The necessity of the new: between the modern and the contemporary

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Abstract
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The necessity of the new: Between the modern and the contemporary

Perhaps the art historian of the near future will tell us why it was that the museum, the academy, and high critical discourse came to such a consensus so swiftly during the first decade of the twenty-first century. James Meyer (2009)¹

"The contemporary" is a curious neologism’, observed James Meyer, as the definite article lends this ‘adjective or noun denoting a shared temporality of persons, things, or events ... a new importance’.² The definite article announced the artworld’s big discovery around the turn of the twenty-first century: that the word ‘contemporary’ had, like the term ‘modern’ before it, acquired a theoretical indeed metaphysical density. The contemporary, as more than a few art critics say these days, is the new modern. To make this claim, whether as an act of succession or negation, is to invest in a loaded history. Ultimately, as a new conception of the new, the contemporary is a judgement on an old theory of the new, ‘modernism’.

A semantic history of new art

Bernard Smith, always alert to the historical and theoretical nuances of words, observed in 1973 that ‘all art was once contemporary’. And he added, ‘all art which still exists even though produced in remote antiquity is, in an important sense, contemporary. It is in the present and may be seen and admired in the present.’³ He was introducing Concerning contemporary art, a compilation of the annual lecture series on ‘contemporary art’ given at Sydney’s Power Institute of Contemporary Art between 1968 and 1973. His point was that in
1973 the etymology of the term misled the unwary reader: ‘the meaning of contemporary art ... that is in general present usage ... denotes the avant-garde art of the twentieth century’, though he added, this usage is already ‘beginning to fade into history.’

Smith's short introduction sought to show that art and its criticism has a semantic history that is implicated in the history of ideas, even when its terms (like ‘contemporary’) appear to be neutral descriptors. His point is made more compelling by his omission of the term ‘modernism’, suggesting that in 1973 it had little currency. In the 1960s a new seemingly objective term appeared to name the new: namely the ‘new’—as in Aldo Pellegrini’s New Tendencies in Art, which was a history of art since 1945, and Gregory Battcock’s The new art, an anthology of art criticism since 1960, both published in 1966. While hardly a new term in artworld lexicon, here its use seems to harden into a name, reflecting the crisis of meaning and purpose in avant-garde art at this time. This trend probably began with Harold Rosenberg's collection of essays with the ironic title, The tradition of the new (1960). He observed that by 1960, ‘the famous “modern break with tradition” has lasted long enough to have produced its own tradition’, creating its own ‘contradictions, myths, absurdities’. These myths and absurdities were enough reason to radically rethink what constituted the new in art.

This was the starting point of Battcock’s anthology, which was predicated on the belief that there was an emerging ‘new role’ for the critic, who now ‘is consciously engaged in the preparation of a new aesthetic, so much so that it is difficult to disassociate their work from the art it purports to evaluate.’ Despite Battcock’s sense of the theoretical turn in new art and criticism, he used the
terms ‘modern’, ‘contemporary’ and ‘new’ with equal abandon and no sense of theoretical distinction.

The oldest essay in Battcock’s anthology was Clement Greenberg’s ‘Modernist painting’ (1960). Why did it, in the decade after the publication of Battcock’s anthology, become such a seminal treatise?

Greenberg’s bête noire, Marcel Duchamp, gave the most succinct answer. One could be forgiven that he had just read Greenberg’s essay and immediately understood its significance: ‘To imagine the future, we should perhaps start from the more or less recent past, … I believe that to try and guess what will happen tomorrow, we must group the ‘isms’ together through their common factor, instead of differentiating them.’ In the coming decades Greenberg’s notion of ‘modernism’ as an abstract meta-term for ‘all the ‘isms’ which have followed one another during the last century’ would become gospel. His theory of modernism is now etched in the annals of art history as the period style of twentieth century art. And, as Duchamp predicted, this drew a line under the recent past as if the very term had settled its differences, allowing the present to reconceive the new. Existing terms such as ‘avant-garde’ and ‘advanced art’ quickly fell out of favour as critics scrambled to brand the new new. Briefly named ‘postmodernism’, today only ‘contemporary’ has a purchase on the naming rights of recent art.

**Theorising the modern in the twentieth century**

‘Modern’, ‘avant-garde’ and ‘contemporary’ are terms that entered the lexicon of the artworld in the nineteenth century, to become the compass points—the holy trinity—of twentieth century art criticism, especially after World War One. Lacking the empirical precision of names reserved for art
movements—the ‘isms’ such as fauvism, cubism or surrealism—these allied terms had sufficient ambiguity to provide traction in the ideological and theoretical discourses of the day. They seemed to mean much the same thing— and for many commentators they were more or less synonymous—yet had enough difference for the subtle polemicist to make all the difference. Of the three, ‘modern’ was the most important. As a central organizing concept in Western thought since the Enlightenment, it provided the theoretical coordinates from which the notions of the avant-garde and contemporary took their bearing.

Considered together, these three terms suggest an art of revolution and negation of the past, thus recalling the original fifth century formulation, modernus (just now), which was conceived as a disavowal of the recent past (pagan Rome) in the name of the present (Christian Rome). Paul Ricoeur argues that the modern, always at the vanguard of history—at the point where the past continuously gives way to the present—necessarily has an endlessly shifting content, such that its ‘full and precise’ definition requires one to at all times say and write “’our’ modernity” i.e. to always reconceive its terms from the perspective of the present or contemporaneity—what Terry Smith (after Fredric Jameson) aptly dubbed an ‘ontology of the present’.

However, Ricoeur points out, ‘the discourse of modernity changes register ... when it loses sight’ of its temporal ontology and ‘directs itself instead to values that our modernity is supposed to defend and illustrate.’ He saw this occurring in late-eighteenth-century texts that inherited the ambitions of the Enlightenment. They defined the new in historicist terms of progress, and the modern as ‘the balance sheet of the accomplishment of Western consciousness,
presented as a guide for humanity as a whole'.

Hegel developed it into a philosophy of a universal and absolute History, a transcendental force that he believed had culminated in the Western European world of his day. Later in the century Social Evolutionism made it into a racist ideology—modern versus primitive—that justified Western imperialism. This idea still lurks in normative definitions of modernity defined in terms of 'the West and the Rest'.

Greenberg, the most influential artworld ideologue of modernism, also focused on a set of operations associated with the Enlightenment. In 'Modernist Painting' he marks up the balance sheet according to Kant's critical method. Greenberg held onto the Enlightenment's promise of the rationalisation of knowledge in the aesthetic sphere. 'The necessity of formalism', said Greenberg in 1971, hinges on its 'hard-headed' scrutiny of the inner logic of the aesthetic faculty.

He was reiterating a point he had made a decade earlier, in 'Modernist painting':

> The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it.

What this meant, said Greenberg, is the reduction of the medium through processes of negation to its essential or 'irreducible' components. These 'limiting conditions' in turn formed the basis of modernism's aesthetic project—a project that he had first outlined in these terms in his discussion of avant-garde art in 1939.
Further, Greenberg traced, in Hegelian fashion, the progress of this negation from Manet to Pollock, as if History demanded that each medium find its own specific language or logos. Thus contemporary art, or modernism, exchanges its contemporaneity for a program that is delimited by historical precedents, or more precisely, Hegel’s world historical spirit.

Greenberg also consciously abandoned the temporal ontology of *modernus*. As with the term contemporary art in 1973, for him the literal meaning of modernism did not apply, and instead denoted the ideological values of the avant-garde. Attacking the commonplace idea that takes avant-garde art ‘to mean a break with the past’, Greenberg counter-intuitively proclaimed: ‘The avant-garde’s principal reason for being is, on the contrary, to maintain continuity: continuity of standards of quality—the standards if you like of the old Masters’.  

Greenberg was not alone. The other influential theorist of modernism, the philosopher and sociologist Theodore Adorno, also resisted the idea that history could be surpassed. In her essay on Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt argued that this resistance ‘was initiated by those who were most aware of [and wanted to redress] the irreparability of the break in tradition’ that World War One announced. The impact of the War shaped Greenberg’s and Adorno’s thinking in other ways. In particular, it convinced them that modernity was a totalizing regime. Each believed that the world faced a bleak feature in which the ever-increasing hegemony of the ‘culture industry’ and other capitalist formations choked the human spirit. This framed their notion of modernist art as a site of resistance. Greenberg described avant-garde art ‘as a holding operation ... the response, in effect, to an ongoing emergency’.  

And, as is now clear, this really
was an emergency for the West, as it marked the end of their global empires and the rise of long earmarked as ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’. As it quickly became clear, Western culture was indeed at a crossroads, which the usage of terms such as ‘avant-garde’, ‘modern art’ and ‘contemporary art’ began to reflect.

While, in the post-War period, many commentators used the terms avant-garde, modernism and contemporary in relatively lose and synonymous ways, a pattern began to emerge as these terms were increasingly roped into ideological service. *Avant-garde* generally denoted the most radical art, or as Greenberg said, ‘advanced art’. *Contemporary* was used to describe the most recent but yet to be defined art, especially if it diverged from the aesthetic concerns of ‘modern art’, which were associated with the abstract tendencies of art emanating from Paris. The ‘School of Paris’, wrote Harold Rosenberg in 1940, ‘had a definite style; the *Modern*.’ However, he added, there was nothing French about ‘the Modern’. It was universal; it ‘belonged to no one country’ but to the world—as if the world spirit had taken up residence in Paris.

**The modern reified**

The distinction between modern and contemporary art became more attenuated as the sense of the French School’s exhaustion was increasingly felt during the course of World War Two. In 1940, shortly after the Fall of Paris, Harold Rosenberg wrote: ‘The laboratory of the twentieth century has been shut down.’ No longer ‘suspended like a magic island’ by ‘currents flowing throughout the world’, Parisian modernism lost its purchase on the avant-garde.
From various perspectives, by the mid-twentieth century the idea of the modern seemed a thing of the past. Everyone felt, as Greenberg remarked in 1948, ‘the exhaustion on the part of those who in the first three decades of the century created what is known as modern art’. Greenberg had felt this since he began writing art criticism in the late 1930s. Then he used the term ‘modern’ as a general descriptor of School of Paris abstraction, but one that suggested middlebrow connotations. In 1939 he referred to ‘the infinite gradations of popularized "modernism" and "modernistic" kitsch’, and reserved the term ‘avant-garde art’ for the real thing. So it is somewhat ironic that he, more than anyone else, is responsible for the revival of the idea of the modern after 1960.

While Greenberg never stopped using the term ‘avant-garde’, after 1960—with the publication of his essay ‘Modernist painting’—he increasingly substituted it with ‘modernism’. He explained why in 1979: ‘The "avant-garde" was what Modernism was called at first, but this term has become a good deal compromised by now as well as remaining misleading.’ He didn’t like its militant connotations: ‘Contrary to the common notion, Modernism or the avant-garde didn’t make its entrance by breaking with the past.’

The important point is that modernism was a substitute for what he called avant-garde not modern art. If modern art referred to an early-twentieth-century Parisian art style—abstraction—avant-garde art referred to a ‘culture that had a ‘superior consciousness of history’ that coincided chronologically ... with the first bold development of scientific thought in Europe’ i.e. Marxism, and began in Bohemia, i.e. mid-nineteenth-century Paris. Thus Greenberg’s influential essay ‘Modernist painting’ (1960) effectively reified the modern, changing its meaning from the particular School of Paris style (i.e. post-cubist
abstract art) to a general current that had kept ‘culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence’ for the previous one hundred years.\textsuperscript{28}

In calling it a ‘culture’ and one with a ‘superior consciousness of history’,\textsuperscript{29} Greenberg gave the idea of modernism a theoretical density. His theorising spoke to the theoretical turn of the 1960s, which, in part, explains why at this time ‘modernism’ became the accepted name of both a period style and its theoretical justification. However, as Duchamp had intimated, in naming and thereby branding the panoply of ‘isms’ of the previous 100 years of art, Greenberg had effectively cleared the ground for imagining the future. As this realization began to penetrate the artworld consciousness, the term ‘modernism’ lost credibility as a term for new art, as Greenberg was the first to realise.

**Modernism lost**

While Greenberg and Adorno developed their very similar theories of modernism in the mid-twentieth century, only in the 1980s did these theories solidify into an accepted fiction of twentieth-century art. This process, which began in the 1960s, can be tracked in Greenberg’s criticism. In the first essay printed in *Concerning contemporary art*, Greenberg’s 1968 lecture ‘Avant-garde attitudes: New art in the sixties’, he moved freely between the terms ‘advanced art’, ‘contemporary art’ and ‘avant-garde art’, but made no mention of ‘modernism’. Arguably, this is because his topic was current unmodernist trends, which, with their ‘rash of labels’ seemed ‘in a state of confusion’\textsuperscript{30} and bore little resemblance to modernism as he had defined it eight years earlier.

In the lecture, Greenberg made a point of emphasising the radical change that occurred around 1960, when ‘Abstract Expressionism’—which for
Greenberg was the culmination of modernism—having lost ‘its vitality well before that’, no longer dominated the scene. Now, he said, ‘something new is there that was not there in Abstract Expressionism when it first emerged’. Greenberg made the same point but with different more abstract terminology in 1983, arguing that ‘since the triumph of abstract painting, since the real time of modernism, the old curricula have gone out’, and ‘fashion went in the world of contemporary art’.

Greenberg believed that modernism's institutional triumph around 1960—when ‘the avant-garde is left alone with itself, and in full possession of the "scene"’—signalled its defeat as a culture of resistance: ‘When everybody is a revolutionary the revolution is over’. Modernism’s triumph, he said a few years later, was due to popular democratic taste, that is, the triumph of the very hegemonic and homogenizing modernity that he never tired of decrying. This ‘middlebrow’ coup was cemented, he said, when it became widely but mistakenly accepted ‘that the reason for modernism’s success in the past was that it had shocked prevailing taste. That it had been far out, that it had been new, new, new’.

Ever the polemicist, Greenberg never makes a definitive announcement on the end of modernism. He ended his 1979 Sydney lecture on postmodernism with a defiant note: ‘But I happen to think that Modernism isn’t finished.’ The important point, however, is that since the 1960s he was preoccupied by modernism's ending. In 1971, in a special issue of a literary journal on postmodernism, he observed that modernism had already failed in literature and that it looked like failing in visual art within the next decade.
Greenberg might seem a poor champion of modernism. From his first criticism he diagnosed it as tenuous and in crisis. In 1939 he warned: ‘the dealers in modernist art are still in business, and the publishers still publish some “difficult” poetry. But the avant-garde itself, already sensing the danger, is becoming more and more timid every day that passes.’\(^{39}\) This pessimism never left him. From the 1960s he was continually haunted by modernism’s end. In this respect the postmodernist critics who, in the 1980s, vehemently attacked his theory of modernism fulfilled its prophecy. Hal Foster later admitted that we (in \textit{October}) made Greenberg’s polemics ‘more central than it was through our sustained opposition to it’.\(^{40}\)

While Adorno and Greenberg tended to characterize modernism as an embattled partisan position promulgated by a defiant minority, rather than a general period style, ‘Modernist painting’ can be read as if Greenberg is claiming modernism as a characteristic mode of post-Enlightenment critique that affirmed the historical tendency and aesthetic values of Western culture. However, this reification of modernism into a period style is mostly due to the politics of 1980’s postmodernism as promulgated by \textit{October}. Drawing on recent French poststructuralism, it launched an attack on Greenberg’s theory of modernism in order to justify the postconceptual character of contemporary New York art practices.

In the first substantial theorization of postmodernism that \textit{October} published (in 1980), Craig Owens distinguished between ‘the self-critical tendency of modernism’ and the ‘deconstructive impulse’ of postmodernism\(^{41}\) that (in poststructuralist fashion) counters the reductive negations of modernist critique by opening discourse to its other. Owens thus drew a sharp distinction
between modernism (as theorised by Greenberg) and postmodernism. So too did Rosalind Krauss, who the next year, in 1981, wrote in *October* that ‘a truly postmodernist art’ acts ‘to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition’. And Krauss added: ‘It is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication.’ In its surpassing, modernism became an ancestral figure, now reified as a once dominant mode of thinking rather than an embattled avant-garde seeking refuge in the ideological confusions of its times. The future of the contemporary hinged on the efficacy of this surpassing.

**Modernism found**

If ‘the contemporary’ is a recent *artworld* discovery, in other disciplines, interest in modernism increased. Instead of the end of modernity is its multiplication. However, the ideas of multiple modernities and the contemporary emerged at the same time and from postmodernism’s radical revisions of previous conceptions of the modern. The reason for these radical revisions is not, as Greenberg would have thought, a matter of taste, but the failure of existing models of modernity and modernism to address the current globalism. The very ontology of modernity needs to be reconceived because, argued S. N. Eisenstadt in 2000, ‘The actual developments in [non-Western] modernizing societies have refuted the homogenizing and hegemonic assumptions of this Western program of modernity’—assumptions that were implicit in Greenberg’s and Adorno’s theories of modernism.

Poststructuralism, which gathered force during the 1960s to eventually impact all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, undercut both the
hegemonic notion of modernity and what Greenberg called the ‘necessity of formalism’. Its greatest impact was in nurturing a broad ranging postcolonial critique. While particularly influential in disciplines such as literature, history, anthropology and sociology, postcolonialism had less impact in the artworld, which throughout the 1980s remained focused on Western art. In focusing attention on non-Western cultures and their engagements with modernity, postcolonial critics not only laid the ground for considering modernism within a global post-Western context, they also expanded the possibilities of what modernity might be and had been.

Occurring as a new multi-national global economy and political order began to form after the demise of the old European empires, postcolonial criticism revealed the formation of twentieth-century multiple-modernisms across the world. Here modernism might still be defined as the struggle for agency in the welter of capitalism, but formed by anti-colonial struggles rather than the hegemony of Western civilization, it lacked the defiant negativity of Greenberg and Adorno. Further, in taking on expressive forms that responded to local traditions, in its multiple formations postcolonial modernisms could not be reduced to any one style, let alone a Western period style. It had taken on a post-Western dimension that is an essential characteristic of the contemporary—at least as defined by Terry Smith. His theory of the contemporary was nurtured by his long-standing interest in such other modernisms and their relationship to the post World War Two hegemony of New York modernism.

In Greenberg’s and Adorno’s schemes, the impositions of modernity and modernism’s resistance had been exclusively Western affairs. This was a common assumption at the time. Outside Western centres, it seemed, modernity
and modernism were either incomplete or delayed. Modernity was most advanced and so most totalizing and repressive in the Western metropolis, which is where the most ‘advanced’ modernism was also to be found. This idea, which in 1974 Smith had called the ‘provincialism bind’, effectively denied agency to the rest. ‘There is’, observed Neil Lazarus in 1985, ‘an inability, in Adorno’s thinking [and it is also true of Greenberg’s] to appreciate the cogency of counter-hegemonic activity originating precisely not in the center but at the margins of the world system.’

Poststructuralism was also the galvanizing methodology of October’s postmodernist critique. Besides underwriting the distinction between postmodernism and modernism (discussed above), poststructuralism also provided a methodology for deconstructing Greenberg’s theory of modernism through reprising its othering of dada and surrealism.

Those who, according to Greenberg, benefited from modernism’s middlebrow triumph, the ‘Minimal, Conceptual, Inter-media, Performance, Pattern—all in pursuit of the far out’—had no place in the avant-garde. Not surprisingly, critics who began speaking for these beneficiaries privileged an alternative anti-modernist lineage in dada and surrealism that Greenberg had dismissed as middlebrow infatuation with novelty. While this line of thinking, which would become a central preoccupation of the October critics, undermined the notion of modernism as a period style that had been superseded, Owens had left open the ‘possibility of an alternate reading of modernist works’. This was the option that the October critics increasingly took. It was, said Crimp, ‘a modernism conceived differently’—by which he meant differently to Greenberg’s ‘very particular and partisan conception of modernism’.52
If *October* offered a fuller account of twentieth-century Western art than
Greenberg’s partisan ‘modernism’, it is still one that unfolds in the aftermath of
the European Enlightenment. As Adorno’s student, Jürgen Habermas, pointed
out, the dadaist and surrealist ‘negation of culture’, their attempt ‘to force a
reconciliation of art and life’, is also a consequence of (or reaction to) ‘the
autonomy of the aesthetic sphere’.\(^5\) The major achievement of *October* was to
write a revisionist theory and history of twentieth-century modernism in which
the anti-modernism of dada and surrealism culminates in conceptualism and
postmodernism. This, and not Greenberg’s account in ‘Modernist painting’, is
now the accepted history of twentieth-century art, packaged as a seminal text
book in *Art since 1900: Modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*.\(^4\)

Instead of expanding the notion of modernism to meet late-twentieth-
century globalism, *October* shrunk it to a Western-centric discourse playing out
the endgame of European post-Enlightenment thought. The very success of
*October* in setting the artworld agenda in the 1980s meant that in the 1990s the
idea of modernism, even in its revisionist anti and post-modernist forms, had to
be terminated in order for the artworld to address globalism: thus the necessity
of the contemporary.

**The necessity of the contemporary**

While there was not a lot of consensus in the 2009 *October* ‘Questionnaire
on the Contemporary’, there was general agreement that a turning point from
the modern to the contemporary occurred around 1990, and that it had a lot to
do with globalism.\(^5\) The artworld’s belated global consciousness is first
glimpsed in the widespread critical reaction to MoMA’s 1984 Primitivism
exhibition and took root in several exhibitions during the following decade. *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) was the most influential. Its innovation was the contemporaneous presence of Western and non-Western artworks. At first many were skeptical. Critics and even some of the participating Western artists condemned it as an act of neocolonialism. And, as one critic asked: ‘How does one make judgments of “quality” about objects completely foreign to our culture and experience?’\(^{56}\) The young French curator, Nicolas Bourriaud, immediately recognized that this was the wrong question. He can be credited with first identifying *Magiciens*’ groundbreaking nature and glimpsing in it the outlines of a future agenda for art.

Bourriaud was most struck by the exhibition’s challenge to existing spatial and temporal categories of art and criticism. He repeats throughout his review this same point:

> it is impossible to subject this “first world exhibition of contemporary art” to the categories of traditional criticism\(^ {57}\) …

> For the first time in a long while, a curator has forced us to rethink art in time and space, reexamine our values and our understanding of the word “art” and reflect on the mechanism of the market\(^ {58}\) …

The exhibition’s intercultural openings particularly intrigued him: ‘One couldn’t help noticing a number of tentative dialogues that were cut short’, as ‘between Richard Long and the Australian Aborigines’;\(^ {59}\) and he pointed approvingly to Huang’s installation of mounds of pulp made from newsprint and books ‘run through a washing machine’. One, ceremoniously placed in a wooden box, was titled *The history of Chinese art and the History of Western art put into a washing machine for two minutes.*\(^ {60}\)
While Bourriaud judged it ‘an exhibition whose "directions for use" are still to be found’, he glimpsed in it a new poetics that a few years later he would dub ‘relational art’. While several critics, recognized that *Magiciens* was, as Bourriaud said, a ‘paradigm exhibition for postmodernism’, the term had by then outworn its usefulness. Like many critics at the time, in his review Bourriaud preferred the term ‘contemporary art’, used in its familiar guise as a descriptive term for a new art yet to be theorized. He clearly felt that *Magiciens* signaled the need for a new theory of art. ‘Relational art’, a term he coined in 1995, was his attempt to fill this gap. While reasonably successful, it never managed to do the conceptual or ontological work that the term modern had. It became the name of a movement rather than a period style.

In the same year, 1995, just a year after Greenberg had died at the age of 85, the US philosopher Arthur Danto suggested that the notion of ‘the contemporary’, which had become increasingly ubiquitous in artworld discourse, had by default already taken on the conceptual work once done by the idea of the modern. Like Bourriaud, he identified a new temporality in play—a temporality that, he emphasized, had negated modernism’s addiction to negation. Unlike modern art, he said, ‘contemporary art has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won’.

It did not matter that the modernism Danto interned bore little resemblance to Greenberg’s modernism, which, as we have seen, did not repudiate the past. Greenberg’s negations were of a different order. However, this widespread ‘mistaken’ understanding reflected in Danto’s definition was, as Greenberg admitted, the prevailing middlebrow view that underwrote the
triumph of modernism. Moreover, the important point was that the idea of modernism was no longer seen to provide a credible account of contemporary art. Danto had judged the moment well, as did the German art historian, Hans Belting, who independently reiterated Danto’s message. They finally buried a body that had been pronounced dead many times, effectively announcing a new era.

Terry Smith is the first art historian to begin a serious attempt to map the new terrain of life after the internment of modernism. He began his topography where Danto had left off, quoting him in the 2001 lecture at Sydney’s Artspace that first announced his quest: ‘just as “modern” had come to denote a style and even a period, and not just recent art, “contemporary” has come to designate something more than simply the art of the present moment’.

This is Danto’s definition of ‘the contemporary’ in 1995:

- as a period it is defined by the lack of stylistic unity ... there is in consequence no possibility of a narrative direction.

This is Smith in 2011:

- the variety of ... visual arts being produced all over the world could no longer be positioned relative to some broad, all-encompassing narrative of art’s historical development (such as modernism followed by postmodernism). For all of their evident differences (indeed, because the evidence of their difference was so intense) they became suddenly – in the first decade of the twenty-first century – simply coexistent, nakedly contemporaneous.

Smith’s originality was to articulate the post-Western (though not anti-Western) nature of the contemporary, which Danto never grasped. Bourriaud
too would become increasingly interested in ‘planetary negotiations’, but like many contemporary critics his vision remains delimited by a Western worldview.

Smith also goes further than Danto in providing a justification for the term ‘contemporary’, and in doing so, better understands its essential character. His philological move recalled that of his former teacher and mentor, Bernard Smith. Noting that it was for many years a synonym of modern art, and pointing to the philological complexity of the term, Smith observed that in the modern era it acquired a meaning foreign to its etymology: not a co-temporality but one defined in terms of temporal oppositions between the present and the past, modernity and tradition. However, in recent times the term began reverting to its original etymology: living or occurring at the same time—a sign that the idea of the modern was losing its former hegemony. This original meaning of contemporary, he argued, encapsulates the dominant narrative of the art practice it now describes.

However it is defined, the contemporary has become the grand narrative of our time by force of its sheer presence in contemporary discourse. This means that it is a critical term, and more than this, a mindset, Ideal or what the British philosopher Peter Osborne, in a book published in 2013, calls a ‘fiction’, rather than just a descriptive term that signifies the totality of works being produced today. “The contemporary”, argues Osborne, “has the transcendental status of a condition” by which social experience is made ‘historically intelligible’.

Osborne’s underlying point—which he shares with Smith—is that the concept of the ‘contemporary’ has acquired the historical-ontological significance that the ‘modern’ formerly had, thus usurping its former paradigmatic function.
Osborne argues that this ontological shift is profound because it fundamentally alters our apriori intuitions of space and time. If Smith mapped its manifestation in a broad outline of contemporary art across the globe, Osborne uncovers its philosophical ground, effectively providing the theoretical foundations for Smith’s art historiography—or, as we shall see, a particular part of it. Like Danto and Smith, he focused on the temporality of the contemporary as its defining feature.

Modern temporality, says Osborne, is ‘inherently self-surpassing’, eternally transient and futurist, whereas contemporary temporality is eternally present, meaning that there is a ‘fictive co-presentness of a multiplicity of times’. Osborne calls it a ‘disjunctive’ or ‘distributive unity’, which, he says, ‘considerably complicates the question of periodization’, imposing ‘a constantly shifting periodizing dynamic’. Disjunctive and distributive unity is also a characteristic of its spatiality. What was formerly incommensurable in the modern—the old and new, Western and non-Western, centre and periphery (and one could add other oppositions), enter new productive relations in the contemporary as we slip more easily between these categories. The distributive logic of the contemporary sets in play relational systems that are dialogical rather than binary, which also was Bourriaud’s claim. Osborne aptly called it a ‘de-bordering’. Difference has not been annulled but its borders have been opened, so that we can now travel as if through a wormhole to other worlds, and do it without leaving our own. In this quantum state of contemporaneity, we can simultaneously be in not just multiple places but also multiple time zones. Today the long dead, even the modern, can be contemporary. Indeed, we are currently
witnessing the history of modernism being re-written according to the paradigms of the contemporary.

While Osborne diagnoses the condition of the contemporary in similar terms to Smith, his prognosis is very different. Oddly, his densely argued philosophy of contemporary art owes much to the classical German philosophical tradition, from Kant, Hegel and the Romantics to Adorno—the very tradition that provided the philosophical justification of Western modernism within a post-Enlightenment frame. One reason that Greenberg’s and Adorno’s theories of modernism are so similar is that they were both schooled in this German philosophical tradition. Osborne is their heir.

Despite Osborne’s analysis of the temporality of the contemporary, he remains wedded to what Danto identified as the raison d’être of modernism: negation. In Osborne’s scheme the contemporary is the most recent stage of modernism in its ongoing negations. In tracing ‘its practices of negation’ beyond the surface appearances of style that normally preoccupy art historians (which, Danto and Smith also argue no longer matter in contemporary art) to those operating ‘at the fundamental level of the concepts of “art” and “the arts” themselves’, he follows Greenberg and Adorno. His originality is to discern not a singular modernism but different historically constituted modernisms, from romanticism to the ‘postconceptual’, as if each is a distinct ‘species’ within the ‘genus’ of an overarching aesthetic modernism.

Here Osborne’s differences with Smith are most marked. Smith locates ‘the contemporary’ in the ‘aftermath of modernity’, when ‘the great sustaining narratives supplied by modernity … have had their day’. His analysis of this shift, which he said is ‘his core art historical idea’, more or less follows
Greenberg’s sense of a turning tide after 1960: the sense of visceral excitement that many felt in abstract-expressionism around 1960, said Smith, ‘was deceptive. Everything that was essential to’ such work ‘was already changing—and, it turns out, changing fundamentally’. As Smith repeats several times: ‘The big story, now so blindingly obvious, is the shift—nascent since the 1950s, emergent in the 1960s, contested in the 1970s, but unmistakable since the 1980s—from modern to contemporary art.’ This shift, emphasised Smith, was profound: ‘Fundamental paradigms of what it was to make art a work of art—residues of centuries-old practices as well as those inaugurated in the modern era—were suddenly shifted.’

There is nothing original in Smith’s diagnosis that the modern now appears as ‘the art of a historical period that is substantially complete’. Brois, Groys, for example, makes a similar point. Smith is, on one level, simply reporting what he calls ‘a pervasive sense’ that has run through artworld discourse for at least thirty years and was first analysed in ‘postmodern and poststructuralist theory’. In endorsing this ‘pervasive sense’, Smith would seem to follow Krauss’s verdict that today we look back at modernism ‘from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide.’ Smith’s originality lies in his qualifying analysis of this ‘historical divide’. Firstly, despite the fundamental paradigm shift of the contemporary, he diagnosis a ‘persistent modernism’ in its most dominant institutional current—which he aptly calls ‘remodernism’. However, at the same time, Smith repositions this ‘persistent modernism’ within a transforming field of multiple currents generated by what he described, in 2013, as: various transformatory indigeneities, by continuing traditional practices, by ongoing Modern art cultures (as distinct from modernist
ones), by highly evolved forms of critical, postcolonial (that is, decolonizing) art, and by new forms of contemporary creativity.\textsuperscript{84}

Osborne, on the other hand, thoroughly embeds the contemporary in a deep history of Western modernism.\textsuperscript{85} He is generally friendly to Greenberg’s analysis (and more so Adorno’s), which he considers the heir of a major current in modernism running through Baudelaire and Roger Fry and which after 1960 ran out of steam. He is hostile to Krauss’s account of postmodernism\textsuperscript{86} (and those of the October critics more generally), which he believes reify this ‘aesthetic’ current of modernism in order to privilege its so-called usurper, postmodernism. Nevertheless, like Krauss he argues for an expanded view of modernism, which for him includes a second ‘parallel and competing’ but also ‘overlapping’ ontological current of modernism, running through Duchamp and culminating in conceptualism and current postconceptualist practices that he identifies with ‘the contemporary’. While essentially the same current as the antimodernist concerns that October critics propose in their genealogy of postmodernism, Osborne argues for a more entangled and deeper history that he traces, in a dense but brilliant analysis, to Kant and Jena romanticism.\textsuperscript{87}

Compared to Osborne idealist account, which is grounded in a substantial philosophical infrastructure, Smith’s empirically driven analysis—what he aptly calls ‘show and tell’\textsuperscript{88}—can appear superficial (especially in its textbook version). However, Smith’s approach is its strength. Smith has simply engaged with a lot more contemporary art from all corners of the globe than Osborne, and for this reason has a much greater sense of its ‘multeity’ (a thing that is many),\textsuperscript{89} of how to survive while ‘drowning in a rising tide of particularity’\textsuperscript{90} and negotiating the wild crosscurrents of multiple histories and centres that have discarded the old
grand narratives of time (History) and place (centre/periphery). In this respect, Smith’s main contribution to the conceptualisation of the contemporary has been to think through more thoroughly than Osborne the repercussions of globalism on art historiography. By comparison, Osborne’s model—which is more focused on the philosophical repercussions of the ontology of the present—seems an attempt to fit a limited engagement with mostly Western contemporary art into an existing Western-centric scheme (thus its underlying idealism).

The ultimate test of Osborne’s model, and also Smith’s, is how it deals with the globalism that both identify as a constitutive feature of contemporary art? ‘Global modernity’, Osborne admits, ‘presupposes a certain global contemporaneity’ that disavows the singular subject of what he calls ‘classical modernity’. In its place is the collective distributive inter-subjectivity that characterizes the contemporary, and which gives theoretical coherence to the discourse of ‘regionally specific “multiple modernities”’. Such discourse, says Osborne, is part of ‘the booming genre of global histories’ that are providing ‘meaningful content to these fictions’ of the contemporary.91

Like anyone who attends biennales these days, Osborne is well aware of non-Western contemporary art. However, his analysis remains Western-centric. While he would claim that at play is a universal capitalism and not the West per se,92 at every turn he re-affirms the West as the privileged angel of capitalism and modernity.

Using Charles Merewether’s 2006 Sydney Biennale Zones of Contact as his example, Osborne claims, with some justification, that ‘the more successful an artist, the less likely they are to live and work in their country of origin, or indeed in any single place,’ and that their movement is ‘overwhelmingly “inwards”, from
the periphery to Europe ... and New York’. While Osborne thus acknowledges a striking feature of contemporary art—the role of non-Western artists in its formation—the significant point is their Westernisation. Despite the disjunctive logic that he ascribes to contemporary spatiality, the old provincialism model of Western hegemony prevails, even if in a more (neo-) liberal guise. Indigenous artists, for example, will recognise in Osborne’s guide to the contemporary a familiar scene:

it is precisely displaced postcolonial subjects who can most successfully represent themselves as “native”. The native itself, on the other hand, (in so far as the term retains a meaningful referent in such an interconnected world) can acquire its status as “informant” only by being represented as such, by others, within international cultural spaces.\textsuperscript{93}

If this doesn’t seem of much use to remote Indigenous artists, it rings true, as the most successful Indigenous artists in the contemporary artworld have been displaced postcolonial subjects living in Western centres, such as Jimmie Durham, not the remote Indigenous artists that Smith also champions.

Osborne’s is a powerful argument. It correctly reads the dominant state of play, and provides a theoretical justification for it. In this respect his argument is an apologia for the status quo—the West’s institutional embrace of the contemporary. Thus he locates the relational agencies that contemporary art must negotiate as it ‘mediates the global dialectics of places, non-places and flows’ in the dominant ‘institutional forms of the market, the large scale international exhibition (biennale, triennale etc.), and the migrancy of artists’.\textsuperscript{94} This privileges a particular set of practices and artists, and occludes an important
consequence of the ontological condition of the contemporary: namely that its relational transnational space also inhabits the most regional and local of contexts in ways that undo what Smith, many years ago, called the ‘provincialism bind’. Smith, on the other hand, is open to the potential post-provincialism and post-Western nature of globalism. Smith is unusual amongst critics of the contemporary to include remote Indigenous art in his account of contemporary art, and to pay as much attention to regional art production as that in the conventional centres of Western art. He doesn’t simply gesture to the global by acknowledging non-Western artists who have made careers in these Western centres.

To account for the diversity of contemporary art, Smith develops a model of multiple semi-autonomous currents. Osborne’s theory bears on only one these currents, the one that Smith calls re-modernism, because it is primarily Western in origin and emanates from a late-modernist discourse that he can trace back through the same genealogy that Adorno and Greenberg ascribe to modernism.

Osborne’s reluctance to let go of modernism, which to date at least is a history of Western art, means that he misses the post-Western nature of contemporary art that is the strength of Smith’s account. If, on the other hand, Smith can seem in a hurry to dismiss the legacy of modernism in the contemporary, he retains an abiding if ambivalent interest in it. No doubt reacting against the focus on Western art centres in 1980’s postmodernist declarations of the end of modernism (by for example *October*), Smith concluded his book, *Making the modern* (1993):

> I hope that … this account… suggests a skeptical view of declarations that we have arrived at a condition somehow beyond modernity and
its problematics ... [and that it] will play a part in the emergence of a more realistic, more critical, approach to the complex and multiple visual cultures of modernity.\textsuperscript{96}

The underlying theme in Smith’s historiography since the 1970s has been the global relations of modernism, an outlook that he inherited from his professor, Bernard Smith. This explains the structure of his textbook account, \textit{Contemporary Art: world currents}, in which each section begins not with the contemporary, but a sketch of its prehistory in the particular modernity of each region. Each sketch is inevitably (as he admits, given the constraints of his study and of a textbook) so sketchy that it is inadequate to the task, but ‘taken together, they hint at the richness, and the complexity, of ‘the prehistory of the contemporary in the modern’\textsuperscript{97} and of Smith’s empathy with what he called, in 2009, ‘the “alternative modernities” or “cosmopolitan modernisms” project’.

Smith is yet to fully reveal his cards on this project. In a recent lecture he was skeptical of what he called the ‘catch-up modernisms’ of ‘alternative modernities’, worrying that they dissemble the spatiality and temporality of modernism’s imperialism, which unlike the contemporary, was ‘a monopolizing phenomenon that spread outwards from a predominant center’.\textsuperscript{98} He warned against projecting globalism back onto modernism, of revising ‘the history of nineteenth and twentieth century art everywhere on the planet in terms that presume that every artist always aspired to modernize’, and of returning ‘every change in contemporary art to some kind of modernism’. Otherwise, ‘however elaborated, updated, decolonized, or contemporized, you will fall short of grasping the present’.
On the other hand, in the same lecture he also applauded the current revisionism because it is ‘leading to enriched histories of art throughout the world during the modern period’. ‘Art made during modern times was always more complex, and was made for different reasons, than those prioritized by the high achieving but relative narrow concentrations that we rightly label “modernist.”’ This ‘complexity within modernity’, he argues, ‘laid the groundwork for the diversity that we now see flowing through the present. But’, he insists, ‘contemporary difference is different from that which prevailed during the modern period.’

‘Because of its restless, unfixed boundaries, its multiplicities, and the state of “permanent transition” … contemporary art’, says Okwui Enwezor, ‘tends to be much more resistant to global totalisation’ than the universalising claims of modernism.99 Thus how the world’s regional fragmented histories cohere in a thing called globalism or the contemporary or multiple modernisms is the task of current critique across the disciplines. Smith gives notice that the familiar Western genealogies that hitherto framed so much art history are no longer sufficient. Osborne, on the other hand, reaffirms a familiar Western genealogy. His philosophy provides a powerful justification for keeping the discourse of contemporary art within a Western frame in which the major museums have a huge investment.

It might seem that by relegating modernism to the past Smith has no need to revisit it. If in fact he had followed this course, it would give his account of the contemporary a certain (if misleading) clarity that would not disrupt existing discourses (in texts and museums) of modernism. Yet his textbook, *Contemporary art: World currents* (2011), does not neatly follow on from *October’s* textbook of a
revisionist modernism, Foster's et al, *Art since 1900: Modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism* (2004), but implicitly calls into question its failure to sufficiently account for the prehistory of the contemporary.\(^{100}\)

On the other hand, because Osborne so profoundly embeds the contemporary in the modern, it would seem more necessary for him to reconceive the history of modernism in the post-Western frame of contemporary globalism. That he fails to do such a mammoth task is not surprising, but in failing to recognise its necessity he misjudges the implications of the contemporary as he defines it. In this respect his book is delimited by the similar dilemmas that Smith argues plague MoMA.\(^{101}\)

These are not just questions of theory, of interpreting the new and judging the past. In privileging intercultural relations, the contemporary is a platform for the trajectories of the most local traditions, which is why its form is post-Western. However this platform is a contested space with powerful vested interests, many of which are Western. Indigenous artists, for example, are already being ruled out of the game (not that they were ever in it). While there are some signs that Western institutions, such as Tate Modern and the Pompidou Centre, are beginning to grapple with the post-Western nature of contemporary art, their efforts remain tentative. Much still hangs in the balance. We must therefore ask, as James Meyer did, why ‘the museum, the academy, and high critical discourse came to such a consensus [about the contemporary] so swiftly during the first decade of the twenty-first century’? How does the idea of the contemporary serve their interests and how can its fictions be made to serve ours?


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1 James Meyer, in Hal Foster, 'Questionnaire on "the Contemporary"', *October*, 130 (2009), 3-124 at 74.
2 ibid.
4 ibid., at 1-2.
7 Marcel Duchamp, 'Where Do We Go from Here?', *Studio International*, 189/973, January-February (1975), 28.
8 ibid.
13 ibid., at 307.
15 Clement Greenberg, 'Necessity of "Formalism"', *New Literary History*, 3/1, Autumn (1971), 171-75.
18 Unless specified, this and the following quotes by Arendt, Benjamin and Heidegger, are from the final pages of Arendt’s introduction to *Illuminations*, pp. 46-49.
Clement Greenberg, 'Modern and Postmodern', *Arts*, 54/6, February (1980).


ibid., at 211.

ibid., at 209.

ibid., at 220.


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Greenberg, 'Modern and Postmodern', (>>

Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. (>>

ibid. (>

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ibid.

See Greenberg, 'Necessity of "Formalism"', (>

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Greenberg, 'Necessity of "Formalism"', (at 174. See also his comments on equivocating comments on modernism and postmodernism in Paul Taylor, 'Clement Greenberg and Post Modernism, an Interview', *Art and Australia*, 18/2, Summer (1980), 141-44 at 143-44.

Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. (>


Though Greenberg is never directly referenced in an article bristling with references to continental theory, as if refusing to utter his name.


Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities', (at 1.
However, there are significant exceptions. Rasheed Araeen’s *Third Text* was an influential organ for promoting the idea that modernism was not just a Western phenomenon. Kobena Mercer >


Greenberg prided himself on his catholic taste, be old or new, Western or non-Western art. But the contemporary art of places like Japan and India did not interest him. (Greenberg, ‘Taste’.) He believed that during the last 200 years the best art has had a limited geographical location, namely Europe and New York. When asked, in 1980, he doubted that a place like Melbourne could produce ‘major art’. (Taylor, ‘Clement Greenberg and Post Modernism, an Interview’, at 142-43.)


Greenberg, ‘Taste’.


Though Crimp was here actually referring to the writing of Greenberg’s acolyte, Michael Fried: Douglas Crimp, ‘Pictures’, ibid.8 (1979), 75-88 at 87.


Foster, ‘Questionnaire on “the Contemporary”’, (ibid., at 120.

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Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* at 19.


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Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition', (at 66.

Smith, 'Thinking Contemporary Art, World Historically'.


Peter Osborne, *October and the Problem of Formalism* (Barcelona: Museu d'art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2012).


ibid., at 5.

ibid., at 251.


ibid., at 1.

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Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* at 37-26.

See, for example, ibid., at 164-65.

ibid., at 164.

ibid., at 162.


to postmodern theory because the book is based on his dissertation (University
of Sydney, 1986), of the same title, which was written during the first half of the
1980s.

97 Smith, What Is Contemporary Art at 257.
98 Smith, 'Thinking Contemporary Art, World Historically'. The quotes that
follow are from this lecture.
99 Okwui Enwezor, 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a
State of Permanent Transition', in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy
Condee (ed.), Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity,
100 See Smith, What Is Contemporary Art at 252-53.
101 ibid., at 13-37.