donating stand-alone wings attached to museums (e.g. Flick Collection, Thompson Collection), corporations building museums (Samsung Museum of Art, Jumex), private collectors building their own museums (e.g. Mori Art Museum, Inhotim, Garage, MALBA, and many museums in China that are basically Kunsthalles, without a collection: Beijing Today Art Museum, Shanghai’s Minsheng Art Museum, Rockbund Museum of Art, the Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou, etc.), and the franchising of museums (Guggenheims globally, the Louvre in Abu Dhabi). Only a small minority of new museums are state funded, and they are vastly outnumbered by the privatized model that defines contemporaneity less in terms of concern for a collection, a history, a position, or a mission than in the staging of contemporaneity on the level of image: the new, the cool, the photogenic, the well-designed, the economically successful. (The New Museum would be an example of this, with its ‘semi-permanent collection’.)

In tandem with this proliferation of contemporary art museums,
contemporary art has become the fastest-growing subject area in the academy since the turn of the millennium. Here, the definition of ‘contemporary’ has become a moving target: when I was doing my PhD in the 1990s, it seemed synonymous with art after 1945; around the turn of the millennium, it seemed to start somewhere in the 1960s; today the 1960s and 1970s generally tend to be viewed as high modernist, and the argument has been put forward that we should consider 1989 as the beginning of a new era, synonymous with the fall of communism and the emergence of global markets and the Internet. While each of these periodizations has its pros and cons, the overwhelming drawback is that they operate from a Western purview. In China, India, and Africa, contemporary art tends to be dated, respectively, from the late 1970s, the 1990s, the end of colonialism (1950s through to the 1970s), and, in the case of Latin America there is arguably still no real division of the modern and the contemporary, because this would mean conforming to hegemonic Western categories.

It almost goes without saying, then, that the attempt to understand contemporary art as a periodization is dysfunctional since it can’t accommodate global diversity. Most recent theorists have therefore positioned it as a discursive category, most usually in opposition to modernism, but also in opposition to post-modernism. These discursive approaches seem to fall into one of two camps: either contemporaneity denotes stasis (i.e., it is a continuation of postmodernism’s post-historical deadlock – e.g. Peter Osborne, Boris Groys) or it reflects a break with post-modernism by asserting a plural and disjunctive relationship to temporality (Giorgio Agamben, Terry Smith). The latter is of course more generative, as it allows us to move away from both the historicity of modernism, characterized by an abandonment of tradition and a forward propulsion towards the new, and the historicity of post-modernism, equated with a ‘schizophrenic’ collapse of past and future into a bloated present that colonizes both.

Recent theories of anachronism and the anachronic offer a similar emphasis on temporal disjunction: Georges Didi-Huberman, for example, has proposed that all works of art have coexisting, stratified temporalities. By contrast, what I call a dialectical contemporaneity seeks to navigate multiple temporalities within a more political horizon. Rather than simply claim that many or all times are present in each historical object, we need to ask why certain temporalities appear in particular works of art at specific historical
moments. Furthermore, this analysis is motivated by a desire to understand our present condition and how to change it. Lest this method be interpreted as yet another form of presentism (a preoccupation with ‘the now’ masquerading as historical inquiry), it should be stressed that sightlines are always ultimately oriented to the future: not the past as interesting for its own sake, and not the present as the rationale for everything, but a continual (dialectical) shuttling between the two.

Where do museums fit into this? My argument is that institutions with a historical collection have become the most fruitful testing ground for a non-presentist, multi-temporal contemporaneity. This is in direct contrast to the commonplace assumption that the privileged site of contemporary art is the globalized biennial. Of course, for many curators, the historical weight of a permanent collection is an albatross that inhibits the novelty so essential to drawing in new audiences; temporary exhibitions are deemed more exciting (and profitable) than finding yet another way to show the canon. But today, when so many museums are being forced to turn back to their collections because funding has been slashed due to austerity measures, the collection can be the museum’s greatest weapon. This is because the permanent collection requires us to think in several tenses simultaneously: the past perfect and the future anterior. The collection is a time capsule of what was once considered culturally significant at previous historical periods, while more recent acquisitions anticipate the judgment of history to come (in the future, this will have been deemed important). Without a permanent collection, it is hard for a museum to stake any meaningful claim to an engagement with the past — but also, I would wager, with the future.

One of the reasons for writing this book [Radical Museology, Koenig Books, 2013] is the fact that debates around museum collection hangs haven’t moved on from the thematic vs chronological around the turn of the millennium. In fact, these have been displaced by a new paradigm: one that is driven by a sense of present-day social and political urgencies, that acknowledges specific national traumas, and that stands apart from the presentist model of the contemporary art museum in which trustee and market interests influence what is displayed. The museums I focus on in the book elaborate a dialectical contemporaneity both as a museological practice and an art-historical method.
The most apt term to describe the result of these activities is the *constellation*, a word used by Walter Benjamin to describe a Marxist project of bringing events together in new ways, disrupting established taxonomies, disciplines, mediums, and proprieties. This approach is, I think, highly suggestive for museums, since the constellation as a leftist rewriting of history is fundamentally *curatorial*. (The implications of the constellation are also relevant to contemporary art history, since it disrupts the formats on which so many dissertations depend: the monograph, the ahistorical thematic, the generational/geographical.)

It is of course banal and predictable to invoke Benjamin in 2014, but it is striking that his theories have been so influential on visual art yet have had so little impact upon the institutions in which it is shown and the histories they narrate. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), Benjamin draws a distinction between a history spoken in the name of power, which records the triumphs of the victors, and a history that names and identifies the problems of the present day, by scouring the past for the origins of this present historical moment; this, in turn, is the determining motivation for our interest in the past. Benjamin’s own *Arcades Project* sought to reflect on Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, by juxtaposing found texts, cartoons, prints, photographs, works of art, artifacts, and architecture in poetic constellations. When applied to the museum, this present-minded approach to history suggests a spectator no longer focused on the appreciation of individual works and authors, but one who is aware of being presented with arguments and positions to read or contest. It defetishizes objects by continually juxtaposing works of art with documentary materials, copies, and reconstructions, and blurring the lines between the two. In short, it gives way to an archive of the commons. In art history, it means that contemporaneity becomes less a question of periodization or discourse than a *method* or practice, potentially applicable to all historical periods.

Some of you will of course argue that we can’t discard periodization so easily, and in part you are right. But such an approach also risks condemning previous ages to a remoteness divorced of relevance to the current day, and does nothing to acknowledge the causes of our current presentism — from technology collapsing spatial distance and accelerating our experience of time into a 24/7, on demand flow of data, to the short-term speculations of finance capitalism, based around fluid abstractions such as currencies,
bonds, stocks and derivatives. All of these affect our spatio-temporal coordinates: for the average person in the West, the future is no longer equated with a hopeful projection into the future (if indeed it ever were), but is a pit of anxiety about short-term work contracts, unaffordable healthcare, and a lifetime of debt repayments (mortgages, student loans, credit cards).

Rather than dealing with this futureless temporality by immersing ourselves in the past, a ‘tiger’s leap’ into that which has gone before may be supremely relevant to mobilizing an understanding of our situation — as well as seeing afresh the events from whence it emerged. Dialectical contemporaneity is therefore an anachronic action that seeks to reboot the future through the unexpected appearance of a relevant past.

_Dit is het transcript van een lezing die Claire Bishop gaf tijdens de conferentie ‘Is contemporary art history’ op het Institute of Fine Arts in New York op 28 februari 2014._