Periodising Contemporary Art

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> *If periodizing is conventional, it is not entirely arbitrary or useless. As historical classification, it is an instrument in ordering the historical objects as a continuous system in time and space, with groupings and divisions which bring out more clearly the significant similarities and differences, and which permit us to see a line of development; it also permits correlation with other historical objects and events similarly ordered in time and space, and thereby contributes to explanation.*
> —Meyer Shapiro, 'Criteria of Periodization in the History of European Art'[1]

> *Periodization is not some optional narrative consideration one adds or subtracts according to one's own tastes and inclinations, but rather an essential feature of the narrative process itself.*
> —Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*[2]

The years following 1989 have seen the emergence of a new historical period. Not only has there been the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the heralding of the era of globalisation, but technologically there has been the full integration of electronic or digital culture, and economically neoliberalism, with its goal to bring all human action into the domain of the market, has become hegemonic. Within the context of the fine arts, this new period has come to be known as the contemporary. In 1989, 1990, and 1991, the converging of several factors precipitated a seismic change that significantly realigned the manner in which art addresses its spectator—indeed, is constructing the spectator in a new way.

The categories that allow us to think contemporary art are uneven and have been converging for some time. They were largely elaborated in the modes of focusing perception first imposed by modernist art work. For instance, tactical media projects that combine documentary information and expressive politics were fully developed by artists working in the 1960s and 1970s (such as the Tucaman Arde collective in Argentina, or the Guerrilla Art Action Group in the US) before they were adopted by counter-globalisation artists working with the Internet. Similarly, although to very different effect, a number of projects of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (by kinetic and op artists such as Jesús Soto, Victor Vasarely, or Bridget Riley, or post-minimal artists such as Robert Smithson or James Turrell) that were characterised by intensity and called for expressive response prefigured some of the ideas explored in contemporary digital images and sculptural installations (by artists such as Andreas Gursky and Olafur Eliasson) that overwhelm cognition and produce sheer affect.

Indeed, causality is one of the main problems I want to address in this paper, which explores several theories of change or transition. To do this, I want to translate

and appropriate for my account the genealogical thought of Michel Foucault—his way of systematising how things can be visible, utterable, and capable of being thought at a particular time. The genealogy of the concept of *contemporary* that I adopt follows the lead of Foucault's concept of a discursive formation, especially as it is crystallised in an *episteme*.[3] But I also think it is important to be aware of the intersections, repetitions, and anachronisms in historical experience. So where Foucault's thought was cast in terms of limits, closure, and exclusion, the task at hand is to think in terms of internal division and transgression to explore what is representable about this moment of radical change. Of particular concern is the twofold movement, in which the foregrounding of continuities, the insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, from modern to contemporary, slowly turns into a consciousness of a radical break; at the same time, the enforced attention to a break gradually turns 'the contemporary' into a period in its own right. Indeed, I will argue that this period in art we now call the contemporary has been coming together for a while, and it parallels other contemporary hegemonic formations such as globalisation and neoliberalism that come to be fully in place by the late 1980s.[4]

By summoning the concept of a hegemonic formation, I mean to signal that I do not think that the consolidation of the contemporary is just a question of periodisation.[5] I use periodisation as a model to be able to think the whole social formation, a model that allows us to think the society in its totality. But I use the concept of hegemony as a tool to think about totality and difference at the same time: hegemony as an ensemble of economic, political, cultural, and ideological practices that are organised in a complex way, but still lie within a larger overdetermining structure of domination. This model allows us not only to think about the totality but also to see it as being constructed by divisions and contradictions and what Chantal Mouffe would call 'antagonisms'.[6] For me, the most important thing about this model is that insofar as it encompasses contradictions and antagonisms, it also opens up the possibility of different subject positions that can occasion different forms of agency. So this is a model that helps to explain the production of subject positions, many of which reproduce the social order, but it also allows us to think of where the alternatives and oppositions to this hegemonic formation can come from.

If, as I suggest, sometime at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s a new historical period or hegemonic formation with distinct features came fully into place, and this new period or formation has affected the way in which the interrelated categories of art, history, geo-politics, and technology are constituted, how might we best characterise this period? I want to enter this debate by exploring a number of questions concerning the crystallisation of contemporary art. For instance, what exactly *is* the nature of the transformation in question? What motivated it or gave it justification? What is its relation to social, political, economic, technological, and cultural developments? Will this new period be specific to the arts and limited to considerations of aesthetic change alone? Or can the contemporary be somehow described in an abstract way that takes into account the rise of

globalisation, for example, or the development of a new technological imaginary?

Thinking of the contemporary as a period—and, of course, the real power of any periodising concept is heuristic, enabling us to see the familiar in new and productive ways—allows us to draw connections between occurrences and events that are unfolding. The first is social and political (and to a large degree economic) and relates to what has, since the end of the Cold War, come to be referred to as 'globalisation'. Although modernity and capitalism have always been global in nature, the ascendancy of this concept in this moment signals at least the beginning of an awareness of changes in our world that render passé many older conceptualisations of it. As the cultural historian Michael Denning puts it, 'behind the powerful accounts of globalization as a process lies a recognition of a historical transition, of globalization as the name of the end, not of history, but of the historical moment of the age of three worlds' (a period that, in Denning's view, extends from the Potsdam conference of 1945 to the unforeseen collapse of the 'Second World' in 1989).[7] What the three worlds shared was a commitment to secularism, planning, equal rights, education, and modernisation. To speak the word *globalisation* is to say that these worlds and their ideals have not only failed but also disappeared. The one thing globalisation clearly means is that the world is now more interconnected than ever. Globalisation thus stands as an attempt to name the present—it is a periodising concept, especially when it announces the end of internationalism or, even more ominously, the end of history.[8]

Globalisation takes a number of forms within the context of the art world. One is the thematic or iconographic representations of global integration in a diverse body of works. The range of examples would include, among many others, Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1989–95), a global exploration of ports and the shipping industry at the end of the twentieth century; Ursula Biemann's *Black Sea Files* (2005), which focuses on the geopolitics of oil; and Pavel Braila's *Shoes for Europe* (2002), which documents the painstaking process of refitting the wheel gauges used on Central and Eastern European trains to the Western European standard. Another form that globalisation takes within the art world is the proliferation of large global exhibitions in temporary contexts (that is to say, biennials, triennials, Documentas, art fairs, and the like). Because these events are so well attended and commented on in the press, the impact of the intricate model of discourse they advance has been enormous, not only on the exhibition of art but also on its production and distribution. Some are meant to extend the Western art world (to places such as Shanghai or Istanbul), while others (such as the Havana, Dakar, or Cairo biennials) are meant to bypass it, to create an alternative pole. 'The global exhibitions', Martha Rosler stated in a recent roundtable discussion, 'serve as grand collectors and translators of subjectivities under the latest phase of globalization'.[9] And yet, the structure of these global exhibitions follows the logic of the market: 'the means of selection have been institutionalized . . . Artists are commonly put forward by other interested parties, such as powerful galleries and curators, whose investment is often linked to prospective sales.'[10] To this we could add that even—or especially—the most peripheral global exhibitions work as research and development arms of the Western

art market, unearthing an endless supply of new goods for distribution. Others have been more sanguine about the proliferation of exhibitions that take globalism as their theme, describing these events as 'the true sites of enlightened debate on what contemporary art means today, a position thoroughly abdicated by museums'.[11] Moreover, the neoliberal economy of globalisation has been accompanied by new collecting practices. Gone is the chic collector who seeks cultural capital, let alone the connoisseur of early modernism; art collecting today is largely dominated by purchases of sheer speculation.

Yet another form that globalisation takes in art is the explosive emergence of counter-globalisation artistic practices. These engagements or new antagonisms range from the videos and paintings of Khaled Hafez, which challenge the stultifying uniformity of artistic globalisation; to the photographs of Yto Barrada that draw attention to the very real and material territorialisation of global power at specific sites; the tactical media projects of the Bureau d'études that combine an artistic treatment of information with politics; and the elaborate drawings of Mark Lombardi that chart the global relationships of the world's largest corporations.[12]

Second, the contemporary is witnessing the emergence of a new technological imaginary following the unexpected and unregulated global expansion of the new communication and information technologies of the Internet. What began as a Cold War project designed to provide a functioning communications network in the case of a nuclear attack has exploded since the early 1990s development of the global hypertext space, the World Wide Web.[13] The full integration of electronic and digital culture that has developed in the contemporary period reverberates in a number of ways within the context of art and art history. For one thing, technological art objects have increasingly come to replace tangible ones in art galleries and museums, which have seen an upsurge of high-tech hybrids of all kinds, from digital photography, to film and video installations, to computer and other 'new media' art. The white cube has begun to be replaced by the black box, the small-screen film or video monitor by the large-scale wall projection. The image has come to replace the object as the central concern of artistic production and analysis. In the academy, the rise of visual studies in this period is symptomatic of this new pre-eminence of the image.[14] Furthermore, the imaginary nature of this shift from analogue to digital has had a number of unpredictable effects. One of the most striking of these is the proliferation of art works (the film installations of William Kentridge come immediately to mind, as does The Atlas Group Project by Walid Raad) that use fiction and animation to narrate facts, as if to say that today the real must be fictionalised in order to be thought—that the real is so mind-boggling that it is easier to comprehend by analogy.[15]

Such a quantitative growth of new media has led to a reinvention of our concepts and practices of communication, information, community, property, space, and even the concept of the subject itself. As a network, the World Wide Web provides the means for a virtually direct and diversified interactivity, flexible and advanced distribution of information, and greater possibilities for the integration of art, technology, and social life. The technological possibilities of the new media, what

Sean Cubitt has referred to as the 'transience' (as opposed to the 'ephemerality') of media arts, compel us to abandon the notion that artworks are stable isolated objects, and challenge the rights, economies, and forms of production traditionally associated with them.[16] Of course, this is not something inscribed in the technology itself; it is not that before the World Wide Web there were stable art objects and now their reality is virtual. It is rather that the new media makes us aware of how our experience of the world as such was always already minimally virtual in the sense that a whole set of symbolic presuppositions determine our sense of reality.

Third, the reconfigured context of contemporary art prompts a thorough reconsideration of the avant-garde. Peter Bürger's argument in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that an avant-garde worth defending is one that seeks to reconnect artistic practices with the lifeworld in order to transform the latter looms large over recent debates.[17] Some, like Okwui Enwezor, find the legacy of the avant-garde 'of limited use' in the present, seeing it as doing 'little to constitute a space of self-reflexivity that can understand new relations of artistic modernity not founded on Westernism'.[18] Others have proposed that the avant-garde promise of aesthetic equality has re-emerged in the form of a 'relational aesthetics' by artists who make work out of social interactions—work that engages, and is made out of, social communities.[19] Another reconceptualisation of the avant-garde, advanced by, among others, the philosopher Jacques Rancière, shifts the focus away from the pursuit of rupture, the new, and progress (whether political or artistic) to the notion that the avant-garde aesthetically anticipates the future by actualising 'sensible forms and material structures for a life to come'.[20] From this point of view, art's role in making transformations in the lifeworld intelligible and preparing communities for the future is of central concern. A resurgence of interest (in the art world at least) in concepts of utopia, community, collaboration, participation, and responsible government, all of which encode a desire for change, has accompanied these new notions of the avant-garde.

Fourth and finally, the new period is witnessing the surprising re-emergence of a philosophical aesthetics that seeks to find the 'specific' nature of aesthetic experience as such.[21] What the relationship is between this return to a pursuit of aesthetic essence and the proliferation of new-media artworks and visual culture in the past two decades is a key question here. The resurgence of philosophical aesthetics has coincided with a new construction of the spectator. When, for example, an artist such as Jeff Wall in a recent statement claims about his photographs that 'meaning is almost completely unimportant' and that 'we don't need to understand art, we need only to fully experience it', he is valuing affect and experience rather than interpretation and meaning—rather than contextually grounding and understanding the work and its conditions of possibility.[22]

This shift from the cognitive to the affective negates some of the most productive intellectual achievements of poststructuralism, which had attempted to reveal the social construction of subjectivity, even if it was understood as being already provisionally configured. It also throws hermeneutically based disciplines such as art history into crisis. This is in no way to suggest that aesthetic experience is

purely mythical. Rather, I mean to argue that we have aesthetic experiences not because of some ontological postulate, but because we have been constructed as spectators in traditions that put those values and those experiences at the center of cultural life. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that not all of the returns to aesthetics have been content with the pursuit of essence. There have been a number of contemporary artists and writers whose work posits aesthetics as ontologically social, as a vital means by which to bring on the stage new objects and subjects. For instance, the meaning of Isaac Julien's video installations or of Yinka Shonibare's photographs and sculptures is located not in the artworks' essence or even in spectatorship per se (with its inherent requirement of a suspension of disbelief). Rather, meaning in such art is determined by usage and is located *after* spectatorship, in the experience-based knowledge that requires an active participation on the part of the public.

New forms of art and spectatorship—a new construction of the spectator— have crystallised in the past two decades. These new forms of art and this new spectatorship have come to be discursively constructed as 'the contemporary'. There is no question that these new modes owe a great deal to their modernist forbearers, and that there is much residual that carries over into the present. However, since the late 1980s these new forms have outstripped their debt to the past, and the hegemony of the contemporary now must be recognised. But what constitutes the period must remain open and unsettled, too, subject to a battlefield of narratives and stories. How the contemporary is symbolised and historicised, and hence its very identity, is the prize struggled over by a number of competing forces. There is presently too much at stake for those concerned with contemporary art and art history to stay on the sidelines of this polemical debate.

1. (1954), *New Literary History* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1970): 113.

2. (New York: Verso, 2002), 81.

3. Foucault referred to the state of knowledge, the regime of truth, of a particular period and culture as its *episteme*. An episteme is constructed through a system of discursive statements, and especially through the 'dispersal' of those statements across contradictions and logical discontinuities to form discursive formations. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 38. 'By *episteme*', Foucault writes, 'we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formalization are situated and operate; the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures or sciences insofar as they belong to neighboring, but distinct, discursive practices. The episteme is not a form of knowledge (*connaissance*) or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities.' (Ibid., 191).

4. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. By 'hegemonic formation', I refer to what Chantal Mouffe describes as 'an ensemble of relatively stable social forms, the materialization of a social articulation in which different social relations react reciprocally either to provide each other with mutual conditions of existence, or at least to neutralize the potentially destructive effects of certain social relations on the reproduction of other such relations'. Chantal Mouffe,

'Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy' (1988), in Kate Nash, *Readings in Contemporary Political Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 297.

6. Ibid.

7. Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004), 11. Denning, who observes that the term 'globalization' displaced 'international' in the late 1980s, places the term firmly within the period theorised in this paper: 'One of the key words of the last decade of the twentieth century was "globalization." Though the *Oxford English Dictionary* places the first use of the word in 1961, there are hundreds of books with the word in their titles in the 1990s; it appears that the first book to use it in its title was published in 1988.' (17).

8. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

9. Martha Rosler, in Tim Griffin, ed., 'Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition', *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (November 2003), 154.

10. Ibid., 161.

11. Okwui Enwezor, in Tim Griffin, ed., 'Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition', *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (November 2003), 163.

12. As Khaled Hafez writes, 'Today I am able to discern, locally in Egypt (and also the Middle East), two types of practices that describe two different perceptions of art: on the one hand there are the artists who still approach and tackle art with the "aesthetics" mindset, and those are the natural descendants of local pioneers and avant-gardes. On the other hand, there is a group of Middle East artists with an eye on the international art scene, approaching art with the very same concepts and perceptions of other "international artists", i.e., they speak the international language that art professionals speak all over the world . . . gradually abolishing "cultural specificities" along the way.' Khaled Hafez, in 'Quarterly Feature: Khaled Hafez', *ArteNews*, January 2007, http://www.arteast.org/artenews/artenews-articles2007/1-special-issue-jan07/artenews-khaled-hafez.html. For examples of artwork that draws attention to the many geopolitical barriers that still exist in the era of globalisation, see Ursula Biemann's video essay 'Performing the Border' (1999), set in the Mexican-US border town of Ciudad Juarez, where US multinational corporations assemble electronic and digital equipment; Yto Barrada's *The Strait Project: A Life Full of Holes, 1998–2004* (Cologne: Schaden, 2005), which examines the highly patrolled Strait of Gibraltar; and Emily Jacir's *Where We Come From* (2003), on the many restrictions on and around the West Bank. For tactical media projects, see RTMark.com and bureaudetudes.free.fr. For the drawings of Mark Lombardi, see Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2003).

13. For a history of the Internet and the World Wide Web see Janet Abbate, *Inventing the Internet* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), and James Gillies and Robert Cailliau, *How the Web Was Born* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

14. See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Visual Studies and Global Imagination', *Papers on Surrealism* 2 (Summer 2004), 1–29.

15. See, for example, William Kentridge's *Felix in Exile* (1994) or *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), and Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2000). Raad established The Atlas Group project in 1999 to research the contemporary history of Lebanon.

16. Sean Cubitt, 'Transient Media', paper presented at the 32nd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art in the session 'New Media Across Cultures: from Gutenberg to Google, 1450-2008.' [WHERE WAS THE CONFERENCE?]

17. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

18. Okwui Enwezor, 'The Black Box', *Documenta 11_Plattform 5:Ausstellung Katalog* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002), 47.

19. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002).

20. Jacques Rancière, 'The Distribution of the Sensible' (2000), in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 29.

21. A plethora of books that focus on beauty have been published in the past two decades. These include Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993); Bill Beckley and David Shapiro, eds., *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics* (New York: Allworth Press, 1998); Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (New York: Open Court, 2003).

22. Jeff Wall, 'Jeff Wall: Artist's Talk', Tate (London) Online Events, 25 October 2005, http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/jeff_wall_artists_talk.