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## Contemporary Art

### World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalization

Terry Smith and Saloni Mathur

#### Abstract

An edited transcript of a colloquium between Terry Smith, Mellon Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh, and Saloni Mathur, Associate Professor of the History of Art, University of California, Los Angeles, held at the Department of the History of Art and Architecture, University of Pittsburgh, on October 17, 2012.

#### About the Author

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# Contemporary Art

## World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalization

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**Terry Smith:** Let me introduce our discussion by taking as a starting point “Global Art and the Museum,” a five-year, worldwide research and exhibition project, conducted by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel, all from the Center for Art and Media (ZKM), Karlsruhe. Its goals were articulated in these terms:

The project represents a first attempt at documenting the contested boundaries of today’s art world; its aim is to spark a debate on how the globalization process changes the art scene and to undertake a critical review of the

development 20 years after its onset. In many countries contemporary art has become an economic project that includes huge cultural districts, museums and art fairs. It’s also become sociopolitical endeavor powered by—often diverging—ideologies of identity, self-determination and overall social change. Spectacular has been the rise of a new type of art museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, which promotes contemporary art without borders and without history. Collectors’ and corporate museums are another result. The art market now covers 50 different countries whereas, with the new geography of auction houses, the art trade operates on a global scale. Art museums, by contrast, operate within a national or urban framework in which they encounter the most diverse audiences. Art collecting has become en vogue on an unprecedented scale, but it lacks a common notion of art. Contemporary art also invades former ethnographic museums, but the novelty of the situation defies any safe categories.<sup>1</sup>

The project culminates in a book, *The Global Contemporary: The Rise of New Art Worlds after 1989*, published early in 2013.<sup>2</sup> It opens with a wonderful interview with Edouard Glissant. Conducted by Manthia Diawara for a film of the philosopher’s life, it was made just before he died. While most of the book consists of essays by the curators and artists who participated in the exhibition *The Global Contemporary: Artworlds After 1989* that was held at ZKM in 2011, it is introduced by a set of overview essays. Hans Belting writes on “Global Art versus World Art, a Challenge for Art History,” Parul Dave Mukherji asks “How Global Can Art History Be Today?” and John Clark, my former colleague from the University of Sydney, profiles “Art History and its Futures: the Asian Case.”

I also contributed an essay to this section of the book, entitled “Contemporary Art: World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalization.” Its key ideas are embodied in the title of today’s discussion. Let me quickly summarize them before inviting Professor Mathur to respond to them.

There is no doubt that contemporary artistic practice has been shaped above all by the forces of globalization that, from the 1980s until recently, predominated within international economic exchange, drove much of world politics, and disseminated spectacle as the theatre of individual and collective imagination in the lives of people all over the world. Acknowledging the broad outlines of the obvious connections between art and social change,

<sup>1</sup> See “GAM—Global Art and the Museum,” ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, accessed May 22, 2014, [http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/about\\_us](http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/about_us)

<sup>2</sup> Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel eds., *The Global Contemporary: The Rise of New Art Worlds after 1989* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press for ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2013).

a number of art critics, historians, curators, and theorists, along with certain students of visual culture, have pursued an interesting set of more specific questions. Did globalized art values spread from the modern cultural centers along with the inroads of multinational capital, intergovernmental agencies, and new technologies? Or did the globalization of contemporary art take hold in art producing centers around the world in ways distinctive to each of them? In considering these questions, should we include within the overall conception of “globalization” actions and attitudes such as anti-globalist resistance, defiant localism, critical cosmopolitanism, and evasive tangentiality? Should we see such reactions as in dialectical opposition to top-down globalization, as in continuity with previous counter-currents, or as emergent modes of living? Can these developments be periodized? Since 2001, a number of unanticipated world-scale changes, notably the increasing disjunction between the leading economies—each with different models of economic organization, all prioritizing national objectives, and none seeking to universalize their model—has broken the hegemonic grip of globalization as a world phenomenon. In 2008 it seemed shaky indeed. Do we need other ideas to guide our thinking on these world-picturing levels? Perhaps we can no longer so conveniently substitute “globalization” for “modernity” and/or “postmodernity” when it comes to naming the overarching framework of present and future possibility?

**Saloni Mathur:** I should begin by situating myself as quite seriously under-qualified to be commenting on Terry’s essay. As someone whose research is largely based in a specific social and historical context—Modern and Contemporary South Asian Art, particularly India and Pakistan—I do not really feel that I have a strong command of the big-picture frameworks of our times that Terry describes so memorably in his essay as “world picturing.” For that kind of project I confess that I generally turn to more ambitious thinkers, like Terry Smith, whose ideas represent several decades of engagement, and whose efforts at “world picturing” have often articulated what I sense to be strongly the case. Namely, that the art emerging from former colonial or post-colonial societies does indeed speak to some of the larger complexities and conditions of crisis in our times. In this sense, along with other thinkers like Partha Mitter or Geeta Kapur, one of our larger debts is to the way in which Terry has, over the years, fundamentally redefined the very concept and category of contemporary art.

To give you a concrete example, when I arrived at UCLA twelve years ago, contemporary art was part of a two-sequence course in our curriculum. One sequence covered the period from 1945-1980, and rendered contemporary art as from “1980 to now.” My former colleague Al Boime taught modern art, primarily as nineteenth century French painting. So, in the year 2000 in Los Angeles, modern and contemporary art was distinguished against other temporal categories or periods like medieval art, renaissance art, and defined as well against non-western geography. Thus we also had Indian art, African art, Chinese art, and so on. There was literally no room for the work that I and several of my colleagues were doing, namely studying the art of contemporary India, China, Africa, African America, etcetera. Significantly, it seems to me that this is no longer the case. While we have not totally resolved the issues, we have certainly dismantled that structure, and begun to rethink a new one. We no longer seem to be making the case for contemporary art’s inclusion of non-western sites. The essay by Terry struck me as reflecting a place that’s firmly on the other side of this rather radical revision and redefinition.

Terry begins his essay by painting a disturbing picture of the relationship between art and social change. For me, that pairing—art and social change—conjures an image of art that protests, or the art of resistance; art that fights or argues for revolutionary social change. But he is not referring to that familiar picture. He refers to a less pretty picture; his is an account of the changes apparent in the cozy connectedness between much contemporary art and neoliberal capital, the absurd market excesses in recent years, art’s relationship to the very rich, to the phenomenon of the global mega-museums, and to blockbuster exhibitions: in short, art’s capitulation to globalized spectacle. This leads Terry to ask a number of probing questions that seem to lay down the gauntlet for the task at hand in his essay. He

summarized them in his introductory remarks a moment ago. To me, these are the key ones: Did this transformation to contemporary art happen differently in different parts of the world? Can these developments be periodized or not? Does globalization continue to remain the prevalent phase that we are in today?

His bold answer to the last question is that globalization is no longer hegemonic. What is needed, he argues, is “an account that locates the forces of globalization as one set among others.” This presents a new challenge to the job of world picturing. The rest of Terry’s essay is an outline of such an account. He emphasizes a decisive shift from modern to contemporary art, and insists that this be understood through the lens of the local, that is, through the processes specific to different regions and different societies around the world. The modern, he argues, has made way for the contemporary differently, in different parts of the world. The resultant historical picture is not, however, intended to produce, for Terry, an object like “global art” or “world art.” He rejects these terms, as do I, because of the way such categories tend to require a synthesis, a resolution, or a kind of coherence that is impossible to conceive today. The global turn towards the South has not occurred without consequence for art itself. The Western bias of the category “contemporary art” has not remained intact. Terry argues, instead, that certain coexisting histories, within the broader movement from the modern to the contemporary, should be interpolated into our contemporaneity. “Contemporaneity” is a term that, for Terry, unlocks the present constellation, by showing that it is made up of various simultaneous currents that have characterized art made since 1989.

This leads to my first question, one of clarification, really. Help us to understand these currents, the forces, if you like, that drive them. You identify three key currents that constitute contemporaneity. One is modernist/retro sensationalists/spectacular; number two is transnational transitionality; while number three seems to me to be more elusive, it’s the current that has no name, as it were, but seems connected to new information technologies, to the digital age, to new media and so on.

**TS:** In my mind, the currents are not simply stylistic modes within contemporary art, they are actual changes in the nature of contemporary thought; they are markers of seismic shifts in human thinking as it moves to grapple with the shifts, at all levels and in all spheres, from modern into contemporary conditions. To summarize them briefly as I see them: Even after the end of modernity, in the afterlife of capitalist hegemony, we still have major continuations of the dialectical modes of thinking that were so important during the Enlightenment. Thus my term “remodernism,” that works for many spheres, despite their enormous inner variety. If we take Western philosophy as our example for the moment, we can see that current modes range from highly formal analytics, through extreme, experience-based subjectivity, to deconstruction turned formulaic. Not a pretty picture, and dangerously reductive when it comes to world picturing. Alongside it, antagonistically, a related but fundamentally quite distinct kind of thinking has emerged since the 1950s from second world, third world, fourth world circumstances, including indigenous situations. As Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us in *Provincializing Europe*, this has been directly tied to Western thinking, in a kind of post-colonial feedback loop.<sup>3</sup> But the incommensurability inherent in the relationship is increasingly precipitating examples of another kind of thought: Glissant’s idea of the Relation, for example, or Archille Mbembe on the postcolony, Walter Dignolo on the decolonial, or Gayatri Spivak on the planetary.

<sup>3</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Looking at these two perspectives from an imaginary distance, we can readily see that the relationship between them is itself dialectical in form: antagonistic as well as Dependent—indeed, it’s a playing out of the master/slave, slave/master relationship. Moving even further out and taking them as playing out across time, these competing forces seem to show less and less sign of resolving their differences into a synthesis (however partial, volatile and temporary) that favors one side or the other. Yet if you read the incessant public media and political policy chatter about, say, the position of the US in the changing world today, you can see the persistence of this kind desire. Of course, it is a thirst for power, and for a continuation of dominance, even now, when we are well past its use-by date.

A third kind of thought is, I believe, emerging in network culture, for instance, in much social media, but also in small-scale, cooperative efforts to evolve a planetary consciousness. Certainly, it exists, a lot of the time, as a mere supplement to the first two currents, as spectacle or fantasy, among much else. It has major sources in Western scientific thinking, especially informatics, in human-machine interaction, in intuitive spiritualism, and in climate change science. It is also, doubtless, an outcome of globalization as a set of economic, political and cultural protocols devised, during the 1990s, to orchestrate the first-second current conflict in favor of the first. But recent geopolitical disarray, and accelerating alertness to the impacts of climate change, is leading many people, including artists, to seek a different mode of thought. They acknowledge differences, intuiting them to be antinomies that will never be resolved but which can be lived with, especially when reworked into affiliations aimed at building connectivities between different kinds of difference everywhere in the world.

**SM:** Let me go on to a related question: how do these currents as they manifest themselves in art resonate with other attempts to understand certain trends in contemporary art? I’m thinking of attempts like Hal Foster’s notion of the archival impulse, or Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of “relational aesthetics,” for instance.

**TS:** In *Contemporary Art: World Currents* I try to lay out more detail what I mean by that third current in art today. Unlike the remodernists, the retro-sensationalists and spectacle artists in the first current, those active in the third are not so committed to the project of the history of art unfolding through time by accretion, via tradition and variation, or through contestation and absorption.<sup>4</sup> Nor do they share much of the priority for artists in the second current: to communicate critical, postcolonial, transnational ways of seeing both locality and the wider world-picture to a self-important, blinkered, Western-dominated international artworld. Younger artists are not so interested in these post-Cold War battles. Their instinct is that globalist thinking is in thrall to top-down power, as is concern about the future of museums and other artworld structures. They are much more interested in creative settings and community situations which can shift and change ways of living among their cohort so as to become more closely attuned to what’s happening to the planet. I deliberately don’t give a name to this tendency because that would cut against its multiplicitous character: it’s simply too diverse.

Hal Foster is certainly right to identify an “archival impulse” in much recent art. Allan Sekula had written brilliantly about “the body and the archive” at an earlier point, as did others, such as Douglas Crimp. Philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida hugely enriched our understanding of the archival. It does not surprise me that it has arisen

<sup>4</sup> Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011 and 2012).

so strongly in contemporary conditions: our contemporaneity is saturated with all kinds of pasts: historical, artistic, religious, utopian. They fill the present with their urgings for recurrence, they rush in to close the yawning gap left by the twilight of the master narratives, and their unrealized projects still seem to desire realization so strongly that they would snuff out other futures. Derrida reminds us that the present is constantly splitting between incipience and slippage into the archival. Deleuze pictures time as crystalline, with the present as constantly in formation out of various pasts. It is no wonder that installations evoking actual or imaginary archives are so common these days: they are ideal format for enabling us to imagine being with time (*con tempus*), that is to say, with many times at the same time.

“Relational aesthetics” was an influential term for what a group of artists, particularly in Europe, were doing in the 1990s, but it doesn’t amount to anything larger than that. In fact, it was a rather poor descriptor. The artists so named do not share an “aesthetic”: they did not have a particularly distinct sense of beauty, or set of pleasures; nor did their work look similar. Yes, they related well to each other, for a time, and, yes, their work was about how, in certain situations, people relate to each other, and about the world relates to them. But everyone knew that “relational” was a non-political, or soft, way to say “social” or “engaged.” “Critical” is, actually, the key word; but even that gets devalued through formulaic usage these days.

**SM:** Claire Bishop was of course a leading critic of relational aesthetics along these lines. I like the title of her new book, *Artificial Hells*, which implies that one person’s relational aesthetic is another person’s artificial and participatory hell.<sup>5</sup>

**TS:** Too true. Although for her, the big issue remains: how might even the most effective socially engaged work count aesthetically? From my point of view, such questions cannot be answered, effectively, in the abstract, or by the application of a general set of criteria to particular cases. They are answered differently within each current, or outside them, according to the instance. For example, either/or dichotomies such as “aesthetics” versus “social engagement” are simply inappropriate to creativity within the third current.

**SM:** Could you say more about the relationship of the three art currents to institutional formats of display, and especially the role of the emergent current number three, which, you provocatively argue, will “increasingly set the terms of what will count in the future”?

**TS:** Certainly, the various kinds of exhibitionary formats have different valiances within each of the three currents and between them. There have been important traveling exhibitions, shown in major museums, that have surveyed the contemporary art of, say, Central and Eastern Europe, before and after 1989, of Russian art from the late Soviet times, of African art in recent decades, of under-appreciated avant-gardes in Latin America, as well as a host of shows that revisit feminist interventions from the 1960s until now. There have been pathbreaking iterations of key recurrent mega-exhibitions, such as Okwui Enwezor’s *documenta 11* in 2002. Indeed, we could add to these the whole phenomenon of biennials in general, as they were revived in the 1970s and 1980s (Sydney and Havana), and then boomed in the 1990s. I would argue that all of these shows have been crucial to negotiating connections between the artists, curators, critics and others who shaped the second current and those active in the first current, especially those with a critical openness to the world outside of EuroAmerica. It is precisely this negotiation that has done most to maintain a critical spirit in contemporary art. Biennials have been subversive, as Carlos Basualdo,

<sup>5</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

Okwui, and many others have said (and shown in their curating). They remain so, potentially at least, in many parts of the world. At the same time, of course, the biennial impulse is constantly being institutionalized, brought back into more orthodox exhibitionary structures. But that's to be expected: it is the breathing-in-and-out of what is basically an infrastructural system. I talk about this at some length in *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, as does Paul O'Neill in his book *Curating Cultures and the Culture(s) of Curating*.<sup>6</sup>

**SM:** I see, so biennials might be seen as tidal jetties of a sort that can interrupt the flows between currents one and two.

Moving to the second section of Terry's essay, which is entitled "The planet to override the global" (citing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), we see how his category, contemporaneity, comes to mark more than just the conditions of provocation and possibility. Here, Terry expresses a concern for a larger collective fate of a genuinely catastrophic kind. We are reminded by him of the fragility of our ecosystems, the seemingly irreconcilable forces of secularism versus religious extremism, and we are invited to imagine the "impossible figure of planetarity." It is not surprising that Terry's call here is not just to artists but also to all "workers in the realm of the imagination," drawing upon a language of "work" that evokes such post-Marxist thinkers as Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, along with Gayatri Spivak. They are thinkers who are/were also strongly committed to providing big picture frameworks: flexible, contingent, dialectical ones—approaches that would encompass positive action, as Terry has put it. While he may not inherit from these Marxist revisionists some of the tools or language of political economy, the spirit of utopianism definitely resonates, as does the drive to imagine that which cannot be imagined. This, then, leads to my question: if contemporaneity and planetarity is a vocabulary relevant to "thoughts of this kind"—perhaps we can call them utopian—then what is your relationship to the tradition of leftist cultural criticism? Does your framework represent a break from it, or an intellectual dissatisfaction with parts of it, or a continued commitment to some of its more specific goals?

I'm reminded of a student's response to an essay by Geeta Kapur, a major Marxist thinker in the Indian context. The student asked: why is Kapur so obsessed with politics? This strikes me as symptomatic of a generation that seems to reject let's say the polemics of any form of Marxist thinking, that don't seem to connect to such frameworks. So, I guess my question is about the way in which you depart from this tradition but also retain, or reintroduce, the question of the political. How do we do that for the present?

**TS:** I am glad that Saloni identifies so clearly my relationship to the kind of critical Marxism represented by figures such as Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Spivak, and Geeta Kapur. These are people I admire enormously, from whom I have learned an enormous amount, and whom, with the exception of Williams, I've been fortunate to know. A deeper background is my being taught by Bernard Smith in Australia and Meyer Schapiro in New York. They offered a direct link to the great generation of Marxist art historians and writers on art of the 1930s: Max Raphael, Frederick Antal, Francis Klingender, and others. Later, I got to Walter Benjamin, even later to Ernst Bloch. I see myself absolutely as starting from within this framework, as does T.J. Clark, for example, among too few others.

Where I differ from these illustrious models and colleagues is that I've always, since I was very young, had a much more relativist position, one that sees historical forces as, at once, enormously powerful and determinative, yet also contingent, chancy and adventitious

<sup>6</sup> Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International (ICI), 2012); Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).



in how that power comes into effect. Being an Australian in the 1960s and 1970s meant learning this lesson well. Experiencing class hierarchies, yet also their porosity, in my own life; hating the dependent provincialism of my own culture, yet coming to see that specific kinds of provincialism prevailed everywhere as, in effect, an iniquitous world system, especially in the arts, where it could be exposed, attacked, and to some degree overcome; disturbed by my society's repression of indigenous culture yet excited by that culture's flowering, again especially in the visual arts. These are just some of the formative experiences that were quite specific during those years to people such as myself in settler colonial contexts.

Being in New York in the early 1970s as a member of the Art & Language group meant immersion as an artist in an avant-gardism so extreme that it counts, still, as the last avant-garde moment, perhaps the first anti-avant-garde one. We had, right there, all the contradictions of, on the one hand, commitment to the pure anarchism that art enables, and, at the same time, to a negative capability, to an Adornian claim for art's autonomy-by-necessity. In the mid-1970s, we carried this spirit into our direct engagement with public-sphere politics. Going to England in the later 1970s meant the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, in Birmingham, during Stuart Hall's last year there. That was as close as I could get to the spirit of Raymond Williams, to the practices of cultural analytics that he initiated, and were being so brilliantly followed by Hall and others.

So, there has always been, for me, this commitment to radical social transformation and to a highly relativistic questioning of every kind of totality, every claim for historical inevitability, no matter how earnestly one might wish it into being. These antinomies have always been—if I can say, paradoxically—foundational. They continue to be. This may sound odd to some, but I do not believe myself at all unique in this regard.

What Jameson came to call "cognitive mapping," and the political necessity of such mapping, is the starting point for putting these values to work. The first job of a Marxist intellectual is to map the world's forces and flows accurately and realistically. The second is to map the range of thought that's out there, the kinds of thinking that prevail at all levels, and in all sectors, of a society at a given time. The gap between these two maps reveals ideology at work, and the inequality, the injustices, the rigged games that prevail in reality. Showing this to the people is the third task: putting it out there, in sharp contrast to the mystifications to which they are, most of time, subject.

If we apply my mix of Marxist pragmatics and deconstructive relativism to utopianism itself, we can see that it is a project that arose and failed in Europe, especially in the middle of the twentieth century, and that the weaker forms in which it exists in this country may, these days, be heard as echoes in the inspired rhetoric of President Obama. Utopianism is a project that is constantly always doomed to fail. However, it's a better project than conformity to spectacle capital, to globalization, to neo-con neocolonialism, any kind of fundamentalism, and so on and so forth.

From a methodological perspective, you could see my efforts to locate contemporary art culture within what I call the core conditions of contemporaneity as an approach that is organized around an old-fashioned Marxist mapping of relations between base and superstructure, of course, complicated in a Raymond Williams manner by recognition that the superstructure is not always determined by the base, that its elements can sometimes transform the base (Marxism itself was an example of that); and deconstructed in a Derridian way.

Taking all this together highlights another key difference from my colleagues, including many whose focus is modern and contemporary art. They continue to assume that modernity remains the overriding concept for our times, however distorted and febrile it may have become. Even Jameson's reading of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capital remains tied to determinative frameworks, however jangled and distorted they have become. David Harvey's account of "the post-modern condition" remains the best description of all the



forces in play, largely because it is the most open-ended. To me, the mismatches between, if you like, super structural understandings of the world's working, including these neo-Marxist postmodern ones, and the actual world as it is happening around us today have become too great to be sustained.

**SM:** The final section of Terry's paper turns to the space of art's encounter with its audiences, to the conditions of curating, of exhibitions, and of display. Terry states that there is no single exhibition that has met the goals of contemporaneity as he has set them out. No exhibition has made visible all three currents as it were, including the exhibition "The Global Contemporary: Art After 1989." Perhaps no exhibition could do so because it would be akin, he writes, to "mapping the world with a map that would be indistinguishable from the world itself." I thought very hard about this conundrum and the way that Terry has put it, and was left only with the elusive nature of the task, which was, perhaps, precisely the point.

This leads to my last set of questions, which concern Terry's vision for the role of curating, and of curatorial ambition, that which exhibitions should aspire to be even if they cannot quite hit the mark. It seems to me that Terry has gone a long way in his writing to shift the terms of the discussion about curating from issues of identity representation, inclusion and exclusion, regional coverage, and so on—values that seem to cling to the exhibitions of the 1980s and 1990s, like MoMA's primitivism show (1983), *Magiciens de la terre* (1989), and *documenta 11* (2002). But these exhibitions were shown at the art institutions of Europe and America. What about the radical deterritorialization of display, the decentering of world art, which has occurred via the biennial phenomenon all over the world?

Related to this is the recent rise of the global mega-museum in the Arab world. Does its arrival simply mean that the Guggenheim model of export spectacle is in play? Or does this change also have promise or potential in relationship to, for instance, the Arab Spring, or other radical changes within these societies? In India, as a further example, biennial exhibitions (like the recent one in Kochi, 2012) are opening up a field of great potential and promise, which is unique to the region in some sense. How might this be reckoned with your suggestion—one that many others seem to share—that the era of the biennial is firmly behind us?

Finally, you talk about the current move away from the global survey format toward retrospective exhibitions. I agree that this is a very exciting direction. In fact, I have been involved in a major retrospective of Zarina, an Indian artist who lived in Los Angeles and New York since the 1970s, which opened at the Hammer Museum in LA last month.<sup>7</sup> It's a 40-year retrospective of her work, and I believe it is the first career retrospective of an Indian artist in Europe or North America. It will travel to the Guggenheim later this year, and then to the Chicago Art Institute. One can imagine all manner of doctoral level projects emerging out of this kind of deep archival foray. This seems like a strong and energizing call to art history itself.

**TS:** Jorge-Luis Borges tells a wonderful story of the king commanding his mapmaker to produce a map that would be so totally encompassing, and also so internally detailed, that would capture the extent and the detail of the world. The result is a map that blankets the actual world, extinguishing life within it. This is, of course, a parody of the self-defeating hubris underlying all aspiration toward complete knowledge. My outline of the three currents within contemporary art, of the tendencies in contemporary thought, and the elements of

<sup>7</sup> Allegra Presenti ed., *Zarina: Paper Like Skin* (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel for the Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, 2012).

contemporary world-being are observations aimed at wedging pluralism on the one hand, and particularism on the other. They are not prescriptions, much less proscriptions. If an artist hearing these ideas were to announce, "Oh, I know what to do, I'll join the third current and create contemporaneity." Another might say "I'm going to be a retro-sensationalist, that looks like the most fun," while yet another might think, "Anachronism or not, I'd rather be a great modernist." Similarly, I am not advocating that curators set out saying "I'm going to curate contemporaneity right now, in my next exhibition."

Look, these are terms that operate at a different level from the particularity of making a work of art and curating an exhibition. They are terms aimed at delineating ways of world mapping, of big-scale picturing, at profiling connectivities, at describing the structures of thought that are in play, and at pinpointing the nature of the things as they are. Artworks are made within this context, but very few set out to display it from a position that is presumptively outside of it, above it, at some elevated observation point. Certain exhibitions have ambitions approaching this level of generality, but not as an illustration of it. Rather, they might be orchestrated so as to register the impacts of the world in the most vivid ways possible. Not, of course, every impact, but a particular set, across a specified range. *DOCUMENTA 13* was, I believe, an exhibition of that kind.

I devote a chapter of the *Thinking Contemporary Curating* book to the ways in which certain exhibitions at various galleries around the world, and, indeed, the burgeoning biennial circuit even more so, has been the infrastructural carrier of the second current I identify in contemporary art. Many curators have devoted themselves to recovering the histories of art groups, movements, tendencies, and of key individuals, whose work has been repressed or ignored during the twentieth century, especially art from Central and Eastern Europe, Russia during the Soviet time, abstract painters from Iran, and so on. A number of shows have literally rewritten our understanding of feminist art and art by women, almost everywhere in the world now. So that's one kind of re-curating.

At the same time, curators have only recently become strongly aware of the lack of their own history, the history of curating as related to but distinct from the history of exhibitions at various museums, and from accounts of changes in the display of permanent collections. One way of bringing these together is to repeat famous exhibitions from the past. For example, at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco, Jens Hoffmann has curated an exhibition that literally re-exhibits a very famous exhibition staged in 1969 by Harald Szeeman: *When Attitudes Become Form—Live in Your Head—Works, Concepts, Processes, Situation, Information*. Alongside this, he will show new work by 50 artists, currently practicing and consciously indebted to artists in the original show. This is another, perhaps more literal kind of re-curating. What's going to come out of it? Who knows, but we'll see.

**Nancy Condee:** It occurs to me that among the ways that new, interesting curatorial work is unsettling is that it seems to move from the staging of the pictorial in conventional ways to which we are accustomed, towards a certain kind of performed art that puts exhibitions more in league with concerts, the ballet, the opera, and so forth. By transforming the curator into a kind of artist, the needle shifts so that curating becomes a kind of framing, an installing, a staging, if I could use a performative term. Is that implicit in your idea of re-curation?

**TS:** Yes, absolutely. Many curators—Jens Hoffmann, explicitly—now talk about the dramaturgy of an exhibition. Designing exhibitions has become a lot more consciously theatrical, and overtly, noticeably so. Yet there remains an odd sense that one is attending a performance or play without actors. Unless it is entirely cinematic, the materials in an installation rarely take on the role of characters; it is, often, an empty set that one is moving through. The goal, obviously, is for us to become the actors, to move from being passive spectators to active participants.

**SM:** Your query and Terry's comment remind me of two recent exhibitions. Tino Sehgal at the Guggenheim and the Tate Modern, where he turned the giant atriums of these

museums into spaces of encounter between actors and spectators. In contrast, Carsten Höller created a giant slide at the New Museum, one that infuriated the critic David Joselit, who asked the excellent question: "Why are we taking our shoes off and lining up to go down this slide? What is the point?" It is just pure spectacle. Between these two exhibitions, it seems to me, lies a vast continuum extending from entertainment and spectacle at one end, to something far more interesting and critical at the other.

**TS:** Exactly.



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