



TERRY SMITH at the Garage Museum of Art, Moscow, 2015. Photo: Denis Sinyakov. Courtesy of Terry Smith.

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WITH TERRY SMITH

CONDUCTED BY CARLOS GARRIDO CASTELLANO

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?: CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS, THE EXHIBITIONARY COMPLEX, AND ACTIVIST CURATING

CGC – I would like to discuss some of your ideas that have become prominent recently. The first is the concept of contemporaneity as a world description of the present, like modernity and postmodernity, but somehow seeming to replace them, or at least trouble them. Then there is your picture of three currents operating within contemporary thinking, geopolitics, and art: remodernisms of various kinds, transnational transitionality, and a third current, which you say cannot be named. I am particularly interested in connections between these currents, in their operations of inclusion and exclusion. How do you see them working within art practice, and in curatorial practice, about which you have also written a lot? Your concept of the visual arts exhibitionary complex comes into play here, I think. Yet it seems like a theory of art institutions, so how do curators working in the anti-institutions, or fragile quasi-institutions, in which I am especially interested, find room to move within this complex?

Let's start with the concept of contemporaneity. What do you mean to achieve by emphasizing it so strongly?

TS – Contemporaneity is not just about whatever happens to be happening right now, wherever we happen to be, in the artworld today, or in the world at large. I am deliberately taking up the most immediate, most unthought, but also the most ubiquitous term in contemporary art discourse and trying to flip it, to turn it into its opposite. You will have noticed how often people use the words “the contem-

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porary” when they want to evoke the larger world in which we are living, or name the current state of affairs, or point to what art today is about. This makes me mad, because when you use such a phrase – an adjective without a noun – this means that you are precisely *not* naming what is shaping the world, *not* saying what art is about today.

So, I start from the fact that if you really focus on what it is to be contemporary – to be “with time” – you instantly find yourself face to face with what it has always been like to be contemporary: something is happening now, and it’s happening at the same time as something else, which we call simultaneity. Furthermore, it’s happening to more than one person, or thing, at that same time – that is, it’s coincidental, but it’s also shared by everybody in that situation and, in principle, by everybody living at that time. This adds a fourth dimension, that of being a contemporary person, someone living in these times, in the world today, in one’s time, or “our times.” Once you start listing these kinds of relationship, you realize that everyone experiences them differently, sometimes only slightly, others greatly. In our globalized world, otherness is more evident to everyone, and is more various, especially as cultures contend with each other in more volatile ways, and identification with stereotypes increases. At the same time, we can sometimes, or often, feel other to those around us, and to ourselves, and alienated from “our times” for all sorts of reasons, as Nietzsche famously warned, years ago, in his *Untimely Meditations*. [1] What a fantastically rich layering of samenesses and differences this is! So, I think that we should not dismiss the sense of being contemporary, but instead unpack its many meanings to highlight the complexity of being “with time” today...

CGC – But presumably these many ways of being contemporary have always been the case, ever since there was more than one person in the world?

TS – Of course, so the real question is: what makes our experience of contemporaneity today distinct from that of earlier times? I believe that we have to face up to the fact that, unlike every earlier period, no larger framework, no inevitable world historical orientation, and no commanding narrative, remains strong enough in its actual unfolding in the world to save us from having to find, with increasing urgency, our futures entirely within a reimagined aggregation of our differences. The postmodernists, especially Jean-François Lyotard, were right about this; to me, they were the prophets of our contemporaneity. Our time, to which we necessarily belong, and which we share like it or not, is no longer a time *for* us. We are, you might say, naked to the present, so we are obliged to understand our situation without illusion. Maybe this is, as well, an echo of the existentialism that attracted me when I was young: “existence before essence” was the slogan then, but today “essence” has evaporated.

CGC – In the book *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, you describe the situation in these words:

...contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them. [2] Is this what you mean by implying that today, we have only our existence as our raw material, yet must somehow find a worldly communality without expecting it to have a human essence?

TS – You are putting the challenge in its most bleak form, but, yes, that is what it is. The notion of the contemporaneity of differences makes starkly visible the gaps and clashes *between* the many factors usually adduced as predominant explanations of what shapes the contemporary world: modernity, globalization, neoliberalism, decolonization, fundamentalism, terrorism, network culture, and climate change, among many others less prominent but just as profound, such as indigenization. Each of these terms cluster a particular set of world-changing forces into a configuration that, its discursive chorus claims, encompasses the others – in fact, in principle, or in the future. Yet none have succeeded in doing so, nor seem likely to do so. Nor can any of them, singly or together, account for every aspect of contemporary life as it is experienced today. Nevertheless, their contention creates the divisive differentiations that define our contemporaneity – precisely those qualities of multeity, adventitiousness, and inequity in the description you just quoted – but it also generates counter-responses, the most important of which are an insistence on the value of place, the search for constructive world pictures, and the reach for coeval connectivity in all dimensions of our relationships with each other. All of these are continuous, on-going processes, feeding a historical condition that is in constant, contentious, unpredictable evolution.

So, just to prefigure what we will doubtless talk about later, it seems to me that the *work* of contemporary art in these circumstances is not only to picture the experience of these divisive differences but also to counter their destructive effects by helping to build coeval connectivity. In a parallel way, tracking how artists are taking on the paradoxical challenges of our shared but divided contemporaneity is what is required of the historian of contemporary art, and showing how artists are doing this is the job of the contemporary curator. For historians of the art of the past, this obligation invites them to study that art from the same perspectives. Exactly *not* by applying current concerns to past art, looking for prefigurations, and treating these as the most interesting things about that art. On the contrary, the obligation is to go back to the originary

scenario, and try to discern how artists worked with and against the multiple temporalities in play within their moment, to try to see *their* contemporary contemporaneity.

CGC – Staying with our contemporary contemporaneity for the moment, where does your theory of the three currents become relevant?

TS-It is an effort to find the shapes, the structures at work within the apparent disarray of change in the present. The world is not descending into chaos, even though it might often seem that way. I argue that there are three currents in contemporary art making, just as there are three currents in contemporary thought, and in contemporary geopolitics. No more, but no less. And they are of the same kind in each domain, or on each plane, as I prefer to say. You can find this argument in most of my recent books: I suppose the introduction to *Contemporary Art: World Currents* would be the best place to start if you want a short summary. [3] First, there are continuing modernities, echoes of EuroAmerican dominance, such as globalization in geopolitics, neoliberalism in economics, remodernisms in art, and spectacle in architecture. The second current, which I call transnational transitionality, was generated by independence struggles, by postcolonial critique, and Indigenous demands for rights and recognition in countries outside Europe and the United States during the Postwar period. It is now prominent everywhere, driving many international organizational forms, notably the United Nations, even though the Security Council constrains everything according to the interests of the victors in World War II – back to 1945, everyone! For art, biennials are the great drivers of internationalization, I do not say globalization, because that is mainly a Global North enterprise, and is now faltering. In fact, the energy of transnational transitionality is the main manifestation of how the Global South now pervades the Global North. The third current is not of the same kind, nor is it the result of a dialectical struggle between the first two currents. It's actually trying to generate a third way of being in a world that is extremely divided, subject to tremendous forces of hyperindividuation, dominated by commercial interests, authoritarian government and surveillance states, but also, given challenges such as global warming, desperately in need of a certain kind of open, unitary thinking. I see this aspiration in many political movements, especially those led by your generation, and in all sorts of interstitial activities, which are trying to imagine what coeval commonality, or a coeval commons, might be like in such a world. I also see this spirit in activism of all kinds and in infrastructural curating.

So, stepping back for a moment, we can see these currents operating contemporaneously, moving through the present, distinct from each other in specific ways but also constantly connecting, shaping our contemporary condition as they unfold. Obviously, in past periods, different currents were in play, shaping cotemporalities into different configurations, and so it will be in the future.

Terry Smith at the symposium 'What Do Museums Collect?' Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, December 1, 2018. Courtesy of Terry Smith.



CGC – How does contemporaneity compare to other large-scale, all-encompassing concepts that have aimed at characterizing the present?

TS – Most of the other very large scale, world-picturing concepts that are out there are, I believe, residual, receding into modern and even pre-modern pasts. Yet we must also face the recent eruption of reactionary resurgences, such as religious fundamentalisms in the Middle East and in the heartlands of the United States, and the rise of rightwing parties in Europe. They are fighting, often violently, for contemporary relevance, to be our contemporaries, and refuse to become the anachronisms that they in fact are. Indeed, most of them are driven by fantasies of arriving at, or returning to, some kind of eternal temporality, here on Earth. So they prioritize waiting for that as their future, which is their right. But they often also insist on that future for everyone else, which is not their call.

Postmodernism was short-lived as a style in architecture – mercifully – and was for a while the wrong name for poststructuralist and deconstructive thinking, but is rarely used in that sense any more. But we are not talking about the passing parade of intellectual fashions. We should acknowledge that there were some brilliant, prefigurative insights amidst the flashy, superficial ones. These insights were, I like to think, early signs that contemporaneity was being thought about in a different, more far-reaching way. For example, Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, painted a prescient picture of the impact of computational thinking on universities and on knowledge formation more generally. [4] He alerted us to the importance of game theory, and strongly promoted the value of small-scale stories and vernacular languages in the wake of the delegitimization of the *grands récits*. Pamela Lee has written about this in an interesting way in her book *New Games: Postmodernism After Contemporary Art*. [5] She, too, is reacting against the witless presentism exemplified by people who use the

phrase “the contemporary.” She reminds us that, in the visual arts, what Hal Foster called “resistant postmodernism” – you know, the Pictures Generation, Act Up, and feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s, as distinct from the complicit postmodernism of Koons, Schnabel, and the Young British Artists – has been pivotal to whatever is interesting about contemporary art since then. She accepts that the postmodern moment has passed, but does not develop any overall ideas about contemporary art in its wake. She is more interested in finding strategies for operating within the contemporary context by deriving them from games theory of the 1950s and 1960s. Thinking more globally, it becomes obvious that postmodernist ideas and strategies were relevant to the “becoming contemporary” of art in many parts of the world during the 1980s and 1990s. In the USSR, and China, as they became postsocialist, and even in Cuba, techniques such as parody, mimicry, and misquotation were really important to artists seeking a new vocabulary as Socialist Realism grew increasingly vacuous. So, too, were conceptualisms of various kinds, as we argued in the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition of 1999. [6] To my mind, conceptualism precedes and has been a more resonant tendency in contemporary art than any kind of postmodernism, the resistant side of which was, in fact, critically “post-conceptual.” [7]

The broader concept of postmodernity has had a longer life as a name for what, after Lyotard, many people began calling our “condition.” Fredric Jameson wrote a tough foreword to the English edition of *The Postmodern Condition*, but that was high-jacked by Lyotard’s quite silly appendix, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in which he turns it into a question about avant-garde art, and postmodernism becomes a modernist recursion that keeps repeating itself. Jameson’s famous intervention, *Post-modernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, is a Marxist answer to Lyotard’s post-Marxist picture. [8] Who can forget his evocation of the deliberately disorienting interior spaces of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, and his call for a critical “cognitive mapping” of such experiences as a form of resistance to the alienation affects of what he calls, following Ernst Mandel, late capitalism? We had to wait a few years, however, for a comprehensive Marxist theory of the relationships at play in postmodernity. This was, of course, the great achievement of David Harvey, in his *The Condition of Postmodernity*, especially his account of the origins and affects of what he called “space-time compression.” [9] This concept was crucial to my ideas about contemporaneity, although I have to confess that I found superficial or complicit postmodernism so repugnant that it took ten years for me to separate out these more fecund ideas. Harvey is an amazing, consistently critical historian of social and cultural geographies, and has updated these ideas and made them specific to the forms of capitalism that have evolved since then. [10]

CGC – Isn’t it the case that Marxist theories, even though they may be theories of post-modernity, remain essentially modern theories?

TS – Yes. This must be so, because these theories were from the beginning anti-capitalist, and thus are counter-modern, locked in tandem with it, by definition. I totally

agree with Marshall Berman when he says that Marx and Engels provided the best analysis by far of capitalist dynamics, logics, and effects, at least in its mid- and late-nineteenth century forms. Marxism has obviously been deflated by the historical disaster of Stalinism, and the totalitarian tendencies of most other societies that tried “actually existing socialism.” Postmodern critique itself emerges from disappointment with this European experience, if you think of Lyotard’s earlier work with the group *Socialisme ou barbarie*, for example. But at the same time, there was also the sense that Marxism will not simply disappear because its progressivist predictions about the inevitability of communism as the coming world condition turned out to be wrong. Jacques Derrida saw this, and explores it with great subtlety in his *Specters of Marxism*. [11] If you want my view, modern Marxism was one of the grand narratives that lost its legitimacy as the twentieth century unfolded, but a certain spirit of communality as an ideal for social organization is going to be essential if our species is to negotiate its way through global warming.

Today, the more interesting challenge arises from the fact that certain clearly modern ideas, aspirations, technologies and organizational forms keep being used, and thus recur as a kind of default generalization about our contemporary condition for those unwilling to face up to its radical difference from modernity and postmodernity. I suppose it is because many countries around the world, such as China or India, seem to have as their model a society that, to feed its millions, should modernize in the general manner of the European countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: that is to say, support entrepreneurial elites, enslave worker drones, use unrenovable resources to produce industrial bases for their economies, foster high consumption middle classes, and generate culture, high culture, out of that. But these countries are, in fact, choosing elements of the Western representative democracy/open market model, not adopting it wholly. Instead, they are actually creating a different kind of arrangement between the state and the market. The Chinese example is very clear: a very restrictive central party is trying to control every aspect of everyday life, including the operations of all markets, within the country, while also negotiating a new relationship with global capital, which in fact is orchestrated by the companies, and governments, in the still (but shakily) dominant capitalist countries, and the international organizations that they still (but shakily) control, such as the IMF and the World Bank. At the same time, China is pursuing what it calls the “Belt and Road Initiative,” an overland road and rail system that stretches from parts of China, through the Middle East and into Europe along the old Silk Road routes. A maritime version goes from the South China Sea to Europe and Africa. It is also building infrastructure throughout Africa, and making trade pacts elsewhere. This is clearly a worldwide infrastructural network intended to secure the future of China’s particular mix of total local governance by an authoritarian party and international relations conducted in free market modes but shaped according to the priorities of state capitalism. In India, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata, or Indian People’s Party) is expanding its political control in order to follow a similar path, at least within the subcontinent.

You can call these changes a kind of modernity, if you like, or we can talk about how modernity keeps reappearing in all contexts, yet this situation changes in one sense but not another, and therefore it has to do with a kind of postmodernity. To me, however, all of these developments are better described under the concept of contemporaneity, precisely because they manifest the multiplicity of ways of being in time, at the same time, with others, and no tendency, quality or character is to be found as shared between them. Instead, you have multiple temporalities coexisting and interacting with each other, many, many different kinds of cultures doing that, with different ways of thinking, being, addressing, at every level of thought, behavior, at every level of commonality, in every kind of social organization. At most, you could say, paradoxically, that difference itself has become a kind of manifest or apparent universal. Peter Osborne calls this a kind of operative fiction, an implied totality that is, of course, logically impossible. [12]

Well, yes, that's how it does work in the world, pragmatically. But there is something dissatisfying about letting things lie there. I don't think we can just say, in such situations, "It's a paradox," and throw up our hands in a gesture of exasperated resignation – what else can we expect given the current state of corrupted capitalism! – as Žižek, for example, is prone to do. Contemporary differentiation does not have inherent direction; it is not stirred by recurrence; and capitalism is not its "last instance." If, like the aporia of "the contemporary," you keep appealing to postmodernity or returning modernities, you leave everything happening energetically, but in a state of suspension, with some parts suddenly moving in small random spurts, like insects across the surface of a pond, or automata that suddenly jerk into action according to an invisible, unknowable program. People who use metaphors such as these are waiting for another grand narrative to arrive to push everything in an overall direction. Good luck with that...this is why I have pointed out the existence of the three currents, and their disjunctive cotemporality, as the organizing principle of the present.

CGC – I am concerned about the relations among those clusters, and about how can we associate some of them with specific contexts. You mention that the relation between the continuing modernities and transnational transitionality is conflictive in some kind of way.

TS – Well, on my model, the relationships between the first and second currents, between the continuing modernities we have been discussing and the massive transformation precipitated on local levels and worldwide by decolonization, is not just conflictive in some general sense. Most Western accounts see it as a North-South, First World versus Second and Third World, master-slave type of confrontation, that is, a battle between those who are already modern and those who aspire to become modern. More perceptive analyses – such as those of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Paul Gilroy, Achille Mbembe, just to

cite a few – would reverse these terms. They remind us that modernity was always, from its beginnings, a colonialist enterprise, and became more obviously so as the nineteenth century progressed. I don't have to underline this, here in Lisbon. Forgive me for not knowing the names of those who spoke from the Portuguese colonial experience, but I imagine that there were many such voices.

But the authors I just mentioned identify something that has been really important to my thinking about contemporaneity, especially about the relationships between these currents. They certainly understand decolonization to be driven by the independence struggles of the colonized against the colonizer, with these struggles constituting an antithesis to the thesis, that is, to the imperialism of the colonizer. And certainly, some of them – Fanon, for example, who died during the Algerian war of independence – expressed the fervent hope that their efforts would help bring about a post-racist, post-colonial, genuinely Human world, inside Europe and in all of its rapidly diminishing empires. Were that to happen, the dialectic would resolve into a beautiful synthesis.

On the ground, in reality, these dreams can seem fanciful in the extreme, as even Hegel, author of the master-slave dialectic, knew, according to Susan Buck-Morss's amazing study of Hegel and Haiti. [13] And, obviously, this is not how things have worked out in the over sixty years since decolonization really started to change the world. But a few decades is such a short time frame in which to expect global change at this level. You cannot, in a generation or two, dismantle a structure that took centuries to build.

Especially not when doing so generates fierce resistance, now that the colonized people of Africa, the Middle East and South America seek to escape civil war and economic disaster in some of the ex-colonies, and seek to enter the comfort zones that the colonizers built, using their resources, their labor, and at their expense. The Global North, for all of its democratic rhetoric, fears that immigration means that it will soon become a province of the Global South. So it is making itself into exactly that, by building walls along its borders – in Palestine, Hungary and Mexico, for example – and in the process it incarcerates itself, creates this delusory zone of unfreedom. These are some of the reasons why the dialectical operations that structure everything to do with modernity can no longer generate the syntheses it needs to remain dynamic. Instead, modernity has become recursive, reactionary, trying to renew itself from within by repeating the successes of its earlier stages: plutocratic governance, more coal plants, larger cars, bigger middle classes, spectacular architecture, big scale art, blockbuster exhibitions... The result is that the dialectic becomes occluded, and the currents become antinomies that operate in parallel with each other, contemporaneously, with no hope, or even interest, in merging into a happy synthesis.

CGC – I am currently thinking about the trajectories of the practices you group under the concept of transnational transition. In many cases, I think that the postcolonial turn has somehow been reduced

or primarily associated with exhibition-making in the West, whereas there is another whole set of practices within postcolonial societies that actually challenge institutional power there. This second set of practices has somehow been forgotten or relegated to second place within the exhibitionary complex that you have theorized. To what extent do you see your idea of coeval commons working as a genealogy (not only as a current possibility, but also a genealogy) of the experiences you include within the transnational transition?

TS – Well, the idea of an exhibitionary complex comes from the English sociologist Tony Bennett, who now teaches in the far western suburbs of Sydney. He argued that the museums of various kinds, as well as recurrent events such as world’s fairs, even the central cities in European countries and the US, when they emerged in the bourgeois era, were platforms to convince millions of people that the growth of industrialization and market societies was a natural social evolution, just like the stories of the evolution of mankind from barbarity to civilization that Natural History Museums and world’s fairs used to feature. [14] Since then, of course, there has been a narrowing towards specialization in each of the art and science disciplines, alongside their exponential growth in number, and the huge increases in the numbers of those active within them. “The artworld” is our common term for the section in which we work, or, at least, it has been since the 1960s. But to me this “artworld” has massively expanded, become much more complex, and globally distributed. My recent thinking about curating as a discursive practice, and about its history, has led me to identify a structure that we might call the contemporary visual arts exhibitionary complex (VAEC). [15]

Everyone involved in it knows that it exists, as does everyone in the cultural, social and political fields within which it sits. But few people think of it as a whole, as a system. We can’t avoid doing so when we simply list its components, which comes as a shock to most people. Let me show it to you:

Private collection museums/galleries; Cabinets of Curiosities; Period museums, national collections, geopolitical area or civilization, museums, city museums; Universal history of art museums; Museums of modern art, museums of contemporary art; University galleries, art school galleries, exhibition spaces in curatorial programs; Single artist museums, one-medium museums, and spaces dedicated to large-scale commissioned installations; Kunsthallen; Not-for-profit, alternative spaces; Artists’ associations and artist-operated initiatives; Satellite spaces; Exhibition venues of art foundations (some of which have collections); Institutes of various kinds that include exhibitions as one part of their research, publication, and educational activities; Residency-related exhibitions; Interventions, temporary events, Pop ups; Publications designed as exhibitionary spaces; Biennials; Art Fairs; Commercial or dealer galleries; Auction houses; Public art; Open Studios; Amateur art shows; Art in non-art venues, including other kinds of museum (historical, science, ethnographic, children’s, war, ethnicities, medicine, historic houses, etc.), in archives and libraries, in hotels,

shopping malls, real estate ventures, public parks; Recurrent public events (celebrations, festivals, etc.) that regularly include art exhibitions or installations; Poster, reproduction, print and framing shops; Internet online sites, including Google Art, but also Second Life, Oculus; Art and art-like images circulating within social media. You can scan this as a historical mapping, from the fifteenth century to the present, of exhibitionary platforms, which moves, as you see, from private places to display objects to globally-accessible sites to show images. These platforms accumulate, they don't simply appear at one historical moment and then evaporate when a new format appears. Instead, they institutionalize themselves. Each of these components emerged for a reason, persists and grows because that reason (or set of reasons) seemed compelling to enough people and to other institutions. As each platform grows, it diversifies and institutionalizes. Each one strives to stay distinct from the others, while also busily absorbing ideas, energy and personnel from one or more of the others. But this is not a neutral system: it is also a profile of top-down cultural power and bottom up resistance.

VAECs operate most visibly at the level of cities, where a variety of platforms act as the nodes of local artworlds. At the same time, the regional then international connections between the various components of local VAECs add up to a global visual arts exhibitionary complex. In some cities, notably in the West, the contemporary VAEC has become an infrastructure so expansive that those working within it may take its outer reaches for granted. This is the universalizing effect of being at a center, the misconception that being there means counting everywhere. Elsewhere, only some of these components may be present, leading to a concern that the "critical mass" that is imagined to be necessary for local art to flourish is lacking, and must be built, fast. In yet other places, there is suspicion that this model may turn out to be as oppressive as it is liberating, so activists focus on building other kinds of infrastructure. This is the concern underlying your question, I believe. To me, what drives the whole system is the tension between the tendency towards historical stasis on the part of the collecting institutions and the openness to future art, to de-institutionalization, to provisionality, on the part of the experimental spaces, from kunsthallen to biennials.

Art historical thinking, to say nothing of research and publication, is way behind in recognizing just how important these alternative spaces have been as a source of innovative energy. Really, it is the scholarship around institutional critique, and interest in the history of radical curating, that has made us aware of this blindspot. With star curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist celebrating predecessors such as Harald Szeemann, and mythical exhibitions such as *When Attitudes Become Form*, we find that, suddenly, urgent attention must be paid. I have tried to take a slightly more measured approach, to outline, in *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, the discursive structure of the field, and, in *Talking Contemporary Curating*, to capture the key ideas circulating in the discourse itself by discussing them with curators such as Hans Ulrich, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Okwui Enwezor, Zdenka Badovinac, and Mari-Carmen Ramírez. [16] In the *Thinking* book, I highlighted "infrastructural

activism” as the most urgent kind of action for contemporary curating. Everyone I spoke to in the *Talking* book was, or has been, a game-changing exhibition-maker but also an institution builder – Zdenka, for example, shaped the main gallery of a newly formed state, Slovenia, in her late twenties, and went on to found the national museum of contemporary art, the Metelkova, according to NSK principles. Maria Lind directs the Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm and is a great organizer of international collaborations between off-center and peripheral spaces. Zoe Butt worked at Long March Space, Beijing, before becoming the director of Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City, then the only contemporary art space. She has just moved to The Factory, a bigger, better resourced, space for contemporary art in that city. I was recently asked to speak at a conference in Bern, and was amazed to find out how little systematic research had been done into the history of *kunsthallen*. I mean, they have been vital players in Germany, Austria and Switzerland since the 1890s, yet this conference was the first to take them seriously. My basic hypothesis to help guide this research is roughly that *kunsthallen* may be considered as once modern, and now contemporary, art exhibitionary venues that have evolved through three phases. First, from the later nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth they seem to have been, in the major cities of Europe and its cultural colonies, important galleries and meeting places for groups of artists, often affiliated into informal societies, that sought varying degrees of independence from the major local academies and from the official art styles of the day. Second, during the 1960s, they were among the first exhibitionary venues to be profoundly impacted by the transformations of late modern art and curating, as they began to become contemporary, something that occurred not only in Europe, or only in the West, but also in places throughout the world. Since then, *kunsthallen* have become one among the multiplicity of platforms that present Contemporary Art within the vast visual arts exhibitionary complex that emerged during the modern period and is, as I just described, now a distinctive aspect of the culture of our globalized contemporaneity. [17]

These kinds of spaces have distinctive features depending on their local contexts. The German-style *kunsthalle* does not work in other regions. The *Kunsthalle Lissabon*, for example, strikes me as a parody of the German style, but is of course a serious space for exploring contemporary art in this city. In China, against years of governmental suspicion about informal, not-for-profit spaces, a plethora of such spaces are being created in many cities throughout the country. The suspicion is still there, but there is now a growing realization that it is in such spaces that art’s most inventive energies are to be found, and that the viability of a larger art system depends on this kind of energy. So they are being left alone, unless they break one of the taboos – mention Tiananmen 1989, Tibet, official corruption – or mock the Party or Xi Jinping.

CGC – My problem with some of the recent approaches to institutional critique, new institutionalism or instituent practices is that they just

set up a genealogy where we have institutional power as something very well located, concentrated into a narrow conceptualization of space. Take, for instance, Fred Wilson in Baltimore doing *Mining the Museum*, Cildo Meireles criticizing transnational biennials from Documenta, the Berlin Biennale dedicated to activism in 2012...Do you think that those engagements have anything of the provisional? Aren't they depending on very permanent structures? Aren't they locating institutional power within the same spaces where it was identified in the 1970s as problematic? To what extent can we frame the emergent modes of institutional power within an equally new geo-referential framework? To what extent is provisionality not just hiding precariousness and latent power divisions?

TS – In a sense, you have the privilege of being concerned about this after nearly sixty years of people working hard to build alternative, on-going yet always critical infrastructure at the same time that this colossal exhibitionary complex was arising around them. It is precisely this huge institutional weight that critique was trying to resist. But you are right to highlight the inequities between formerly colonized countries and those of the former colonizers – I say “former” in an ironic tone, because colonization still colors decolonization in major ways, and seems to be reviving itself these days.

The second and last edition of the Johannesburg Biennial, curated by Okwui Enwezor, was in 1997, a long time ago, but remains vivid in the minds of those of us interested in the history of critical curating. So it is relevant that, in Johannesburg a few years back, in 2010 I believe, curator Gabi Ngcobo and artist Sohrab Mohebbi created a Center for Historical Reenactments. Their aim was to grapple with current issues through their historical legacies, so they organized discussions, staged exhibitions of work by local artists, and some theme shows. But they concentrated on reflexive curating, including a faux reimagining of the defunct Johannesburg biennale, its possible third edition. Signaling the provisionality of such a project, they were not afraid to stage what they call their “institutional suicide,” which they did in 2012. [18] Most alternative spaces, even though nearly all of them were founded in a spirit of short-term intervention and the temporary occupation of their site, find it hard to close themselves down after the initial impulse runs out of creative energy, or transforms into something else.

The examples of Institutional Critique that you list in your question: all of them were actually forms of *artistic* practice located inside or in relation to a museum, not initiatives by curators. Led by conceptual artists, what came to be known as Institutional Critique art was a post-conceptual effect, *after* the 1960s-1970s moment when museums were regarded as the enemy of contemporary art, which most of them were, at the time (the opposite seems true now, which is another kind of problem, for art especially). Turning the critical spotlight onto museums was a logical next step, and it was a necessary one. It was entirely predictable that, as

Andrea Fraser pointed out, the critique of institutions would quickly become the institutionalization of critique. One good reason why that happened was that a new generation of curators entered museums from their early experiences in experimental art spaces, they welcomed this critique, and worked out ways of building it into the procedures of their institutions. This is the complex acting like a complex, as if it were a network system mixing and matching, or an organism breathing in and out. Fred Wilson is a lovely man. Trained as an artist, he was working as a museum education officer when he staged *Mining the Museum*, although he had earlier made installation pieces, *Rooms with a View*, about racist ideologies in museums. Since then he has produced individual artworks that echo some of the work he did during that period. You can find them at art fairs, such as Frieze New York, as individual objects for sale in a booth. They are one aspect of what is a wide-ranging practice, which is not atypical for artists of his generation, except that he has continued to focus on social justice and the degradations of racism as the major content of his art.

So, no, I don't think that everything fades when it is absorbed into institutions, because, you know, some things have to be held for history, ready for their second act, particularly when anti-historical forces are prominent, as they are at present. Nor do I think that the market is entirely a monster waiting for every artist, curator and critic to take up the Faustian bargain it constantly offers. Some gallerists act like alternative spaces should be acting, when that is the need in their locality. We keep seeing small-scale, not-for-profit experimental spaces that avoid institutionalizing themselves, that have maintained their commitment to provisionality, although of course that gets harder the longer that you keep going...

There are all sorts of transformations going on here, and it can get confusing because, as I said, each current is moving through the present with a distinct orientation and at different speeds, as are the components of the exhibitionary complex both within and between the currents. This is contemporaneity at work: it is cotemporal, dispersive, and multifarious – in a word, complex.

CGC – Related to that, you mention the idea of coeval commonality as a future, as the point towards which things are going. To what extent is this commonality being curated, being subsumed into curatorial activity and thought? What might that imply?

TS – As I explained earlier about contemporaneity, coevality is not just about things happening at the same time, it is, more importantly, the quality of acting in a cotemporal way, of genuinely sharing one's different ways of being in time, and doing so in direct, one-to-one exchange. The concept comes from postcolonial anthropology, and was best theorized by Johannes Fabian. [19] So, it does imply a different ethics, an ethics of openness to each other's difference, a kind of community based primarily on the respectful exchange of difference, not the sharing of sameness. That's the basic condition, the simple sense of presumed equity between all persons, things and worlds. The biggest challenge, now, is that this spirit must

also find a way to work at the largest scale, at the level of thinking about how we deal with global warming, how humans develop a different kind of contract with animals, all living things, the Earth, and the planetary system. Coeval commonality is the core of this, at places closest to us, and furthest away.

I have no illusions about how difficult this struggle will be. Neoliberalist capitalism and the politicians who support it will continue to prioritize making money from anything that moves in the world, and will do so until the last moment. This is like dancing on the deck of the Titanic, to use a metaphor from the last century, and they'll keep doing it, as long as they can make money out of it. The only rational explanation for the attitudes and actions of those commanding the major extractive and communication companies, and the reactionary politicians who support them, is that they know that global catastrophe is inevitable yet somehow believe that their wealth and power will protect them in their citadels and gated communities when it comes. This is as insane as the retro-futures imagined by fundamentalists.

CGC – I am struck when people explain global revolution by pointing at the specific action of groups of artists located in New York, for example. For me, that is limiting and provincializing a global phenomenon that has many things to do with art, but also, on the other hand, cannot be restricted to art...I'm thinking here of many cases, among them the Berlin Biennale, the Guangzhou Biennale organizing carnival, Tate Gallery including Nothing Hill parade, exhibitions like *Living as Form...* To what extent can curating be also a burden for that communality or for activism? And also, turning the question the other way around, in what ways can activism appropriate anything from curating in a positive sense?

TS – Well, a short answer would be that the occupation of Union Square then Zuccotti Park in 2011 was actually precipitated by a group of anarchists in New York, who were quite experienced political activists. It was not, as was widely believed, a totally spontaneous uprising, which would have caused serious panic on Wall Street. Nevertheless, as things evolved, all sorts of dissatisfied people joined in, and it demonstrated the potentialities (and limits) of such actions. So, in sum, it was a really important moment: in the United States, protest is frequent but insurrection is rare. I think that there will be many more of such responses to the political and economic problems that are mounting in the United States as elsewhere. Of course, Occupy! was a small scale thing compared to the other "squares" around the world that were occupied by hundreds of thousands of protesters – Tahrir, Maidan, Syntagma, Taksim, among others – and were, sooner or later, brutally repressed. So I agree that the EuroAmerican experience should not be thought to have triggered, or in any sense be thought of as more significant than, the actually far more revolutionary movements in the Middle East and elsewhere during those years. None of them, however, amount to the "global revolution" that you mention.

Political struggle in the West has to continue, in the streets as well as in the exhibitionary complex, as it should do everywhere else in the world. In this context, *Living as Form* was an important show, because it brought together activist art from many places, not to display “social practice art” for the sake of it, but in order to show how transformatory work was being done in this or that context, and to share ideas that could be adapted to local conditions, including the US. Nato Thompson chose to present it in the Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side, one stall next to the other, so that each activist group had its own shop front. In this sense it was like an art fair, but with radicalism on show, not expensive things for sale. So, *Living as Form* would be an example of curating communality that you asked about earlier. Technically, not so innovative, in terms of its display logic, but content-wise it did do what I called for in my *Thinking Contemporary Curating* book, that is, for people to curate our contemporaneity, and do so critically. Your mention of Occupy reminds me of another way in which contemporaneity can be very effectively curated: open the gallery spaces to the streets. This is what the Gallatin Gallery at New York University did during the months that Zuccotti Park was occupied. They showed the posters, artworks as they were being made, used their monitors to show other occupations going on around the world in real time, hosted meetings to plan action and explain things to visitors, some of which I attended. The director, Keith Miller, basically let Occupy occupy the gallery, and curate itself. This was exceptional for New York, but it is actually quite common during revolutionary times elsewhere around the world.

CGC – Through my work in the Caribbean I have had the experience that the most difficult things for such critical art spaces are place-making, sustainability, persistence. Experiences are temporary, audiences are limited, but on the other hand I have experienced how the struggle for engaging within a broader arena and connecting with more varied agencies has been a common feature. How do you see this in the future? What have been our achievements in that sense, when seen within a bigger picture?

TS – With this question, you link my three ideas of the importance of place-making, world picturing and connectivity to contemporary life and to contemporary art. As you say, maintaining the actuality of place is the hardest thing to do, particularly in situations where there are very few resources, or there is state repression, and in countries dominated by others, such as in Puerto Rico, where people struggle to survive. This struggle is reaching truly desperate proportions in north Africa and the Middle East, in Syria especially, throwing millions of people into conditions of transitionality that, many fear, might become permanent, as it has been for those in the Palestinian refugee camps for so long.

It is a wonderful thing that artists and curators continue to work in such situations. I keep thinking of the gallerist in the rebel-held suburb of Gouta in Damascus, who

makes exhibitions by photographing works by artists who are still active, projects them on the makeshift gallery's wall, and then everyone rushes away, because they know the building is about to be bombed by the government or the Russian air force. This is placemaking as a kind of fundamental persistence, of selfhood as neighborhood. It is a kind of location that refuses dislocation. And it stands in stark contrast to parochialism, nativist thinking, isolation...all of those corrupted concepts of place, when it is defined above all as private property, or designated as a place by those with the power to do so, and the power to withdraw it, not made by the relatively powerless, with the materials to hand.

On the other side of this contemporary coin is world-picturing. Making the effort to world-picture is clearly something that more and more of us are going to have to do. We have yet to develop a shared picture of what it would be for all of us to exist in concert with the planet, in ways that are mutually productive, instead of exploitative and destructive. We can see patches of this picture: some scientists, farmers, environmentalists, engineers, politicians, curators and some artists can picture parts of it, but no one can see it whole, at the moment. So, there is a huge human effort needed to really picture a world in which we share a reality in common with the planet. We are lucky to have had some glimpses of it, exactly in some of the mega-exhibitions by star curators that artworlders love to complain about: Documenta 11 in 2002, the Triennale in Paris in 2012 with its theme of "Terrible Proximity," the Venice Biennale in 2015, "All the World's Futures," just to mention some of Okwui Enwezor's world-picturing shows. The lineaments of world governance, of at least the desire for it, can be found in many parts of the contemporary exhibitionary complex, including in some of these survey exhibitions.

In my seminar at the European Graduate School we look at the statement from the Convention on Climate Change, the Paris declaration of December 2015. It was produced following input from every member state in the United Nations, all 195 of them, and has to be ratified by the governments of most of these countries to become valid. Even then, it is voluntary, because there is no world force capable of enforcing it. As we speak, a few months later, it is heading towards achieving ratification by the 55 parties necessary to make it valid for every country. Except, of course, for those who refuse to sign it. National sovereignty still overrides the global good, as we see every day. To me, the hopeful aspect of this process is that this was the first ever statement about the world by the world, or, at least, by the geopolitical world's national representatives, elected or otherwise.

Of course, every document issued by the United Nations speaks in the name of humanity, but with the caveat that it does not constitute a world government, and relies on member states to carry out its work, or at least not obstruct its agents. We know that this is problematic on the ground, in many situations, as it was in Rwanda, for example, but there is a long game being played here. The Paris Convention is a move in such a game: it is a statement about the actual state of the world, signed by representatives from every nation in the world (insofar as nations are representative of the peoples within their borders). So, in a certain way, it's the world's voice

articulating itself, asking: what kind of contract with the planet Earth do we humans actually want? If you read it from this point of view, its spirit is deeply moving and encouraging, but it must be said that its language is disappointing. It confronts geopolitical realities such as the different levels of responsibility for “developed” and “developing” countries, and is specific about the reduction of carbon emissions as the key to containing global warming within survivable limits (even as the actual commitments of the member states, added up, will not as yet do that job). And then, as every UN document must do, it insists over and over that everything must be done in a way that respects a parcel of human rights, but the problem is that there are now so many of these, and they are so mutually contradictory, that they might seem themselves to be an obstacle to the realization of its greater goals. Human rights is the international language of the decolonized, of, in my terms, transnational transitionality itself: it is the language that the formerly colonized are obliged to speak to the (post)colonizers who still control the main concentrations of economic and political power – including, as I said before, by exercising their veto votes on the Security Council. So, it is no surprise that we see in this document a clash between the languages of the first and second currents: it is, after all, trying to remedy the disastrous impacts of Western industrialization, and the continuing catastrophe caused by countries of the Global South who pursue similar models of growth. It is trying to bring first and second current actors on to the same page, to act in their own interests and those of the world at large. This is third current work, to find the language that will help us move from divisive difference to coeval communality.

The long game I refer to is to become capable of speaking with one, multi-differential voice, precisely in order to be able to encompass such contradictions, to grasp them not as a resolved synthesis but as enabling antinomies that are on-going. This would be the language world of the coeval commons. We are working towards it through rethinking these questions, and the frames within which they are being asked, but also through actions, through infrastructure building, through artworks, and through curating of the kind we have been discussing. We keep on trying to answer the eternal question: “What is to be done?”

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