The predicament of contemporary art

We've structured our entries on twentieth-century art through the analytical perspectives that each one of us tends to favor: Hall's is a psychoanalytic view; Benjamin's, a social-historical view; Yve-Alain's, a formalist and structuralist view; and mine, a poststructuralist view. One way to look back on the development of postwar art is to consider what happened to those methodological tools—how their relevance grew or diminished.

We: None of us is married to a particular method.

He: Right: my commitment to psychoanalysis is not as strong as you suggest; frequently the art led me somewhere else, methodologically, altogether. But your question is really about the fate of these different methods in postwar art and criticism. On that score, as far as psychoanalysis is concerned, the Surrealist concern with the unconscious continues after World War II, but in a register more private than political. Many artists from Abstract Expressionism to Cobra attempt to open up this private unconscious to a more collective dimension; there's a turn, for example, from a Freudian focus on desire to a Jungian interest in archetypes. Yet that move is soon stunted, at least in the United States, by the rise of ego psychology, and another reaction sets in. An aversion to the private ego as the source of artmaking is palpable in milieux from John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns to the Minimalists: to different degrees they all try to de-psychologize art, and, in the face of much pathos-laden work in the fifties, one can understand why.

One irony of Minimalism is that, despite its making art more public in its meaning, more objective in its situation, it also puts the subject back into play in a phenomenological form, embodied in space. And as Postminimalists like Eva Hesse moved to complicate this general subject, and to reveal it to be marked differently by fantasy, desire, and death, psychoanalysis returns. This is explicit in the seventies when feminist artists and theorists question how the subject is given by sexual difference, and how such difference informs both the making and the viewing of art. Psychoanalysis is extremely productive for many feminists, even as they also critique its presuppositions, and the same holds for some queer artists and theorists thereafter, as well as some postcolonial critics.

On a more abstract level, psychoanalysis has provided insights into artistic forms that other models don't grasp well—for example, the persistent evocation of the "part-object" from Duchamp, through Johns, Louise Bourgeois, Hesse, and Yayoi Kusama, to many artists today. However, psychoanalysis is not consistently important in the postwar period; its presence waxes and wanes as questions of subjectivity and sexuality advance and recede.

YAB: The postwar fate of the methodological tools of formalism and structuralism is partly discussed in my introduction. There I trace the transformation of a morphological conception of formalism (à la Roger Fry in the prewar period, but revived by Clément Greenberg in the postwar era) into a structuralist one, and then the transformation of the structuralist position into the "poststructuralist" one, which Rosalind in turn explains in her introduction. She discusses how many artists in the middle seventies and early eighties found in "poststructuralism" a powerful theoretical ally that helped them sort out issues in their own production. (By the way, if, as I do with "postmodernism," I put "poststructuralism" in quotation marks, it is because, as far as I know, it was never used by the authors designated by that label.) Here I want to stress that structuralism also left a mark on the artistic production of the sixties. We know that a number of artists in New York were reading Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss (for example, their books were in Robert Smithson's library) and, perhaps more importantly, the novels of the French Nouveau Roman (such as Alain Robbe-Grillet's), which were written in a structuralist context (Barthes was the biggest champion of Robbe-Grillet's early novels). In many ways the antishubjectivism that is an essential element of structuralism was parallel to the de-psychologizing tendency, just mentioned by Hal, of many artists opposing the pathos of Abstract Expressionism in the US or art informel in Europe. The anticompositional impulse that characterizes so much of the art produced from the mid-fifties through Minimalism—the serial attitude, the interest
For Bataille the same model could be used in a conservative way and in a revolutionary way (I guess we wouldn’t use that term today); that’s a constant in all his writings concerning not only psychoanalysis but also Marxism, Nietzsche, de Sade, and almost every other philosophical system or mode of interpretation he discussed. And I think this is linked to our mode of approach here. For example, Hal wrote an essay in the early eighties about stressing that there were two kinds of “postmodernism” in art, an authoritarian one and a progressive one, and he also wrote in a similar way about the divergent legacies of Russian Constructivism and Minimalism. This goes hand in hand with what I mentioned about the two kinds of formalisms, a morphological one and a structural one.

**HF:** Perhaps “desublimation” is a way to raise the question of social art history in the postwar period. The attack on refined forms and codified meanings à la Bataille is one version of the process, but there is also the spectre of “repressive desublimation” in the Marxist sense of Herbert Marcuse. What are the social effects when artistic forms and cultural institutions are desublimated—i.e., when they are cracked open by libidinal energies? It’s not always a liberatory event: it can also open up those spheres to a depoliticized rechanneling of desire by “the culture industry.”

**BO:** As I develop in my introduction, the dialectic of sublimation and desublimation plays an enormously important role in the history of postwar art. Perhaps it is even one of the central dynamics of the period, certainly more so than in the history of the prewar avant-gardes. It is defined differently by different theoreticians, both as an avant-garde strategy of subversion and as a strategy of the cultural industry to achieve incorporation and subjection. One axis on which this dialectic is played out more programatically in the postwar period than ever before is the relationship of the neo-avant-garde to the ever-expanding apparatus of cultural industrial domination: as of the fifties, in the context of the Independent Group in England, for example, or in early Pop art activities in the United States, appropriating imagery and structures of industrial production became one of the methods with which artists tried to reposition themselves between a bankrupt humanist model of avant-garde aspirations and a emerging apparatus whose totalitarian potential might not have been visible at first. Desublimation in England served as a radical strategy simultaneously to popularize cultural practice and to recognize the conditions of collective mass-cultural experience as governing. Desublimation in Andy Warhol, by contrast, operated more within the project of a final annihilation of whatever political and cultural aspirations the artists of the immediate postwar period might still have harbored.

As schematic as this might sound, my own work is situated, methodologically, between two texts: one from 1947, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the...
chapter on "The Culture Industry" in particular, and the other from 1967, The Society of the Spectacle by Guy Debord. The more I think about those texts the more they seem to historicize the last fifty years of artistic production, for they demonstrate how the autonomous spaces of cultural representation—spaces of subversion, resistance, critique, utopian aspiration—are gradually eroded, assimilated, or simply annihilated. This is what occurred in the postwar period with the transformation of liberal democracies in the United States and in Europe. From my perspective not only has the prognosis of Adorno and Horkheimer in 1947 been bitterly fulfilled, but so too has the even more nihilistic prognosis of Debord in 1967—exceeded even. The postwar situation can be described as a negative teleology; a steady dismantling of the autonomous practices, spaces, and spheres of culture, and a perpetual intensification of assimilation and homogenization, to the point today where we witness what Debord called "the integrated spectacle." Where does that leave artistic practices in the present, and how can we, as art historians and critics, address them? Are there still spaces situated outside those homogenizing apparatuses? Or do we have to recognize that many artists themselves don't want to be situated outside it?

HF: Are you content with the finiteness of that narrative?

YAB: It's a dire diagnostic (after all, Debord committed suicide), but one I think we all share to some extent.

HF: Yes, but if you agree entirely with Adorno and/or Debord, little more can be said.

BB: I take the last statement I made seriously. I'm not concluding that every artist in the present defines her or his work as inextricably integrated and affirmative. The artistic capacity still might exist not only to reflect on the position that the art work assumes within the wider system of infinitely differentiated representations (fashion, advertisement, entertainment, etc.), but also to recognize its susceptibility to becoming integrated into those subsets of ideological control. And yet, if there are artistic practices that still stand apart from this process of homogenization, I'm less convinced than ever that they can survive, and that we as critics and historians are able to support and sustain them in a substantial and efficient manner, to prevent their total marginalization.

HF: Let's look back over the last few decades to instances where critical alternatives were proposed. Indicating some "incomplete projects" might help us look ahead as well.

BB: Yes: what place does neo-avant-garde practice have in the present compared to the one it held in the moment of 1968, for example? Or even in seventies, when the relative autonomy of such practice had role in the liberal bourgeois public sphere as a site of differentiating experience and subjectivity? It was supported then, or at least taken seriously, by the state, the museums, and the universities. As of the eighties, artistic production was subsumed into the larger practice of the culture industry, where it now functions as commodity production, investment portfolio, and entertainment. Consider Matthew Barney in this regard: even more than Jeff Koons, he has articulated, that is to say exploited, those tendencies. In that sense he is a proto-totalitarian artist for me, a small-time American Richard Wagner who mythifies the catastrophic conditions of existence under late capitalism.

HF: Again, can't we complicate the Adornian position that the totalitarian cultural sphere is simply continued in the American culture industry, and that that industry has entirely subsumed art?

YAB: There were energetic expressions of artistic freedom in the aftermath of 1968—and before as well ...

BB: Of course there's an important artistic culture in the postwar United States—from Abstract Expressionism, through Pop and Minimalism, to Conceptualism at least. That has to be taken into account. Why was it possible? Because the United States was a liberal democracy at its highest level of differentiation. But no more.

HF: Other possibilities also opened up in other parts of the globe, especially in various encounters with different modernisms. For example, Yve-Alain discusses the elaboration of Constructivism among the Neoconcretists in Brazil, as well as of performance after Pollock with the Gutai artists in Japan. Those practices alone complicate the old story of a simple shift from Europe to North America or, even more reductively, from Paris to New York. It's an alternative narrative of cultural difference—of avant-garde practices in other place-times.

YAB: At first, though, the usual paradigm isn't changed much; for at least two decades those avant-garde activities on various continents still define themselves in relation to the old centers. For example, the Brazilians still look to Paris, and for Gutai it's all New York, Pollock especially, whom they read through the photographs of Hans Namuth. It's only later, once they have had some history in their own way of working, that they give up the competitive relation to the old centers. On this level 1968 marks a very important date: there's an extraordinary internationalization not only of political rebellion but of its artistic offspring, with social unrest all over Europe, the States, and elsewhere (the Prague Spring and its crushing by the Soviet Union; the Chicago Democratic convention followed by violent riots, and so on), all in the context of the Vietnam War. That was a strong political unifier for progressive minds around the world, let us not forget; and certain aspects of the present situation are reminiscent of that period—notably the fact that the Bush administration has unified much of the world against American imperialism. It remains to be seen, of course, if this "negative internationalism" will have any direct consequences in the cultural sphere.
HF: Much before 1968, too, the postwar period witnessed an international resurrection of some movements—like Dada, Surrealism, and Constructivism—that were international in ambition in the first instance. The Bauhaus alone had several afterlives in different sites after World War II. This is further complicated by a centrifugal move outward from Paris and New York. Cobra, for instance, initiates a partial shift away from Paris to other European cities; and later, to take another example, Arte Povera emerges in Italy. So there’s a remapping of Europe, a relativizing of Paris as art capital, which is slight but significant. There’s also a remapping of the United States, with a similar relativizing of New York, especially by artists in California—beat performance and assemblage artists in San Francisco and in Los Angeles, and later California Pop and abstract artists as well.

BB: Yes, but then if we turn back to the present, what do we see? Look at Michael Asher, in many ways the most radical of the figures involved in institutional critique from the late sixties onward, and long based in Los Angeles: his work is now mostly neglected; the very radicality of its contestation appears forgotten. Clearly the complexity of Asher’s work seems to pose, now more than ever, insurmountable obstacles to its reception within the present parameters of the art world. So, as with social depression at large, the way to respond to the work is simply to eradicate it from historical memory and to isolate its producer as an outsider. And Daniel Buren, another radical artist of institutional critique, is the pendant on the European side, only Buren has now transformed himself, willingly, into an affirmative state artist in order to avoid the fate that has befallen Asher.

HF: Once again, can’t your narrative be complicated? It carries a teleology of its own that is reductive, indeed defeatist.

RK: Perhaps a different narrative will help, though it might be no less dire. In my view postmodernism, understood through the prism of poststructuralism, constituted a great critique of essentialist thinking—of what is proper to a given category or activity. It annihilated the very idea of the self-same, and launched an especially strong attack on the idea of the medium (this is explicit in Jacques Derrida’s essay “The Law of Genre”). So the medium came under a concerted assault from the most sophisticated thinkers of the sixties and seventies, and that critique joined a similar attack in Conceptual art on medium-specificity in art (that painting be only about the forms of painting, etc.); this was supported in turn by the reception of Duchamp at the time, which only underscored the Conceptualist contempt for the medium. And then video entered the field of aesthetic practice, which also disturbed the idea of the medium (it’s very hard to find the specificity of video). So poststructuralism, Conceptual art, Duchamp reception, video art: together they effectively dismembered the concept of the medium.

The problem is that this dismemberment then became a kind of official position (the pervasiveness of installation art is one sign of his state of affairs), and now it’s a commonplace among artists and critics alike: it’s understood as given. And if I as a critic have any responsibility now, it is to dissociate myself from this attack on the medium, and to speak for its importance, which is to say for the continuance of modernism. I don’t know if poststructuralism will help me do this, and thus I don’t know if I can maintain my earlier commitment to this methodological option.

HF: That’s a strange position for the author of “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”—among other essays that theorized the intermedial and interdisciplinary dimensions of postmodernism—to take. What do you intend by “medium” now? Surely not medium-specificity in a Greenbergian sense.

RK: No: I mean the technical support for the work. It needn’t be a traditional support—like canvas, which is the support of oil painting, or metal armature, which is the support of modeled sculpture. A medium grounds an artistic production, and provides a set of rules for that production. It can be complicated even when it appears simple; a good example is Ed Ruscha’s use of the automobile as a kind of medium—it’s a consistent support of his work. His early book of photographs, Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations (1962), documents a number of gas stops on his drives from Oklahoma City to Los Angeles and back; that idea gave him a rule for making his book. Again, a medium is a source of rules that prompts production but also limits it, and returns the work to a consideration of the rules themselves.

HF: This notion of medium still seems a little arbitrary to me, almost free of historical motivation, let alone of social convention. In that respect it’s not clear how much of a corrective it could be to the relativistic condition of contemporary art. Surely a medium is a social contract with an audience as well as a private protocol for form-making.

RK: Sometimes it only appears arbitrary. At one point in his work Ruscha could use almost anything as a support for color—like blueberry extract, chocolate sauce, axle grease, and caviar. What he did with this comestible mess was to do a portfolio of prints (actually they’re dirtied sheets of paper) titled “Stains”, and those works hooked back into the history of stained painting—from Pollock through Helen Frankenthaler and color-field painting. It got him away from the arbitrary back into the history of recent art.

YAB: If I understand you, it’s a question not of the materiality of the medium so much as of the concept of the medium. The medium can fluctuate from one series of work to another, but the artist has to have a set of rules to work.

RK: The idea of a coherent set of rules means that the structure of the work will be recursive, that it will generate analogues for the medium itself.
HF: Now your definition of medium sounds formalistic as well as arbitrary.

RK: Without the logic of a medium art is in danger of descending into kitsch. Attention to medium is one way modernism tried to defend against itself against kitsch.

HF: Now that really is Greenberg come again.

YAB: As a concept kitsch seems very dated — it has been replaced by spectacle.

RK: I don’t think it’s dated at all. Kitsch is the meretricious, and we see that everywhere. On the other hand, Greenberg’s was a blanket condemnation of kitsch, and, as Yve-Alain has argued elsewhere, some kitsch practices, such as Lucio Fontana’s use of ceramics or Jean Fautrier’s use of color, take on the presumption that “advanced” art, such as Cubist-compositions or elegant monochromes, is the epitome of good taste. The late paintings of Francis Picabia are another case of the mobilization of kitsch. And how can we speak of an artist like Jeff Koons without recourse to the concept of kitsch?

BB: I disagree with many of the statements you’ve made. I’d like to support your demand for a continuation of modernism — rather than look back at its demise with a melancholic attitude — but whether one can preserve its practices is not a matter of voluntaristic decisions within the cultural sphere. What is aesthetically achievable is not in the control of critics or historians or even artists, unless artistic practice is to become a mere preserve, a space of self-protection. And there are problems even there. One might argue that Bruce Mclean, for example, or Gerhard Richter retains a space of exemption for painting in a relatively credible way, as does Richard Serra in sculpture. But the moment they formalize that position they border on a conservative position that contradicts their initial project. And the question becomes whether preserving modernism is desirable, even if it were possible.

HF: I’m also not happy with this story of a modernism of medium-specificity, followed by a postmedium condition, which is then recuperated somehow by a renewal of the medium, even if in an extended sense. There are multiple ruptures in the postwar period that can’t be sutured so easily. One transformation has to do with the eclipse of the very tension between avant-garde and kitsch that Rosalind still insists upon. Many artists — perhaps most under fifty — assume that that dialectic is now overwhelmed, that they have to work within a condition of spectacle. That’s not to say they capitulate to it, although we see extravagant examples of that embrace too. (Spectacle is the very logic of a Matthew Barney, his “medium” if you like, and for many people he turns it to his advantage.) Some artists also find productive cracks within this condition; it’s not as seamless as Benjamin makes it out to be.

BB: Give us an example.

YAB: There was Warhol earlier. That’s one reason why he became so important to subsequent artists: they understood he worked with spectacle.

BB: Yes, he was the oracle of things to come.

HF: I hope you don’t mean that Warhol was only an agent of spectacle. To take but one instance from his work, is there a more critical expose of the dark side of spectacle than his 1963 images of consumerist “death in America” — of car wrecks and botulism victims? Or another instance already mentioned, the photobooks of Ruscha from the sixties: I don’t see them as affirmative of the car-commodity landscape (as is so often claimed); they show its null aspect, or document its space as so much gridlocked real estate, or both. Another example is Dan Graham, who has also become important to younger artists: his Homes for America (1966–7), for instance, indicates how the serial logic in play in Minimalism and Pop was already at work in capitalist society at large, specifically in the development of suburban tract-homes. There, in the very similarity in production-logic between avant-garde art and capitalist development, Graham was able to point to the possibility of both critical insight and artistic innovation. And many other examples could be cited here — in Fluxus, for instance, and work closer to the present too. Cindy Sherman has generated her art out of an ambivalent play with the restrictive types of women offered up by spectacle. Mike Kelley has produced his out of a fascinatied exploration of the wayward subcultures of “dysfunctional adults” that spectacle cannot always conceal. And, with his tacky installations of kitsch items, fan photos, and tin foil, Thomas Hirschhorn does all he can (in that great old line of Marx’s) to make “life’s refined conditions dance once again” by “playing them their own tune.” And so on. So we can’t say that artists haven’t diagnosed the problem and produced work that addresses it.

YAB: Yet perhaps conditions have changed again now, and, instead of a polar opposition à la Adorno between resistant high art and mass-cultural trash, both have become, in the context of global media, so many bits in the planetary web. The paradigm isn’t resistance versus dissolution any more: resistance is immediately dissolved in the new situation. Young artists are not necessarily suicidal about it (there I agree); they want to do something with it.

BB: Certainly, artists as diverse as Allan Sekula, Mark Lombardi, and Hirschhorn address the condition of artistic production under the rule of an intensely expansionist form of late-capitalist and corporate imperialism, now generally identified with the anodyne and meaningless term “globalization.” All of them have succeeded to articulate the fact that nation-state ideology and traditional models of conventional identity-construction are no longer available to relevant cultural production, since the internationalization of corporate culture would desire nothing more than a cultural retreat into mythical models of compensatory...
identity-formations. At the same time such artists have made it one of their priorities to work through the intensely complicated networks of political, ideological, and economic intersec
tions that make up the supposedly liberating forms of globalization. Thereby they achieve a critical analysis of phenomena that are generally presented by the media, but also by cultural organi
ers and functionaries, as an emancipatory and almost utopian achievement.

But globalization is only one of the driving factors. There are at least two others. One is technological development, which confronts artists, historians, and critics today with problems that none of us really foresaw in the sixties or seventies. The second factor is more complicated, and it is difficult not to sound conspiratorial about it: the very construct of an oppositional sphere of artists and intellectuals appears to have been eliminated; certainly this is true in the realm of cultural production. That production is now homogenized as an economic field of investment and speculation in its own right. The antinomy between artists and intellectuals on the one hand and capitalist production on the other has been annihilated or has disappeared by attrition. Today we are in a political and ideological situation that, while it is not quite yet totalitarian, points toward the elimination of contradiction and conflict, and this necessitates a rethinking of what cultural practice can be under the totalizing conditions of fully advanced capitalist organization.

HF: The postwar acceleration of new technologies was already evident in the early sixties, and it was addressed not only by media gurus like Marshall McLuhan but also by artists involved in Minimalism, Pop, and other movements. These artists treated new and/or nonartistic materials and techniques (e.g., Plexiglas in Donald Judd, fluorescent lights in Dan Flavin, silkscreen serigraphy in Warhol) within the formats of sculpture and painting the better to register their effects there. These examples (to say nothing of video) suggest that “new media” already has a complicated history within postwar art—indeed all history is littered with “new media.” So are the consequences of “new media” really so total today? For example, isn’t there a dialectic here, however feeble it might appear, whereby “new media” also produce outdated forms as a by-product—outmoded forms that then stand as ciphers of surpassed or suppressed aesthetic and social experiences that contemporary artists can recover critically? Alongside the embrace of “new media” there is a recovery of displaced modes, which can be mined as an archive of past subjectivities and socialities.

I grant that these attempts to open up cultural history through old media are humble, and certainly they appear overwhelmed by the institutional attention given to “new media.” Here I have in mind such technophilic extravaganzas as the recent video installations of Bill Viola, who seems to want to deliver what Walter Benjamin once called, in the thirties in relation to film, “the blue flower in the

land of technology”—that is, the effect of spiritual immediacy through the means of intensive mediation. This effect is a kind of techno-sublime that overwhelms body and space alike, but which today goes well beyond simple distraction (Benjamin’s concern in the thirties) to outright immersion. An immersive, even mesmeric experience seems to be the desired effect of much art today (you see it in much digital photography too), and it’s very popular, in part because it aesthetizes, or “artifies,” an already-familiar experience—the mind-blowing intensities produced by media culture at large. In this art we get the rush of special effects along with the surplus-value of the aesthetic. Nevertheless, there are also artists who sketch a different project, again a sort of archaeology of outmoded forms, and, interestingly, they do so often in film, now that film is no longer the medium of the future or even the present but is already touched with archaism ...

BB: Artists such as?

HF: Stan Douglas, Tacita Dean, Matthew Buckingham, to name just a few.

RK: Another artist engaged with the outmoded is William Kentridge.

HF: Right. And one reason why James Coleman is so interesting to younger artists is that he has consistently explored the social spaces of outmoded media. One might argue that the separateness of these spaces is illusory, that the culture industry is always there to reconize them, but we shouldn’t say they never existed in the first place.

BB: We’ve seen that recuperation already with Surrealism and advertising.

HF: Absolutely, but we shouldn’t declare the dialectic foreclosed for ever.

YAB: The outmoded is resistant only to a certain point and only for a certain time. I was struck to hear that the radical filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet refuse video and DVD: they only want their films to be projected on the screen. How long can they sustain that position, and not be forgotten? In this regard they’re the equivalent of Asher in the universe of film.

RK: Yet the way the outmoded works is that new technologies—maybe even DVD—will fail, or at least be surpassed, rendered outmoded, too. What will Coleman do, for example, when Kodak no longer makes slide projectors? They’re being outmoded by digital projection and PowerPoint.

YAB: The digitization of images is going to be the Esperanto of globalization. There’s a becoming-uniform of format at the level of production and distribution alike. Young artists want to address that frame.

BB: To return for a moment to the opposition of Bill Viola and James Coleman: they reveal two tendencies that are very
complicated in their interrelationship. One is the intensification for
the desire of myth—that’s the secret of Viola’s success. He
succeeds in reinvesting technological representation with
mythological imagery, even religious experience ...

HF: One sees that kind of cultic reenchantment through new media
everywhere. Benjamin saw a fascist dimension to this
manipulated immediacy, and maybe that’s still accurate.

RK: Viola produces the video monitor as a black box meant as an
analogue of the viewer’s own head: the psychic space externalized
as the physical surround. Once physical space is converted to
gestural space in this way (notice I’m not saying
phenomenological space), all connection to the reality of his artistic
means is dissolved.

HF: Right: it’s a “faux-phenomenological” experience: experience
rewound, keyed up, given back to us in a very mediated fashion—
as immediate, spiritual, absolute.

RK: In that respect the concept of kitsch is relevant again.

BB: That’s the treacherous tendency. In opposition to it Coleman
succeeds in bringing together two things that seem mutually
exclusive—namely, the mnemonic dimension of art and a
technological format of representation. That’s extraordinarily
important in the present; and yet, as we’ve just remarked, the
potential of tapping the mnemonic through the outmoded is
extremely fragile. There’s no more innate resistance in the
mnemonic than there is in the outmoded: both are very precarious.
We know that the mnemonic dimension in art (intrinsic to
modernism since Baudelaire) is the most susceptible to
fetishization and spectacularization, as such work as Anselm
Kiefer’s has amply proven. On the one hand, the effort to retain or
reconstruct the capacity to remember, to think historically, is
one of the few acts that can oppose the almost totalitarian
implementation of the universal laws of consumption. On the other
hand, as artists such as Viola and Barney demonstrate, to deliver
the aesthetic capacity to construct memory images to the
voracious demands of an apparatus that entirely lacks the ability to
remember and to reflect historically, and to do so in the form of
resuscitated myth, is an almost guaranteed route to success in the
present art world, especially with its newly added wing of “the
memory industry.”

HF: There’s a further danger there. As you suggest, the mnemonic
easily tips into the memorializing, that is to say, into a demand that
the historical be monumentalized; and often today what is
monumentalized is the traumatic. The chief example here, among
countless others, is the new World Trade Center design by Daniel
Libeskind, with its vast memorial preserve and immense glass
spire: historical trauma is here made not only monumental but
spectacular and triumphant as well. Paradoxically enough, then,
there might be no contradiction between a blinding fixation on
historical trauma and a culture industry that produces historical
amnesia as a precondition of ever-renewed consumption (next to
the memorial there’ll be the usual Gap, Starbucks, etc.). This
condition is in stark contrast to the utopian dimension of so much
modernist art and architecture of the early twentieth century that
also experienced great traumas: we seem to live in a culture fixed on
horror pasts, not in a culture desirous of transfigured futures.
From my perspective its political effects are disastrous: we live
under the repressive dread of antidemocratic blackmails (“9/11,”
“the war on terrorism,” etc.).

RK: By the nineties the question of trauma becomes a kind of
Intellectual fashion. Essentially it is a way of reinserting the subject
into the discourses of history and culture. Trauma discourse
effectively reconstitutes the subject—even if it is a subject
absent from somewhere, by definition not alert to the traumatic event.
This way of privileging the subject again slips into a reconstitution
of the biographical subject, and that project is very suspect from a
poststructuralist perspective.

HF: Yet in one sense the poststructuralist critique of the
biographical subject is continued in the psychoanalytic
understanding of the traumatized subject, even as, from another
angle, it is also recouped there. I don’t think the two discourses are
as opposed as you suggest: both fix on slippages and
breakdowns—on aporias—in a way that sometimes suggests
another contemporary version of the sublime.

BB: But why hold out for a poststructuralist critique of the
subject now, or even then? Hasn’t it become evident that such
a critique prevents not only a reflection on the historical
foundations of postwar culture but also an understanding of
their traumatic conditions?

YAB: Why do you say that? How would Michel Foucault, for
example, prevent such an understanding?

BB: As far as I know, Foucault did not reflect on those conditions of
postwar culture in the way that Adorno, for example, did from the
forties onward. Adorno’s critique is always directed at both cultural
practice and the subject in post-Holocaust European and
American society.

YAB: Foucault’s critique of subjectivity doesn’t imply any disjunction
from historical struggles. He was very politically engaged, as you
know, especially at the time he was writing Discipline and
Punish and reflecting on the nature of power. And through his political
engagement, notably at the side of prisoners struggling for their
rights, he became very attentive to the way in which collective
memory—especially what he called “popular memory”—is violently
erased by the state and by the media. This is probably why, unlike
Adorno, he was reluctant to single out the Holocaust as a kind of
absolute limit of evil. And that is probably what prevented him,
contrary to Adorno, from being deaf to the student uprising in 1968.
HF: I agree, but the poststructuralist critique of the subject was questioned in other ways as well. It was seen to concern a particular kind of subject only: this was a critique initiated by feminist theory and advanced in postcolonial discourse. Both argued that many groups had not yet accrued to the very privileges that the poststructuralist critique wanted to throw into doubt or to dispense with altogether. Why critique a subjecthood, these groups argued, that was denied one in the first place?

BB: That was a very important argument.

HF: Yes, and another problem with the poststructuralist critique of the subject was that it was sometimes turned into a cliché about the construction of the subject—that we are all fashioned, top to bottom, socially—and this reductive version of the poststructuralist critique was not resistant enough to the consumerist modeling of the subject: that we can be made and remade continually in terms of new clothes, cars, and cuisines too—and art as well. For many people "postmodernism" is not much more than hip, knowing consumerism.

BB: The reception of Cindy Sherman, for example, supports that account.

HF: As I see it, the interest in the nineties in a traumatic subject—a subject fixed by trauma, stuck in abjection—was in part a reaction to that consumerist version of the constructed subject. It called into question the idea that we just float along as so many combinations of signs and commodities. So, however reductive it might seem now, and however grim then, trauma discourse did have a certain point, even perhaps a certain politics, and Cindy Sherman was important there as well (it's not as though she was blind to how her work was being taken up).

BB: Your first argument concerning the postcolonial caution about the poststructuralist critique provides a way to return to the question of globalization. There was a move to open up the focus of practices and institutions in Western Europe and the United States—to recognize that cultural representation can also be a form of political representation. With an almost missionary zeal the art world responded to the aspiration that all cultures, all countries, at whatever stage, might have access to contemporary artistic practices. That is politically progressive, even radical, but it is also naive, and sometimes problematic, because one problem in the globalization of culture is a failure to recognize the dialectics of dissemination—that inherent in this dissemination is the possibility of new forms of commodification and blockage as well as of new forms of self-constitution and self-representation. That contradiction is not well understood in the avid globalizing of current curatorial enterprises.

HF: To make this point more specific, we might consider what occurred between the moment of the "Les Magiciens de la Terre" show at the Centre Pompidou in 1989 and the present flourishing of international biennials, where the formats of work seem both fairly restricted and generally available (prominent models include installation art, the projected image or video, the vast pictorial photograph or photographic sequence, the chat-room filled with all sorts of texts, documents, images ...). "Magiciens" was an emphatic attempt to open up the center to the peripheries, even if it came at a time when the two couldn't be opposed in that manner any more. There was a great diversity of work and a concerted attention to local traditions. That was as recent as 1989, and yet today international exhibitions—Documenta, the biennials in Venice, Johannesburg, Gwangju, Istanbul, and so on—feel very different.

YAB: The model of "Les Magiciens de la Terre" was not so dissimilar to any colonial show. Things are different now in part because the market is two-way. Work flows in from South Africa, for example, but part of the art world also goes there, and its net can pick up anything. It's not exoticism any more; it's feeding the network of markets.

BB: A curator like Okwui Enwezor might say that we're looking at this phenomenon only from a hegemonic Western perspective, and that we don't see that the development of cultural activities within these countries has tremendous consequences for producers and receivers alike. They develop forms of representation, communication, and interaction that might not have been so readily established without the globalization of cultural practices.

YAB: In South Africa there has been a great surge in artistic practice since the end of apartheid, and alternative spaces of art have mushroomed. So has the number of artists.

BB: But we don't know yet at this moment whether a quantitative expansion is a desirable effect in and of itself. From the perspective of an art world that is more crowded than ever before, marked by extraordinary overproduction, the simple multiplication of artistic practices and alternative spaces might not be desirable if it's not linked to an actual agenda of new forms of political articulation through cultural means.

YAB: It's too early to say. But we can say now that there's an unbelievably sharp acceleration in artistic production and reception in many countries as a result of globalization.

RK: One possible positive of globalization is the internationalism of the art world today. This was very important in the early aspirations of the avant-garde—to turn away from nationalist culture and to move into a set of international connections.

HF: But, as we discussed in the first roundtable, that aspiration was often driven by faith in socialist revolution. What social projects guide the present internationalism?

BB: Corporate culture.
OK, what other social project? There are counters to corporate culture, to American Empire, even if at this point those counters often seem rather romantic (as those are articulated, for example, by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt). But then none of us is in a position to comment on what projects might be emerging in other parts of the globe. There is much interest, for instance, in contemporary art in China: what role might it assume internationally? Or art produced in the Indian subcontinent, which has its own modern history of national forms and international responses? Or in contemporary Islam? And so on. Postcolonial discourse gave us some conceptual tools with which to address these formations—to do with hybrid spaces and complicated temporalities—but how are those practices to be articulated with ones more familiar to us, in a manner that is neither restrictively particular nor glibly synthetic?

The opens up a question we haven’t confronted, but it goes to the heart not only of our own double status as modernist art historians and contemporary art critics, but also of the latter part of this book. Are there plausible ways to narrate the now myriad practices of contemporary art over the last twenty years at least? I don’t point to this period of time arbitrarily: in the last several years the two primary models we’ve worked to articulate different aspects of postwar art have become dysfunctional. I mean, on the one hand, the model of a medium-specific modernism challenged by an interdisciplinary postmodernism, and, on the other, the model of a historical avant-garde (i.e., ones critical of the old bourgeois institution of art such as Dada and Constructivism) and a neo-avant-garde that elaborates on this critique (we discussed both models in the first roundtable). Today the recursive strategy of the “neo” appears as attenuated as the oppositional logic of the “post” seems tired: neither suffices as a strong paradigm for artistic or cultural practice, and no other model stands in their stead; or, put differently, many local models compete, but none can hope to be paradigmatic. And we should note too that the methods discussed again here—psychoanalysis, Marxian social history, structuralism, and poststructuralism—are hardly thriving. For many this condition is a good thing: it permits artistic freedom and critical diversity. But our paradigm of no-paradigm has also abetted a flat indifference, a stagnant incommensurability, a consumerist-touristic culture of art sampling—and in the end is this posthistorical default in contemporary art any great improvement on the old historicist determinism of modernist art à la Greenberg and company? And then we have to compound this problem with the question of the narrativity of art in a global context.

The problem is not abstract: it’s there in the museum galleries (but not, interestingly, in the auction halls). It’s evident in the proliferation of single-artist and single-period museums—the Dia:Beacon shrine to Minimalism and Postminimalism is just one instance. It’s also apparent in the mix-and-match thematics of the Tate Modern, for example, with works from across the century clustered under iconographic headings like “Nude/Action/Body” or “Still Life/Object/Real Life.” And this sense of post-historical is, paradoxically enough, a common institutional effect today: we wander through museum spaces as if after the end of time.

For the most part participants in the contemporary art world (and that includes ourselves) have not yet developed a systematic understanding of how that once integral element of the bourgeois public sphere (represented by the institution of the avant-garde as much as by the institution of the museum) has irretrievably disappeared. It has been replaced by social and institutional formations for which we not only do not have any concepts and terms yet, but whose modus operandi remains profoundly opaque and incomprehensible to most of us. For example, we have more artists, curators and exhibition organizers than ever before in the postwar period, yet none of these operate in any way comparable to the way they functioned from the 1940s to the 1960s. We have ever larger and ever more imposing museum buildings and institutions emerging all around us, but their social function, once comparable to the sphere of public education or the university, for example, has become completely diffuse. These new functions range from those of a bank—which holds, if not the gold standard, at least the quality and value warranties for investors and speculators in the art market—to those of a congregational space, semi-public at that, in which rites are enacted that promise to compensate for, if not to obliterate, the actual loss of our sense of a once given desire and demand for political and social self-determination.

But couldn’t we say that such a current amnesia is in great part what motivated us to write this book? I don’t think we should delude ourselves into thinking that we are going to change the global colonization of the cultural sphere by spectacle, but I don’t think we should whine either. After all, we’ve been united in our desire to reshuffle the cards, not only to revisit canonical moments of modernism and “postmodernism,” but also to retrieve from oblivion many aspects of the cultural production of these past hundred-plus years that had been ignored or deliberately repressed. In doing so, I think, we have presented a much more complex tableau than the one served to us when we were students. Who knows, it might have some laboratory effect.