

The Contemporary Composition

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What might it mean to think of *composition* in contemporary terms? For artists of all kinds, active in whatever period, composition has usually been understood as the process of creating coherence within a work of art by employing a set of quite exacting, but also necessarily open-ended procedures that have accumulated over time to constitute the demands and the limits of the genre or medium in which the artist has chosen or felt obliged to work. Artists nearly always adjust these procedures in various ways during the creative process, and, in rare cases, transform them to the point of reinvention. More broadly, by a generously inclusive metaphor, composition may also name the ways in which everyone in the world composes, to the extent that they can, the worlds that they live within. If this is accepted, then equally broadly, but with no remainder, it must also name the ways in which those worlds, which add up to the larger World, composes everyone in it. In her essay, “Composition as Explanation,” written as 1925 turned into 1926, Gertrude Stein used the concept in exactly these three senses, combining them to give a trenchant account of her own development as an artist during the preceding two decades, and in the process demonstrating, with highly reflexive acuity, how a modernist art goes about composing itself, and how it contributes towards composing its times, while being, in turn, composed by them.¹

Ninety years later, can we speak in the same or similar terms about not only the metaphorical resonances but also the actual, mutually determinative connections between art making and the settings in which it is made and to which it returns? How might we explain composition today—in the arts, in self-fashioning, and the shaping of our social being? Are we still modern in the ways we picture our worlds, in how they shape us, and in how we might, as part of the invention of a different politics, compose them differently? Can we expect

1. Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926).

“composition” to bear, for our time, the weight Stein laid upon it in her time, working it as a metaphor able to integrate, with a precise economy, the complex relationships between artwork, being, and world? In her time, this meant the relationships between artistic modernism, the personal and social experience of modernity, and the economic, political, and societal forces of modernization. Can we speak, now, of *contemporary composition*, when art being made today seems so diverse in all of its aspects as to defy coherent categorization, when the world situation presents itself, day after day, as spinning into confused chaos, structural disintegration, and violent disorder — that is, a state of unfathomable *decomposition*? If we can, it will be in quite different terms from those highlighted by Stein. We will speak, instead, of the compelling need for coeval composition at a time defined above all by the contemporaneity of divisive difference. How this might be achieved remains the world’s most urgent question. Asking what the visual arts can contribute is the more modest concern of this essay.

CONTEMPORANEITY AND DIFFERENCE

For a number of years, I have been looking at the work of contemporary artists, exploring the discursive worlds and institutional frameworks within which their art is made, disseminated, and interpreted, while also tracking its imbrication within relevant cultural formations in societies throughout the world as they, too, have become increasingly contemporary. Major — indeed, definitive — differences between contemporary art and the Modern and modernist art that preceded it have become apparent. A cacophony of descriptions of what counts, or should count, in contemporary life and thought generates competing world pictures, on scales ranging from profiles of preferred subjectivity to accounts of

matter in the universe. Along with many others, I accept that the concepts that drove the great engine of modernity can no longer encompass these pictures, most of which challenge its claims to universality. Today, an impossible array of mutually exclusive universalisms are engaged in an intense and deadly competition for hearts, minds, and territory, yet none have a realistic prospect of commanding the future. Faced with this prospect, many thinkers default to the position that the world has arrived at a state of suspension, after modernity's untidy end, yet remains still in its debt, inescapably tied to many of its presumptions and desires—that is, in a condition of postmodernity. They believe that this situation will continue until a new universality arises to periodize the present and claim the foreseeable future. This is a view that many, including myself, find defeatist, debilitating, and intolerable.

It is, of course, undeniable that divisive difference does rule in most contemporary relationships, in many spheres of life, and on most fields. Their raw contemporaneity to each other is the most evident fact about these relationships, while at the same time, and perhaps for the first time in human history, the absence of a singular, internally diverse yet nonetheless encompassing world picture haunts the settings in which we must live. Yet the contemporaneity of differences is a state, a situation, a set of conditions. Unlike the Great Chain of Being, or modernity, or capitalism, or any other of the great hierarchical totalizations, it cannot in itself serve as a frame within which the details of life, however incidental, might be understood as elements within a larger whole. Yet today we face the prospect that, on the most general levels where we humans picture to ourselves the nature of our place in the world, the contemporaneity of divisive difference is *all that there is*.²

2. See "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and the introduction to *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

This, too, on its face, is defeatist, debilitating, and intolerable.

Instead, we must take up the challenge of contemporary world-being, which I see as a matter of pursuing these goals, urgently: picture all of the worlds in which we live in their real relation to each other; work together to create and sustain a viable sense of place for each of us; establish and maintain coeval connectivity between worlds and places. These aspirations might sound familiar; they also sound utopian. However they sound, they are, simply, necessary if the Sixth Extinction is to be slowed sufficiently for us to survive it.³ They must be pursued until a sense of planetary mutuality becomes the priority informing all relationships between humans, animals, and things. These relationships— not anything goes, whatever, blind faith, fearful submission, or outright chaos— must come to constitute the actual armature of our contemporary composition.

Claims on our contemporary composition are to be heard everywhere today. They appear once we start listing the terms widely used to evoke the essence of what it is to be in the world today, to name the most important relationships between nations, economies, and cultures, and to characterize the tendencies most likely to shape the world's future. Listing these ideas in a random fashion might seem to honor the spirit of open-ended futurity. But doing so simply reproduces their messy cacophony. Instead, a hypothesis about underlying structures must be advanced, and tested against the realities that the world itself generates.

In my view, three currents course through contemporary life and thought, isolating modernity's master narratives like beached whales, and proliferating divisive differences while at the same time channeling them into a contemporaneous

3. See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2014); and Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism*

versus the Climate (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

configuration. I am making a historical argument, about the shape of historical forces operating through the present. Underlying it is an intuition about a major shift in the nature of human thinking about thinking, and perhaps in the nature of human thought (if such a thing can still be imagined). It is these currents, and these shifts in thinking, that shape our understandings of today's world into competing clusters. We can identify these currents precisely by how they cluster our efforts to picture the world, by how they try to organize the concepts and terms we use to do so. What follows, then, is a meta-picture of world picturing, as we undertake it today.

Continuing modernities:

Globalization; Post-Cold War Hyperpower;
Clash of Civilizations; War on Terror; Spectacularity;
Neo-conservatism; neoliberal economics; Posthistory;
Invented Heritage; Remodernisms
(between these, dialectical oppositionality but no prospective resolution)

Transitional transnationality:

Decolonization; Indigenization; Anti-Orientalist and
postcolonial critique, the movement of movements,
anti-globalization; Postmodern pastiche, new realisms;
inverse modernizations (China, Asian "tigers");
revived fundamentalisms; insurrectionary anarchisms;
post-Communism
(between these, difference, adjacency, antinomic frictions)

Contemporaneous differences:

Contemporaneousness of incommensurable master
narratives; Self-fashioning within Immediation;
post-capitalism cosmopolitanism/planetarity,
ranging from world citizenship to as-needed affiliative
connectivity (Occupy); eco activism;
open-form revolutions; the coeval commons

Each of these concepts is a signpost, a perspectival point that expands to fill out parts of a total world picture. Since the 1950s, they have come to cluster into these three kinds of current. Think of them as signs of the major movements of human world picturing, and their relationships to each other on analogy to the slow grinding, and the earthquakes and tsunamis, that signal the shiftings of the great geological plates that constitute the earth's mobile crust. It will take decades to work through to what will doubtless be a different configuration. But this, I submit, is how we report our contemporaneity to ourselves right now, when we frame it as historical occurrence in the present, when we look for historical patterns passing through our own time. These concepts, in these clusters, are the most evident markers of contemporary composition, as we try to imagine it working on its largest discursive scales.

When set out in this way, the reign of incommensurable difference, the lack of coevalness in most of our relationships, is all too obvious. But the desire for coevality is emerging in the third cluster. Indeed, I believe that it is driving that cluster, and turning the whole of world-picturing discourse its way. Everything registered in this chart, I am suggesting, is tending—or to be more realistic, *should* be tending—toward those last three words: “the coeval commons.”

There is much more to be said about each of these concepts, and about their relationships to each other, inside each cluster, and above all between the clusters. There is also much more to be said about how the turn from divisive differencing to a coeval commons is, might, and should be taking place, in all spheres of life, on this planet and beyond. These issues are the objects of related inquiries, on which I

4. An outline is given in Terry Smith, “Defining Contemporaneity: Imagining Planetary,” *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 24, no. 49/50 (2015): 156–174. See also Terry Smith,

On Our Contemporaneity (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

will publish separately.⁴ I have introduced them here to highlight the obvious fact that any discussion of composition today, in any of the senses introduced by Stein, or in any other sense, will have to take account of the fact that it is occurring in a very different set of circumstances from those that prevailed nearly a century ago. Others have seen this necessity. Noting that, in recent years, “art, philosophy, ecology, activism and politics exchanged their repertoire in order to redefine the actors, the aims, the forums, and the motions of political involvement,” Bruno Latour remarks that

I have come to use the word “composition” to regroup in one term those many bubbles, spheres, networks and snippets of arts and science. It allows us to move from spheres to networks with enough of a common vocabulary, but without a settled hierarchy. It is my solution to the modern/postmodern divide. Composition may be a plausible alternative to modernization. What can no longer be modernized, what has been postmodernized to bits and pieces, can still be composed.⁵

In his sketch for a “Compositionist Manifesto,” to which these remarks allude, Latour is clear about the “modernist” values such a document would exclude — that is, critique, nature, and progress — but offers little clue as to the values that would be included, preferring instead to emphasize the *process* of composing, slowly, in detail, collectively, in all forms of thinking and living, and with full respect for the mundane materialities involved, “the common world” to come.⁶

5. Bruno Latour, “Some Experiments in Art and Politics,” in *The Internet Does Not Exist*, ed. Julieta Aranda et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 52.

6. Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto,’” *New Literary History*, no. 41 (2010): 471–90. In taking this step, Latour moves beyond the “actor-

network theory” outlined in, for example, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), towards *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). See also <http://aimeinquiry.org>.

While acknowledging the broad outlines of this approach, I will offer in this essay some concrete answers to the following questions. How might we understand composition in the work of contemporary artists? Does this art, diverse to a seemingly unprecedented degree, share identifiable compositional qualities across its astonishing variety of mediums, meanings, contexts, affects, usages, and purposes? How does art today connect to contemporary composing of selfhood and social being, assuming that the concept holds for accurately understanding both? Can we, in turn, sensibly say that the contemporary world is composing us, even as it seems to decompose itself? In short, what exactly are the relationships between contemporary art in its diverse forms, the experience of contemporary life, and the conditions of our contemporaneity? Let us begin by revisiting Stein's essay, as it charts, succinctly, what she calls "the modern composition."⁷ It will throw into sharp relief what has changed since then, and make more visible the elements composing our contemporaneity.

THE MODERN COMPOSITION

The very title of Stein's essay, "Composition as Explanation," tells us, unequivocally, that what we are about to read, or hear (it really is a prose poem, better understood when heard, best when read aloud), is a composition that will be self-explanatory. At the same time, it will be an explanation

7. For a closer reading of Stein's essay, and of the work of Jean-Luc Godard and Christian Marclay exemplifying, respectively, late modern and contemporary creativity, see my essay "Time And The Composition: Creativity In Modern And Contemporary Works Of Art," in *Handbook of Research on Creativity*, ed. Kerry Thomas and Janet Chan (Cheltenham, UK:

Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013), 265–281. On Godard and contemporaneity, see Jacob Lund, "The Coming Together of Times: Jean-Luc Godard's Aesthetics of Contemporaneity and the Remembering of the Holocaust," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 24, no. 49/50 (2015): 138–155.

that, in explaining composition, composes itself. Stein composes by writing a composition about explaining artistic composition that not only articulates a modernist argument about what it is to compose, but which also becomes, in itself, a model of a modernist literary composition. Such absolute integration of content and form, of subject matter and style of presentation — in a phrase, of *content as form* — is a core creative ideal for modernist art, its compositional base line, and is quintessential to its greatest achievements. So, too, is a presumption about historical trajectory: that modern art is deeply connected to its own modernizing time, a time that has broken in fundamental ways from recent pasts, and that is essentially different from distant pasts. Stein takes these two as axiomatic, and then evokes the third core characteristic of making modern art in modern times: that the artist, notably the avant-garde artist, envisages a kind of composition not yet seen by his or her immediate contemporaries.

No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who are also creating their own time refuse to accept. In the case of the arts it is very definite. Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical.⁸

Nevertheless, composition remains the most basic and natural way of world making, for artists as for everybody else:

8. All quotations from Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*, online at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/238702>. Print versions are *Composition as Explanation*

(London: Hogarth Press, 1926); reprinted in *What Are Masterpieces* (California: Conference Press, 1943), and in *What Are Masterpieces* (New York: Pitman, 1970).

The composition is the thing seen by everyone living in the living that they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living in the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing that they are doing. Nothing else is different, of that almost anyone can be certain. The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps everyone can be certain.

When she focuses on the creative process undertaken by artists, in particular her own composing, she describes it as driven by the effort to imagine, in the totality of each work, a particular kind of time. She notes that, in the last years of the nineteenth century, when she began as a writer, “naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future,” but implies that, soon, presumptions about time as it was ordinarily experienced and usually explained could no longer serve her purposes. Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27) explored at length and in depth the interplay of voluntary and involuntary memory—that is, the layering of individual, social, and aesthetic temporalities—in the lives of the newly rich and the fading aristocracy of fin-de-siècle Paris. During the twentieth century, some major works of modern literature, art, and film were framed by concern as to how modernity’s insistence on conformity to standardized time was changing the specific world depicted. Thus the twenty-four hour format used to display individual alienation within a changing ancient city in James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* (1918–20), the atomistic teeming of collective life in a fast-modernizing city in Walter Ruttmann’s film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), and the nuances of community life in a rural village in Dylan Thomas’ radio play *Under Milk Wood* (1954).

Of her own writing during the years before World War I, Stein notes, “the composition forming around me was a

prolonged present.” *Prolongation* is a term frequently used by historians to describe the pre-War situation in Europe, characterized above all by the perpetuation of aristocratic rule against the changes being brought to fruition by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of democratic social movements.⁹ Against this grain, between 1902 and 1911 Stein wrote *The Making of Americans* (1902–11), an 80,000-word frieze of portraits of Americans and others in Europe, each one generated out of the one before it and in anticipation of the next. She describes her creative process during these years: “I as a contemporary creating the composition in the beginning was groping toward a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and again” This changed approach to the creative process—a move from imagining a “prolonged present” to imagining a “continuous present”—proved prescient, as the war “made every one not only contemporary in act not only contemporary in thought but contemporary in self-consciousness made everyone contemporary with the modern composition.” She ends this passage with a (sick) joke: “And so war may be said to have advanced a general recognition of the expression of the contemporary composition by almost thirty years.”¹⁰

After the war, and in direct response to its horrors (not least the massive slaughter caused by the mechanized means of waging it), a return to order prevailed in public polity, and a revival of classicism appeared in the arts.¹¹ Stein acknowledged this by saying “And so now one finds oneself interesting

9. Thus Eric Hobsbawm’s argument about “the long nineteenth century” in Europe, as outlined in his series *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* (New York: Vintage, 1962); *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (New York: Vintage, 1975); and *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987).

10. Obviously, she is using the term “contemporary” as subsidiary to “modern,”

in the colloquial sense of being up-to-date, and in the root sense of being in the same time as another, or many others. These days, the valiance of these terms has been drastically reversed.

11. See, for example, Kenneth E. Silver, *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010).

oneself in an equilibration,” that is, the demand for balance and harmony, and in matters of “distribution,” that is, the demand for widespread accessibility. Both of these demands are arising, she implies, from the requirements of the social composition. A new kind of disjunction is opening out between the kind of art she had committed herself to make and the kind of art demanded by her times. It is a different disjunction from that which prevailed during the period before the war, the time of the “prolonged present,” a time that she could confront with her compositions committed to creating a “continuous present.” Now, however, the kind of artistic expression that is expected is, she says, “the quality in a composition that makes it go dead just after it has been made.” She finds this situation “very troublesome,” something that she expresses in the final major paragraph by jumbling her text into unreadable, unspeakable, confusion — not decomposition, more a kind of discomposure, an un-composition.¹²

Gertrude Stein’s essay does not, of course, exhaust the range, variety, and depth of modernist art and thought, much less that of art and reflection during Modern Times. But it does embody some of modernist art’s key ideas about how it does, and should, relate to its time — in my view, the essential ones.¹³ So, it will serve as a point of reference as we take up the issue posed earlier: with the world situation seeming to spin into a state of unfathomable *decomposition*, when art today seems so diverse as to defy coherent categorization, in what sense, or senses, might we speak of *contemporary composition*?

12. Subsequently, however, Stein did make her accommodation with the post-War social composition, devoting the late 1920s to writing her most “equilibrated” and “distributable” book, the quasi-autobiographical novel *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Published in 1933, it is still in print.

13. See “Modernism” and “Modernity,” *Dictionary of Art*, vol. 21 (London: Macmillan, 1996), 775–9. Oxford University Press published a revised edition in 2003. It is now available online as *Grove Art Online*.

BECOMING CONTEMPORARY

In 2010 I published a survey essay entitled, “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” which concluded with these words:

Place making, world picturing, and connectivity are the most common concerns of artists these days because they are the substance of contemporary being. Increasingly, they override residual distinctions based on style, mode, medium, and ideology. They are present in all art that is truly contemporary. Distinguishing, precisely, this presence in each artwork is the most important challenge to an art criticism that would be adequate to the demands of contemporaneity. Tracing the currency of each artwork within the larger forces that are shaping this present is the task of contemporary art history.¹⁴

If we continue with Stein’s metaphor, we can see that place making is the most fundamental kind of social composition; to world picture is to identify the powers in play around one’s place, and to pattern their disposition into a readable configuration; while to connect one’s sense of place and this composition of worlds is, indeed, to compose the World. It is to picture one’s place, and that of others, within the World as a composition.¹⁵ We glimpse here, I think, the essential demand

14. Terry Smith, “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” *The Art Bulletin*, vol. XCII, no. 4 (December 2010): 380.

15. I distinguish this *worlding* from Heidegger’s famous characterization of modern times as those that grasp the world as a picture, rather than the becoming being that it actually is. As I will argue,

composition allows for, in fact encourages, our participation in world making to a greater extent, and with a greater awareness of the urgency of this necessarily collective effort. See Martin Heidegger, “The Age of World Picture,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 115–54.

that the times are making on artmaking, art criticism, and art history as discursive practices. The same is being asked of art curating, of its theorization, and of art education. By responding to this demand, each of these practices, in their own and shared ways, contribute to composition in contemporary conditions. But how are they doing so?

In my recent work on late modern and contemporary visual art I have suggested a set of linked propositions about how contemporary art is made within, and how it contributes toward the making of, contemporary being-in-the-world.¹⁶ The core art historical idea is the claim that a worldwide shift from modern to contemporary art was prefigured in the major movements in late modern art of the 1950s and 1960s in Euroamerica, and became explicit in artworld discourse there during the 1970s and 1980s. Postmodernist practice was an important signal of this change, postmodern and poststructuralist theory its first analysis. A market phenomenon in the major centers during the 1990s, contemporary art was at the same time expanded, but also divided, by art emergent from the rest of the world. Since then, contemporary art everywhere has engaged more and more with spectacle culture — with image-saturated commerce, globalized lifestyle, and social media — and with anxieties caused by political volatility and climate change. These developments flow through the present, thus shaping art's imaginable futures — in the short term at least.

Unlike the great art styles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these changes from modern to contemporary art were not a monopolizing phenomenon that spread outwards from a predominant center. Rather, they occurred at different times and in distinctive ways in each cultural region and in each art-producing locality. I believe that the histories specific

16. Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009); and Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King, 2011).

to each place should be acknowledged, valued, and carefully tracked alongside recognition of their interaction with other local and regional tendencies, and with the waxing and waning of more powerful regional and international art-producing centers. This approach, applied retrospectively under the banner of “alternative modernities,” is leading to greatly enriched histories of art throughout the world during the modern period. The promise of this project is that it might show that the complexity within modernity itself laid much of the groundwork for the diversity that we now see flowing through the present.¹⁷

The diversity within contemporary art cannot be fully encompassed by terms such as “global art,” “world art,” or even “geoaesthetics.”¹⁸ Certainly, each term spotlights a key aspect of art today. Nevertheless, however loosely defined or critically intended, each of them echoes the metropolitan-provincial, center-peripheries models that prevailed during the age of imperialisms and would-be empires, but are now fast becoming outdated.¹⁹ Worse, and against the intentions of those using them, these terms mistakenly suggest an overarching coherence, an inclination toward hegemony that,

17. See, for example, Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

18. See, for example, Charlotte Bydler, *Global Artworld Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2004); *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective*, ed. Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddenseig (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007); *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*, ed. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddenseig (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); *The Global Contemporary: The Rise of New Art Worlds after 1989*, ed. Hans Belting,

Andrea Buddenseig, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press for ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2013); *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, ed. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfred van Damme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008); and *The Planetary Turn: Art, Dialogue and Geoaesthetics in the 21st Century*, ed. Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

19. See Terry Smith, “The Provincialism Problem: Then and Now,” *ARTMargins*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2017). See also Foteini Vlachou, “Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery,” *Visual Resources* online, posted March 17, 2016, at https://www.academia.edu/23376076/Why_Spatial_Time_and_the_Periphery.

while present within parts of them, is, I argue, residual within the whole ensemble. Rather, what is most striking now is the contemporaneousness of different kinds of contemporary art, each of which, if it has an “aesthetic,” has its own, internally diversified one, elements of which exchange with elements of others, without however adding up to anything like a “contemporary aesthetic.” We will return to this point, as it is about composition in one of its key senses. From the multi-scalar perspective of worlds-within-the-World, the important point is that we can see that each current within contemporary art is, at the same time but in distinctive ways and to specific degrees, local, regional *and* international—that is to say, *worldly*—in character.²⁰ How so?

CONTEMPORANEOUS CURRENTS

As a core art critical idea, one that is also an art historical hypothesis (a proposal about how today’s art will be seen, in broad terms, by art historians in the future), I argue that three strong currents may be discerned within the extraordinary quantity and seemingly limitless diversity of art made since around 1989. They are manifestations in art practice of the same underlying forces that clustered the world picturing concepts that I mentioned earlier. First, *Remodernist*, *retro-sensationalist*, and *spectacularist* tendencies fuse into one current, which continues to predominate in Euroamerican and

20. Worldliness is discussed in more detail in Terry Smith, “Currents of World-Making in Contemporary Art,” *World Art*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2011): 20–36. Valuable essays by Ian McLean and Marsha Meskimmon may also be found in this issue. Peter Osborne concludes a recent article with closely similar sentiments: “the successful postconceptual work traverses (crosses back and forth) the internal temporal disjunctions that

constitute the contemporary, constructing them in such a way as to express them, at the level of the immanent duality—conceptual and aesthetic—of its form. Each a condensed fragment of the worlding of the globe.”—“The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 184 (March/April 2014): 26.

other modernizing art worlds and markets, with widespread effect both inside and outside those constituencies. It instinctively recurs to earlier styles in the history of art, particularly modernist, postmodern, and late modernist formats and imagery. Against this tendency, a second current of art created according to nationalist, identarian, and critical priorities has emerged, especially from the movements towards political, economic, and cultural independence that occurred in the former colonies of Europe, and on the edges of Europe, and then spread everywhere, including throughout the former West. Characterized above all by clashing ideologies and political experiences, this is the art of *transnational transitionality*. For many of the artists, curators and commentators involved, it has evolved through at least three discernible phases: a reactive, anti-imperialist search for national and localist imagery; then a rejection of simplistic identarianism and corrupted nationalism in favor of a naïve internationalism; followed by a broader search for an integrated cosmopolitanism, or worldliness, in the context of the permanent transition of all things and relations. The third current cannot be named as a style, a period, or a tendency. It proliferates, mostly, below the radar of generalization. It results, in part, from the great increase in the number of artists worldwide and the opportunities offered by new informational and communicative technologies to millions of users. These changes have led to the viral spread of small-scale, interactive, do-it-yourself art (and art-like output) that is concerned less with high art style or confrontational politics, and more with tentative explorations of self-fashioning, immediation, precarity, futurity, and climate change that those involved feel personally and share with others, particularly of their generation, throughout an increasingly networked yet disordered world on an ever-more fragile planet.

Each of these three currents disseminates itself (not entirely, but predominantly) through appropriate

—indeed, matching— institutional formats. Remodernist, retro-sensationalist and spectacularist art are mostly found in major public or dedicated private museums, prominent commercial galleries, the auction rooms, and the celebrity collections. These are, usually, located in or near the centers of economic power that drove modernity, but they constantly seek to follow the new money being generated elsewhere in the world. Biennales, along with traveling exhibitions promoting the art of a country or region, have been an ideal venue for postcolonial critique in art and in cultural exchanges. They have, at the same time, been vehicles of local tourist promotion, and encouraged the emergence of a string of new, area-specific markets. Art-making of the third kind prefers alternative art spaces, temporary displays, the Internet, zines, and other do-it-with-friends networks. It will, of course, appear in the more traditional institutions, and the biennials, to the degree that they reinvent themselves as event-sites, comfort zones, and art clubs.

Thus there is no exclusive matching of tendency and disseminative format. Just as crossovers between what I am discerning here as currents are frequent at the level of art practice, connections between the formats abound, and artists have come to use them as gateways, more or less according to their potential and convenience. The museum, third current artists will say today, is just one event-site among the many that are now possible. But this mobility across institutional and quasi-institutional sites is recent, and has been hard won. While convergence certainly occurs, temporary alliance— the confluence of differences— is more common. My use of a “currency” metaphor aims to highlight the mobility of contemporary artworks: their inherent heterochronicity, their movement through time, across space, and in and out of place. In these conditions— where a multiplicity of actual and artistic languages coexists in close proximity— *translation* becomes the medium of necessity, of possibility, and of hope.

While these three currents are contemporaneous now, albeit unevenly, it is reasonable to ask how might we imagine them changing, in themselves, in relation to each other, as well as in response to unpredictable new currents and even less predictable changes to the world flow.²¹ The first of the currents I have discerned is dominant now, especially in the major centers, but is historically residual, and, like the globalizing capitalism on which it so heavily depends, is courting crisis.²² The second took shape due to local necessities but was also, everywhere, a reaction to the dominance of Euroamerican art. It predominates on international art circuits, which move in a variety of directions, and will most likely prevail for some time. A dialectical antagonism operates between these two currents, because both are products of modernity's inner historical logic, itself dialectical. But the third current is emergent and will increasingly set the terms of what will count in the future: these terms are already, evidently, and deconstructively, different in kind from those first formed during modern times. Taken together, I suggest, these currents constituted the contemporary art of the late twentieth century. Their unpredictable unfolding and volatile interaction will continue to shape art in the early twenty-first.²³

Does it follow that there are three kinds of contemporary artistic composition, three "aesthetics," not one, and do they correlate to three kinds of social composition? Not so easy. The main outcome is their "volatile interaction" (their deconstructive tripling). What else generates the seemingly unreadable totality, the incessant unraveling, the fiction of

21. See Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016).

22. This is a claim I have been making for some time, so I welcome publications such as Paul Mason, *Post-Capitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 2015), however much I would question certain of his presumptions and prescriptions.

23. I discuss the three currents hypothesis in some detail in "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity, Review of Reviews, Part II: The Three Currents Hypothesis," *Discipline*, no. 4 (Spring/Summer, 2015): 158–169.

unity within diversity, that is a core characteristic of the contemporary condition?²⁴

MODES OF CONTEMPORARY COMPOSITION

For those interested in the question of whether the world has, in fact, moved on from modernity, and beyond postmodernity (however much it may trail these pasts behind it), a key issue would be whether things have changed so much that the very terms under discussion have become redundant. Does it follow that composition, however it may now be defined—indeed, any concept that seeks purchase on, and between, a number of different registers—must wither in the face of the dispersive disarray that typifies every aspect of contemporary life and thought? Yet an idea such as composition might be one of the few “undeconstructibles” or “indecidables” that we have available to us, if we are to build the mutuality that we need in order to move differencing itself (which I take to be foundational to human being), away from incommensurability and toward mutuality—in fact, to what is more properly named “multeity.”²⁵

24. In his *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), Peter Osborne pinpoints two of the three currents that I have outlined, and sets these two currents into the same dialectical struggle that I have identified and explored in recent writing. He says that “it is the convergence and mutual conditioning of historical transformations in the ontology of the artwork and the social relations of art space that makes contemporary art possible, in the emphatic sense of being an art of contemporaneity,” and notes (with regard to composition) that various “de-bordering” procedures in art and its social settings have occurred. “This has been an extraordinarily

complicated and profoundly contradictory historical process, in which artists, art-institutions and markets have negotiated the politics of regionalism, postcolonial nationalism and migration, in order to overwrite the open spatial logic of post-conceptual art with global political-economic dynamics.” [28] For further discussion, see my “A Philosophy of Contemporary Art?: Some comments on Osborne,” in *Three Reflections on Contemporary Art History*, ed. Nicholas Croggon and Helen Hughes (Melbourne: Discipline and emaj, 2014), 75–88, and essays by Ian McLean and Amelia Birkin in that volume.

When it comes to composition, however, nothing begins *ab initio*. There is always, already, something there, an anticipatory formlessness awaiting the opportunity to take form, along with other forms; to achieve figure (actually, to *configure*); to compose and to be composed; to become, in a word, a composition. Taking form along with other forms, the working toward a work of art beginning to work, these early moves occur in the act of taking up a preliminary plane, a ground of possibility, a setting for the creativity to come. The material support chosen to carry the paint, the kind of plate that is to be engraved, the paper ready to receive charcoal or watercolor — every art medium has a history that acts as both spur and constraint in myriad ways, from first steps to completion, and resonates through every reception. But composition also requires, in that same founding moment, and throughout the process, an affective substrate, without which the image, or the text, cannot begin to appear. This grounding, like the material support itself, is usually effaced during the compositional process, yet never vanishes. In his remarks on Antonin Artaud's use of the word "*subjectile*," Jacques Derrida highlights this ghostly but also, and so appropriately for Artaud's drawings, volcanic layering. Derrida brings out the interplay between "*sub*" in the sense of "*substratum*," and "*jet*," that is, spurting energy, thus evoking the potential of the *subjectile* to penetrate the surface of the final, composed work, to insist on its presence there, its persistence as a "*projectile*," shooting from the artist's unconscious into ours.²⁶

25. In his later thinking, Jacques Derrida concentrated on certain constructive potentialities, such as "the democracy to come." See Terry Smith and Paul Patton, eds., *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001). Fred Evans takes up these suggestions in relevant ways in his *The Multi-Voiced*

Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and continues to do so in his *Citizenship and Public Arts: An Essay in Political Aesthetics*, forthcoming.

26. Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *Artaud: Portraits, Dessins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

The subjectile, in this spectral sense, has rarely been an object of art critical remark, or art historical inquiry, especially in English language writings. Although of course it pervades accounts of artistic composition of every kind. I cannot undertake a profile of such accounts here, but were one to do so, certain interpretive insights stand out. Georges Didi-Huberman on the *paregone* in Fra Angelico. W. J. T. Mitchell on the vortex in the illuminated manuscripts of William Blake. Michael Fried's focus on the spectator, on the dialectic of absorption vis-à-vis staged distancing in art spectatorship since the eighteenth century. T. J. Clark on "color patching" in Pissarro. Griselda Pollock on the "spaces of femininity" in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. Clement Greenberg on "Cubist order" and "flatness." Benjamin H. D. Buchloh on *faktura* in the Russian avant-garde. Rosalind Krauss on the grid in Mondrian and other geometric abstractionists. Hal Foster on "convulsive beauty" in Surrealism. Richard Shiff on breath and blur throughout modernist art. Yve-Alain Bois on "the Formless." Leo Steinberg on the "flatbed" format in Johns' targets, Rauschenberg's combines, and Warhol's screen-prints. Other subjectiles call out for their interpreters, among them are collage, and assemblage, although montage has its greatest practitioners as its preeminent theorists: Sergei Eisenstein and Jean-Luc Godard.

It will come as no surprise that this list, already shaky (each of these interpretations being hard won), starts to collapse by the 1970s, as art based on craft and studio traditions underwent radical transformation. The very idea of starting from a given set of problems, from the leavings of an occluded, institutionalized avant-gardism, began to seem like a trap.

And yet, from this distance, we can see that Conceptual Art did spawn, against its better grain and deeper purposes, a distinctive visual form, an easily-acquired "look" that inflects much, perhaps most, of the kinds of art produced since then in

most parts of the world, including that which circulates around that world and is recognizable by the ugly term “international art.” Canonical works such as Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* (1965) are reduced to being simple illustrations of the basic components of a sign: signifier, signified, and referent. Whenever you see a work of art composed so that the interaction between a word (or set of words) and an image (or repetition of images) amounts to an idea, a concept, a takeaway that can be stated in a sentence, then you are responding to a conceptual composition. Nevertheless, when properly understood as a worldwide reconceiving of what conception in the visual arts might mean, conceptualism actually generated a “base grammar” for its inquiries that cannot be reduced to caricatures such as this.²⁷

The appropriations beloved of postmodernist art in Europe and the United States often took the form of two or more images, usually arrayed side by side, imprinted on a flat, indistinct, non-ground. Extracted from their disparate sources in popular culture, or from other art, from contemporary cultures or distant pasts, these images were replayed as a surprising mismatch that nevertheless made some kind of sense in an image-saturated world. As one of its major practitioners, painter David Salle, recently put it: “Appropriation—as a style—had a tendency to stop short, visually speaking. The primary concern was with ‘presentation’ itself, and the work that resulted was often an analog for the screen, or field, something upon which images composed themselves into some public/private drama.”²⁸ Postmodernist composition echoed the fact that various pasts were invading the present, purportedly making everything “ahistorical,” and that low art was invading high art, while it also echoed the pairing of manual painting

27. See Terry Smith, *One and Five Ideas: On Conceptualism and Conceptual Art*, ed. Robert Bailey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

28. David Salle, “Structure Rising,” *Art News*, posted February 23, 2015, at <http://www.artnews.com/2015/02/23/structure-rising-forever-now-at-moma/>.

with mechanical reproduction that was an obvious material fact about how such works were actually made. Finally, such strategies echoed both Pop and Conceptual Art in that the conjunctions might be simply showing us a glimpse of how the world looks today, or, in certain contexts (such as late Soviet times in the USSR, in post-Mao China, and in Cuba's long revolution), they could be suggesting a new idea about how contemporary visual cultures do, or should, operate.²⁹

In the latter situations, in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, we move into the second major current in contemporary art, that I have named transnational transitionality. In this current, appropriation occurs frequently, but with a declared, constructive purpose. Throughout the postwar period, artists active in the independence struggles sought to develop symbolic imagery for their new nations. Artists such as Ibrahim El-Salahi fused elements from Islamic, Africa, Arab, and Western artistic traditions in an effort to create a Sudanese visual vocabulary.³⁰ When such fusions go beyond being declarative emblemata, and actually transform the meanings and significance of the appropriated images to the extent that new meanings are generated, the compositional strategies they employ might merit the name *transcultural iconomorphism*.³¹

Indigenous artists working within modernizing settler colonies, and in contemporary societies, are obliged to repurpose artistic modes that they have developed across millennia. Aboriginal artists in Australia, for example, transpose ceremonial imagery from their own bodies, from rock walls and the desert ground, onto bark, boards and canvas, thus

29. See Ales Erjavec, ed., *Post-modernism and Postsocialist Condition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

30. See Salah M. Hassan, ed., *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013).

31. I develop this idea in "Antipodean Visions: Postwar Art in Australasia and the South Pacific," in *Postwar – Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965*, ed. Atreyee Gupta (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

circulating—in paintings, sculptures, and installations of often dazzling beauty—this sacred form of world picturing, and, for them, world making.³² Transcultural exchange of this kind is often contested from within the home culture as a kind of contamination, and patronized by the dominant, colonizing culture as an impure compromise. Nevertheless, at a time when peoples and polities are unavoidably thrown together, and fear-filled voices cry out for reactionary retreat, this kind of composing holds out the possibility of a genuinely shared space of cultural exchange. It begins from a ground on which two or more artistic traditions are in necessary, often uncomfortable conjunction, yet all acknowledge that none has the power to override and absorb the others. The possibility arises, then, that all might have the chance to fashion their own identity while respecting that of the others.

INTERMEDIALITY, OR COMPOSING BETWEEN MEDIUMS

Photography, cinema, and painting have been interrelated since the appearance of the newer arts, and the other two media inform the aesthetic criteria of each to the extent that it could be claimed that there is almost a single set of criteria for the three art forms.³³

This statement, made by Jeff Wall in 2003, typifies what has become a widespread understanding of the nature of the intensely close relationships between art forms that is one of the most obvious features of contemporary art, especially when one encounters it in a museum context. Yet during the heyday of high modernism, as recently as the 1960s, each of the arts

32. See Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

33. Jeff Wall, "Frames of Reference," *Artforum* (September 2003): 190.

that Wall mentions, indeed, all of the arts, were understood by most artworlders to be distinct in both principle and best practice, and destined to become more so as art continued to modernize itself. That the opposite has happened within contemporary art is obvious to almost everybody, and has led to over-generalizations such as art having entered a “post-medium condition.”³⁴ It has also given rise to more grounded descriptors, such as “the photofilmic,” that highlight how certain artists, as various as Tacita Dean, Andreas Gursky, and David Claerbout, meld analogue and digital platforms in order to mix heterogeneous temporalities.³⁵

It is doubtful whether the photofilmic would meet Wall’s “criteria.” For him, “the newer arts” are photography and cinema, painting being the older art. He is evoking the modern history of the dense intertextuality between painting and photography during the nineteenth century, and that between photography and the cinema during the twentieth.³⁶ Of course, he is offering his own artistic practice — one that features large-scale, screen-like, backlit photographs of staged scenarios of selected moments of everyday life — as the (natural, desired, most aesthetically resolved) outcome of this history. His work is informed to an unusual degree by a consciousness of debates within art history as a discipline, especially debates as to how to interpret the history of modernism in the visual arts. In 1990, in conversation with the historians T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut, and Anne Wagner, he was explicit about the need for artists to continue to

34. See Rosalind Krauss, *Voyage to the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

35. This section is drawn from my essay “Cotemporality, Intermediality: Time and Medium in Contemporary Art,” in *The Photofilmic: Entangled Images in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*, ed. Brianne Cohen and Alexander Streitberger (Leuven: Leuven University

Press, 2016), 21–41. I thank both editors.

36. As argued, for example, by Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981), ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma, *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), and David Campany, *Photography and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

mine the rich commitment to “the painting of modern life” as defined by Baudelaire:

[W]hen the concept of a painting of modern life emerged with particular clarity in the nineteenth century, it changed the way the history of modern art could be seen. Manet’s art could be seen as the last of a long tradition of Western figuration, and of course at the same time, as the beginning of avant-gardism. So it seems to me that the general programme of the painting of modern life (which doesn’t have to be painting, but could be) is somehow the most significant evolutionary development in Western modern art.³⁷

Thus Wall’s artistic program, as he saw it relatively early in his career. The 2003 statement cited above, however, hints at a retreat to an older emphasis, one within which modernism’s greatest challenges are taken as those given from within its own urge toward self-criticism, with the “self” to be criticized understood above all as the medium that defined both the limits and the potentialities of each of the arts. The most famous, and the most seemingly reductive, version of this outlook is that of Greenberg, who argued in the 1960s that each of the arts, if they were to be truly modernist (that is, self-critical), must expend their inessential norms and conventions, defined in turn as those they shared with any other art. Greenberg’s programmatic statement is well known:

Under the testing conditions of modernism more and more of the conventions of the art of painting have shown themselves to be dispensable, unessential. By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible

37. Jeff Wall, “Representation, Suspicions and Critical Transparency: Interview with T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut

and Anne Wagner,” in *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 124.

essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness, and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture.³⁸

At the most obvious level, Wall, in 2003, is saying exactly the opposite: that the crucial thing about pictorial art today—or, at least, the three arts of cinema, photography, and painting—is that they share “aesthetic criteria” so completely that they are producing the same kind of artistic outcome, which he, like Greenberg (and Fried after him, although differently), calls “pictures.” Yet, on a deeper level, Wall (like Greenberg and Fried before him) is taking as given that it is what an artist does with regard to medium that is most fundamentally definitive of aesthetic value. Unlike Greenberg and Fried, however, who believed that the artistic mediums were essentially distinct from each other (although Fried was more permissive in celebrating the capacity of certain artists to continually transform these mediums), Wall is noting that the contemporary sharing of aesthetic criteria between at least these three arts is leading to the creation of a new medium.³⁹ What is this new medium? He leaves it unnamed, but his writings and his work leave us in no doubt that he sees it to be essentially pictorial, a practice of picturing, a kind of composing, that accumulates the achievements of the best painting, photography, and cinema

38. Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” [1962], in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Art Criticism*, vol. IV, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 131. It should be noted that Greenberg was not here advocating a universal principle, or the only grounds for judgments of quality, but rather elaborating a minimal condition for a modernist painting to count as a painting, and a limit against

which a modernist artist must necessarily struggle.

39. There is a large literature constituting this discourse. For an illuminating survey, see Diarmuid Costello, “Pictures, Again,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 8, 1 (2007): 11–42. He notes, correctly, that we could have the same discussion in reverse in relation to Gerhard Richter.

since early modernism.⁴⁰ The constant allusions in Wall's works to iconic modernist paintings, such as those of Manet, Courbet, and Gautier, suggest that, while the print laid across a light box is his material support, his subjectile is a calling up of the ethereal field of iconographic resonance, as if each of his carefully orchestrated pictures of an aspect of contemporary life is also a superimposition aimed at suggesting the afterlife of modernity resonant within the present.

To cling to unspecified "interrelationships" between the three predominant modern arts seemed anachronistic in 2003, and is, now, simply quaint. Each of them operate primarily on digital platforms, as does Wall's own work. Has this shift in formats changed the equation, fundamentally? Has it changed the processes of production within each of the arts, so that "artworks" are less likely to be fixed percepts, selected through canon-conferring protocols and preserved for subsequent contemplation, and more likely to be temporary configurations of information generated within interactive situations? Also changed are the ways that predigital, analog, medium-based works of art are now disseminated. Indeed, the field of dissemination itself has changed, such that all communication has become more or less managed media, and all communicants are immersed within it, for better or worse (and tending fast toward the latter). Installations such as Hito Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2015, demonstrate that *immediation* is a major way in which our contemporaneity is composing us. Yet this is not a simple story of irresistible turnover into a wonderland of total techno-culture. On the contrary, as we shall see, far from democratizing connectivity, these changes have accelerated inequitable differentiation, and made the task of contemporary composition even more challenging.

40. It is this outlook that enabled Michael Fried to recover Wall for his own art historical project in his book *Why*

Photography Matters as Art as Never Before (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

THE ATLAS EFFECT

In recent decades, a number of artists, not least Gerhard Richter, have taken inspiration from Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* project.⁴¹ Beginning in 1924, and working obsessively until his death in 1929, the German art historian arranged and constantly rearranged photographs of artworks, postcards, maps, newspaper clippings, diagrams, and charts on sixty-three panels (two hundred were intended) in order to trace what he called "the afterlife of antiquity," that is, the resonance in European art and thought of the symbolic imagery created in Greece and Rome. Not simply display boards for iconographic tracking, or merely an array inviting attention to coincidental formal echoes, for Warburg each of these artworks, popular images, and cosmological diagrams indexed the historical warring between irrationality and rationality, paganism and organized religion, individuality and institutionalization that had shaped Western cultures and societies, especially since the Renaissance.⁴² In other words, the images were symptomatic of larger and deeper forces, the "base grammar" of cultures and civilizations.

In his 2008 essay, "The Atlas Effect: Constraint, Freedom and the Circulation of Images," Melbourne-based artist, historian, and educator Charles Green notes that "in the contemporary period, the navigation of images through the creation of an atlas has become a major structuring principle of key contemporary artworks; artists have taken to the production of atlases (organized compendia of date and images, often pre-published and copyrighted) that

41. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive," *October*, no. 88 (Spring 1999): 117–45.

42. Surviving as a set of photographs and related paraphernalia in the Library of

the Warburg Institute, University of London, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* project has attracted much brilliant commentary. Online access at <http://warburg.library.cornell.edu>.

are both visual and historical propositions.”⁴³ Propositions about historical flow, about the past as the ground plan of the present; propositions made visually — that is, through images arranged to display the convergences and divergences between competing world pictures, the impact of events on understanding, the shifts in how power stages itself as spectacle, and in how institutions seek to manage public memory. More than the “archival impulse,” Green contends that the atlas acts as a subjectile for a number of contemporary artists.⁴⁴

In his artistic practice, Green works always in partnership with Lyndell Brown. Their 2001 work *Sanctuary* is a painting of three photographs that is then photographed as a lightjet print and printed on Duraclear film, creating an intense yet unfathomably off-register affect.⁴⁵ The predominant image is drawn from a photograph, taken from inside a spaceship, of an astronaut, seemingly unanchored from life support, tumbling into space far above the Earth’s oceans. At the upper right, a framed photograph taken from an Australian navy helicopter shows the decks of the container ship *Tampa*, crowded with recently rescued refugees from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq who are lined up in rows as if they were the contents of the containers. They were refused entry into Australia by a government determined to “stop the boats.” At the lower left, French actress Brigitte Bardot, the calm blue Mediterranean behind her, stares into Jean-Luc Godard’s camera during the filming of *Contempt* (1963). In the specific reality captured by the camera in each case, each image is an instance of personal alienation, actual or potential endangerment, and, in space and on the high seas, death. Each was intensely mediated at its

43. Charles Green, “The Atlas Effect: Constraint, Freedom and the Circulation of Images,” in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence, Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), 945.

44. See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22.

45. See <http://www.australianphotographers.org/artists/lyndell-brown-and-charles-green/photos#707>.

moment of making, and even more so in subsequent usage. Yet no narrative unites the disparate collation inside this painting. Incoherence rules this image-world. We are placed behind the viewfinder, given control of the gaze, but there is no sanctuary for those seen through the lens, or for us. Everyone is in motion, but none of us has found our place. Is this what our contemporaneity looks like, when seen all at once, in a flash, as a film still? Are we lost in a disconnected image-world, or are we floating within it, from one kind of confinement to another?

A floating world, seen like this, implies the incoherence of pure difference, as if differentiation itself had ceased, and all that exists are remainders destined to drift into endless entropy. It is as if there were no subjectile, as if composition had never begun, as if these three images, items from an infinite set, have somehow fallen into a temporary conjunction, which we have chanced to see, frozen before us as if they were the result of an accidental screen shot. Is this, then, the no-space of the Internet; the virtuality that screen space artificially composes into a navigable surface? Or, if we take this painting to be one framed moment in a navigable universe, what kinds of energy are composing that world?

Brown and Green's conception of the atlas as "a major structuring principle," as a subjectile that composes, is realized on a grander scale in their painting *League of Birds*, 2015. It is a retrospect of their lives, their evolution as artists, and their spiritual quest. Its broader significance is its demonstration that the search for place, in the sense of close-to-hand, achieved locality, must also be a matter of constantly connecting to larger cycles of journeying, an endless process of matching the near and the far, pasts and presents, moments and duration, our time and the world's time. As we are drawn into its atlas affects, we remain aware that we are seeing this painstakingly hand painted montage of photographs, drawings, prints, letters, and ephemera photographed and then as inkjet printed onto linen, with whole new areas and trompe l'oeil images

added to its surface in oil paint. This mix of ancient analogue and contemporary digital mediums is entirely intentional, and is part of the point of this work (as it is for many other artists working today).⁴⁶

At the painting's heart lies a panoramic view of dawn from the artists' studio in Castlemaine, Victoria, where warm light edges the dark clouds that rise upward to become a panorama of a range in the Himalayas, including a view of Mount Kailash in Tibet, a sacred site to four religions (Bon, Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism), as the origin and center of the universe, the seat of their major gods. Arrayed around this center, and oriented to the cardinal compass points, are images that mix sketches by the artists (some made during their joint deployment as war artists in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2007, others made in collaboration with artist Jon Cattapan, himself a war artist in Timor-Leste in 2008), source images for their paintings, documentation of significant events in their lives, and relevant news photographs of current events. At top, for example, an annotated landscape drawing made by Charles Green aged 6 appears above one of the bird images that recur throughout the whole (two from the Gould League of Birds, a club for followers of the British ornithologist, John Gould), adjacent to Gilles Deleuze's sketch for an "Orpheus Machine." Leftwards, a portrait by Egyptian artist Wael Shawky appears below a sketch by the artists of an Australian army camp in Afghanistan (others are scattered throughout), and above two owls sounding the question "Who?" Further left, a letter to the artists from Georges Didi-Huberman, a photograph of the artists meeting with Bruce Pollard, director of the Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne, in 1991, alongside a photograph of Ho Chi Minh in a meeting, and a 1994 letter from Mel Ramsden of the Art & Language group.

⁴⁶. See <http://arcone.com.au/brown-green-2016/>. On the artists' work as official Australian War Artists in Afghanistan, including their collaboration

with Jon Cattapan, see Lyndell Brown, Charles Green, and Jon Cattapan, *Framing Conflict: Contemporary War and Aftermath* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 2014).

At the western point of this accumulating set of worlds-within-the World, an eighteenth century image of a parrot sits alongside a photographic record of Charles Green remaking, in the bush at the Grampians, a mountain range in western Victoria, Robert Smithson's famous earthwork, *Monuments of Passaic* (1967), which is in New Jersey. Below that, a 1870s portrait of a Japanese lady from Yokohama by Baron von Stillfried, sits above a watercolor view of Paris made by Charles Green in 1990. In the lower, southern register, the artists' photograph of members of the Iraqi Army is juxtaposed with a 1971 installation by Australian earth artist Ross Grounds, and a photograph of Taliban supporters near Peshawar. A portion of a mandala painting from Tibet anchors this section. Above it, an image of a Pakistani army base hit by a US drone, and across the lower central region, below the twinned landscapes, a panoramic photobook of images of Berlin collected by the artists in 1979. At the lower right, a portrait of the artist's niece (who happened to visit the studio) appears in front of images of Ladakh, a city in Yemen, and Kathmandu. Beside them, an image of Green's father, the painter Douglas Green. Small paintings of parrots by John Gould are at the lower right, above them drawings from Afghanistan, a view from a sniper post on the roof of the Baathist Party Headquarters in Baghdad, adjacent to images of protesters at the Woomera rocket testing range in South Australia. The eastern point is marked by a careful rendering of Lyndell Brown's hand in the gesture of God moving to give the spark of life to Adam in the panel by Michelangelo in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Rome. Above rise images of Alice Liddell photographed by Lewis Carroll, the Dalai Lama visiting Jaipur in 2013, refugee children in the sea around a sinking boat attempting to make its way from Indonesia to Australia, and above them a close-up of Brigitte Bardot in Godard's film *Contempt*. Finally, a print of a page from the *New York Review of Books* featuring an article on the war in Afghanistan,

showing a photograph of Gurkha soldiers, returns us to the north, or top of the image.

The scratches that break the surface of the overall image are based on a sketch map of Tibet made by Charles Green as he traveled across the Himalayas for a year in 1976. As our eyes rotated around the painting, back and forward across it, we had already registered, metaphorically, figures such as the circle of life, the prayer wheel, a mandala, and, for believers, a journeying around Mount Kailash. The spiraling motion of the scratches makes explicit the underlying subjectile, the crudest form of drawing, the first idea that ends up being the last, the connectivity between the seemingly disconnected that is found in the act of journeying. Which is another way of saying that the composition which is found here, in this artwork, has always been there—in the artists’ lives, in ours, and in the life of the world.

To find it is the aspiration of this kind of contemporary composition.

COMPOSITION AS SEARCH

David Joselit has given us the best description to date of the mode of composition that has come to be natural to artists active in the third current that I have identified in contemporary art. In his 2013 book *After Art*, he defines *formats*, in contrast to *mediums*, as “dynamic mechanisms for aggregating content”:

In mediums a material substrate (such as paint on canvas) converges with an aesthetic tradition (such as Painting). Ultimately, mediums lead to objects, and thus reification, but formats are nodal connections and differential fields; they channel an unpredictable array of ephemeral currents and charges. They are configurations of force rather than



discrete objects. In short, formats establish a pattern of links or connections. I use the terms *link* and *connection* advisedly because it is through such modes of association, native to the World Wide Web, that composition occurs under conditions of image population explosion.

Composition is no longer a matter of refining, or rupturing, the conventions of a medium, nor, he argues, is it a matter of finding the kind of presentational vehicle most suited to what the artist wants to say.

As I have argued, what now matters most is not the production of new content but its *retrieval* in intelligible patterns through acts of *reframing*, *capturing*, *reiterating*, and *documenting*. What counts, in other words, is how widely and easily images connect: not only to messages, but to other social currencies like capital, real estate, politics, and so on. In economies of image overproduction connectivity is key. This is the Epistemology of Search.⁴⁷

Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010) might seem to exemplify this description most completely. Instantly acclaimed as a masterpiece, it seems destined to enter the art historical canon (in the doubtful eventuality that such a structure can remain in place).⁴⁸ It deploys the Epistemology of Search, without, it seems, any remainder. Yet, I want to suggest that anachronism haunts it, albeit in interesting ways, which are becoming typical of another kind of contemporary composition.

The Clock is a *tour-de-force* remix of clips retrieved from post-1940s film and television by a team of twenty-five searchers of YouTube and other archives. It consists almost

47. David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 55–6.

48. See “Canons in the conditions of

contemporaneity,” in *Partisan Canons*, ed. Anna Brynzki (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2007), 309–26.

entirely of scenes in which, as part of the action, watches, clocks, or actors mark the time from midnight to midnight. Using Final Cut Pro, Marclay edited these digitalized clips into a twenty-four hour-long film that is screened in synchronicity with local standard time.⁴⁹ *The Clock* is projected on a single screen, in a darkened gallery space that is filled with rows of comfortable couches, as if the space were a screening room, or a small art cinema venue. Despite this nod to its content, *The Clock* exists in an edition of six, and, as property, remains firmly within the art economy — even as museums become increasingly sites of attractions, important nodes within the economy of entertainment. The projection time is twenty-four hours, with viewers welcome to come and go at will, a feature the work shares with other installation art, a medium ubiquitous in contemporary art, one that, as we have seen, invites a variety of compositional modes.⁵⁰

The main compositional concept driving *The Clock* is to tie screen time and real time together for a day of viewing — that is, create an onscreen, constantly changing, dazzlingly self-displaying yet nonetheless working *timepiece*. *The Clock* is, underneath it all, a clock. It is also the reverse, a functioning time machine that has become *this* work of art. It therefore echoes the reflexivity at the core of modernist art — that form and content be one, that subject matter show itself as form, as we saw in the case of Stein's essay. But *The Clock* does this in a way that prioritizes the *cotemporality* of spectatorship. Every viewer will always be watching the screen, usually with others, at the same time that the action on the screen declares itself to be happening. How much more contemporary can anything be? And: how much more of a composition that shows itself to be one can something be?

49. Interesting back-stories about Marclay's compositional process may be found in Daniel Zalewski, "The Hours, How Christian Marclay Created the Ultimate Digital Mosaic," *The New Yorker*

(March 12, 2012): 50–63.

50. See Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *e-flux journal*, no. 2 (January 2009), at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-installation/>.

Yet, at the same time, a certain *dérangement* of our sense of time, particularly the standard time required of us by modern forms of social organization, is the constant affect of *The Clock*. Scene after scene recurs to such moments of acutely realized alienation, sometimes many times a minute. Excess is the affect: there are, it seems, more clips out there about telling the time than can fit a twenty-four hour compilation. The movies (especially in modern times) were, it seems, preoccupied by this experience. All commentary on *The Clock* highlights the sense of anxiety that flows between screen and spectator, inducing us to check our watches, phones, etc. as time watching itself becomes a constant of the projected clips.⁵¹ Yet soon we are drawn into the opposite texture: we become good at noticing the visual continuities between scenes otherwise incongruous as to time, place, color, and mood, and learn to anticipate the surprises provoked by sudden cuts that work like juxtaposition in Cubist or, better, Dada collages. So far, so modernist.

It is no surprise, then, that Rosalind E. Krauss celebrates *The Clock* as a key work by one of the few contemporary artists, dubbed by her “knights of the medium,” who keep extending the possibilities of “technical supports” and thus resist contemporary art’s slide into what she labels “the post-medium condition,” exemplified above all by installation art, which she despises *tout court*. Krauss values Marclay for using “pure *synchronicity*,” that is, “synchronous time,” as a medium for the first time.⁵² As a general art historical argument, this is flawed in that it seeks to save mediums as the ground of consequential art by taking anything, however immaterial, as a medium, to such an extent that every artist of consequence is celebrated as having invented one of his

51. See, for example, Zadie Smith, “Killing Orson Welles at Midnight,” *New York Review of Books* (April 18, 2011): 14–16.

52. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 102–3; and “Christian Marclay: Clock Time,” *October*, no. 136 (Spring 2011): 213–7.

(or in rare cases her) own. Infinite regress beckons here. As an argument about style names, it is better, but Marclay is more accurately seen as what I call a *remodernist*. As an argument about mediums, it misnames as “synchronicity” what is actually a *tour-de-force* of filmic *editing*. As an argument about temporalities, it misnames as “synchronicity” what we can see, now, is *cotemporality*.

To derange time, and to do so over a given amount of time—within the constraints of telling the time every minute over a twenty-four hour period tied to highly conventionalized measure of standard time—does this not require Marclay, paradoxically, to introduce narrative, to devise a plot? Precisely not, if by plot we mean a single narrative with a defined structure, such as those appropriate to the theatrical genres of story, comedy, tragedy, or farce. Nevertheless, these self-imposed stipulations have led him to *emplot* the work to a high degree and in sustained depth. Here I draw on the theories of emplotment in narrative fiction since Aristotle and their relation to Augustine’s reflections on time offered by Paul Ricoeur in his three-volume study *Time and Narrative*.⁵³

The paradox in play within *The Clock* is that, having dispensed with conventional narration, the flows, changes, surprises, shocks that we experience do *not* become a dispersive loosening, or an accelerating separation of disparate parts. Instead, what occurs is a gradual accumulation, a solidifying, and a filling up of time even as it keeps chopping and changing. Marclay’s command of musical composition based on sampling is crucial to this affect.⁵⁴ It enables him to

53. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, three volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985, and 1988).

54. Coding the music for *The Clock* was reportedly much more challenging than for the film clips. We might presume that it would simply replicate that attached to the clips, but this is not consistently the case. It is interesting to compare the use of music

in *The Clock* to Phillip Glass’s comments on his kind of minimal music: “This music is not characterized by argument and development. It has disposed of traditional concepts that were closely linked to real time, to clock-time. Music is not a literal interpretation of life and experience of time is different. The listener will therefore need a different approach to listening, with the traditional

score the whole day *without* any narrative emerging, with no plot in any conventional sense. The cotemporal paradox is that we keep watching, in our own real time, people, actors, characters, and places that are inhabiting the same moment in a day, but that moment in a past time, either actual (if it was a documentary) or fictional (in all other film), a day uniquely brought into being by *this work, this installation, this film*. *The Clock* is alive with the temporal anxieties of the younger and the dead. In parallel, as viewers, we sense — with increasing anxiety — that our rapidly passing, essentially empty present is being filled with imagery that is entirely and only past. At the same time, *The Clock* is alive to the point of saturation with vivid embodiments of cinema’s modern and pre-modern pasts, and the futures of which its agents dreamt. In this attenuated sense, everybody involved — the actors, the characters they are playing, and each of us watching — were, are, and always will be contemporary. Furthermore, for as long as *The Clock* is projected, and for as long as we keep watching, it and we are nothing else *but* contemporary.⁵⁵

Curiously, this feels like a durational version of a film still, a kind of freeze-framing of the present, as if *The Clock* remains within the same twenty-four hours, and becomes (against every aspect of its intentionality) *dated*, while our time, as repeat viewers, keeps moving along. To break such frozen contemporaneity, and the consequent inevitable retreat into pastness, three options were open to Marclay. He could have released the work as a DVD, or in formats that would

concepts of recollection and anticipation. Music must be listened to as a pure sound-event, an act without any dramatic structure.” Cited in Wil Mertens, *American Minimal Music: LaMonte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Phillip Glass* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983), 88.

55. A powerful analysis along similar lines may be found in Joseph Potemski, “The Cinema and Real Time: An Investigation of the Medium’s Relation to Time

Through the Lens of Christian Marclay’s *The Clock* (2010) and Dan Graham’s *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974),” *KINEMA, Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* (Spring 2012), at <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/index.php>. Likewise, see Nadav Hochman, “The Social Media Image,” *Big Data & Society* 1, 2 (July–December 2014), posted August 19, 2014, at <http://bds.sagepub.com/content/1/2/2053951714546645.full>.

enable it to be played on any platform. Widespread access would mean an infinite number of instances of the work, not just six. This would remove *The Clock* from the visual art paradigms of the singular object, and the limited edition. More significantly, it would dissipate the work, precisely because it would surrender control of its temporal conditions to the convenience of any spectator, who could watch it at their leisure, at their own pace, and be able to recompose it. These viewers would be, in principle and practice, remote from the art museum, the socially sanctioned repository of concentrated aesthetic value. *The Clock* would be contemporary with every potential spectator, rather than just those who come to see it when one of the six museums and galleries that own a copy chose to make it available, or to lend it to less favored places. In infinitely repeatable digital form, *The Clock* would become an image array, a very long YouTube-type video, or perhaps even a film (as many critics and commentators instinctively take it to be), rather than what it is, an art installation that wishes to immerse us within, but also offer us some critical distances and creative escapes from, “the movies,” “television,” and YouTube. These alternatives are not, in principle, exclusive—that, at least, is the premise of Chris Marker’s *Immunity* (1998), and are consistently achieved in the work of major video installation artists such as Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, Gerard Byrne, and Omer Fast. Another option would be to keep on editing the work, adding new clips and sequences from current movies, television and the Internet into the time-traveling mixture, and do so on and on, forever. This, too, is the path of superficiality. It would turn *The Clock*, eventually, into an outlet, and the museums showing it into a franchise. The third option was internal to the premises of the work itself: disrupt the expectation of continuous temporal flow, of measured duration, so thoroughly that the experience of time itself becomes, for the spectator, not just atemporal, not even

anti-temporal, but deranged. I have been arguing that, to Marclay's credit, this is the path that he took.

William Kentridge has also engaged directly with these questions, especially in recent years. His subjectile is the filmed drawing. We, the camera, focus on the parameters of the space in which he draws, or collages, or montages, or performs. Each act is filmed for a split second, then edited together to create animated pages, which become compositions that compose themselves as we watch. Sometimes, latitudinal movement intervenes to command the flat, framed space: often, it is the procession, a favored format from the artist's earlier career as a set designer, a format particularly popular for puppet plays. On other occasions, a short film will unfold, usually evoking the mock theatrics of silent film, mixed with the experimental "camera eye" of Dziga Vertov. Anachronism is used consciously, welcomed as a way of suggesting *heterochronicity*, a multiplicity of cotemporalities, past mixed with present, with other pasts, and possible futures. His installations regularly employ all of these modes together. For example, his *The Refusal of Time* (2012)—a title recalling Jorge Luis Borges' famous 1946 essay—is a multi-screen installation centered around a wooden pump that positions the projections on each of the four walls as if they were magic lantern shows. In a *mélange* of collages, mock-lectures, shadow processions, puppet plays, *commedia-dell-arte* performances, and spoof films, he vividly evokes the long history of philosophical reflections on time, from Saint Augustine through to the clock-makers of recent eras, highlighting the distinct perceptions of time held by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, specifically Kentridge himself and his fellow South Africans.⁵⁶ *The Refusal of Time*, too,

56. William Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). See also Terry Smith, "William Kentridge's Activist Uncertainty: During

and After Apartheid," *Nka: Journal of African Art*, 28 (Spring 2011): 46–55; and "Currents of World-Making in Contemporary Art," *World Art* 1, 2 (2011): 20–36.

is a kind of clock (in that its central engine echoes the process whereby clocks in Paris were once set in motion by pumping gas through the sewers). The scope here is much wider than anything envisioned by Marclay. It is also less reflexively modernist in media terms, and, although the history of time is a modern concern, Kentridge's treatment of it actually pictures many recognizable aspects of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, as we experience it today.

Eve Sussman, known for videos such as *89 Seconds at Alcázar* (2005), which employs actors in its 360-degree pan around the scene in which Velasquez paints *Las Meninas* (1656), engages more directly, and transparently, with the Epistemology of Search in her 2011 piece *Whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir*. Working with the Rufus Corporation, Sussman devised a kind of filmmaking robot—a custom built, algorithmically programmed computer dubbed the “Serendipity Machine” that uses key words to select seamlessly from 3,000 film clips shot in central Asia, 80 voice-overs, and 150 pieces of music to create an ethereal narrative that appears to follow the tribulations of a geophysicist named Holz (Jeff Wood). The “plot” is sketchy; in fact, it is, technically, non-existent. Rather, there is a setting, vaguely located in Soviet and post-Soviet spheres of influence, mostly in the South East, that gradually becomes the “world” of the film. Holz seems stuck in a 1970s-looking metropolis called City-A, whose citizenry are subject to various unusual restrictions. (Echoes of *Alphaville*.) Through voice-over dialogues, wire-tapped telephone conversations, and snippets of Holz's job interview with his employer (a mysterious woman referred to as Dispatch), it becomes evident that Holz is controlled by the factory and city where he works, just as his fate is dictated by the machine editing the film. No viewing of the film can be repeated. It is never the same outcome for the protagonists. No one segment cuts to the same next scene, except by random occurrence. Efforts to impose narrative become more

and more improbable the longer one views, the harder one tries. The viewing space is organized to expose the projector, and a computer screen in one wall shows the coding that is running the algorithm.⁵⁷

An even more radical and open-ended format for displaying found imagery, moving and still, has been developed by the iCinema artists. Inside an AVIE (Advanced Visual Immersion Environment) dome, overhead projectors throw up to two hundred mobile screens into the field of vision of a user wearing 3D glasses. On each screen a film clip, sourced from anywhere, can repeat itself for any length of time. The viewer (or viuser) can control the arrangement of screens, can constellate them, and can drag and drop clips from any screen onto one screen, in order to edit one's own continuous short film. Each clip has been tagged for its specific qualities: these range from genre type, presence or absence of, say, male or female agents, through emotional registers to material facts such as amount of lighting or predominant colors. The iCinema work *T_Visionarium* (2008) is an invitation to explore the seductive effects of film and drama as broadcast through television. Everything shown on public and commercial channels during one day was captured. Clips of material between every edit were extracted, then each clip was tied to its own screen and tagged. On entering the space, viewers find a swirl of moving screens, all with active film upon them, including sound. Clicking on one brings it forward, enlarges it, and increases its volume. Screens with clips sharing similar qualities cluster around it, while those with opposite qualities retreat quietly behind the viewer. The affective territories of broadcast television may be entered, traversed, and, in small ways, transformed. As a platform, the program can carry any digitable content, and has since been used for interactive immersion in a variety of situations, ranging from

57. See <http://www.rufuscorporation.com/wowpr.htm>.

the virtual reality training of underground miners to artworks, such as *Deluge* and *Nebula* (both 2016), that explore atmospheric layering on registers from the personal to the planetary.⁵⁸

DIGITAL RETROMANIA

The utopian aspirations of the early years of “new media” and “digital art” are fading as fast as those associated with the dreams of democracy presumed, by many, to be inherent in the Internet.⁵⁹ Composition-as-search seems to find itself constantly discovering earlier kinds of composition, particularly those of the immediately preceding past, the about-to-become redundant technologies at the moment when they still believed in a possible future, the technologies that prevailed before composition-as-search surprised itself by its own prevalence. Has the digital arrived at its (a)historical moment only to find that it has nothing to say? Or, perhaps a little more accurately stated, is it most comfortable—given the anxieties generated by the speed, chaos, and uncertainty of our present contemporaneity—speaking through the visual languages of the recently outmoded?

Retromania is pervasive among techheads: no surprise, as it was, in the 1980s, the local culture of the whiz kids who now dominate Silicon Valley. It also dominates most forms of music, especially contemporary pop music and videos, fashion at all levels, most film genres, advertising of all kinds,

58. See Jill Bennett, *T_Visionarium: A User's Guide* (Karlsruhe: Zentrum für Kunst und Media; Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), book and DVD, and <http://www.icinema.unsw.edu.au>.

59. See Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003);

Timothy Binkley, “Digital Media,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, ed. Michael Kelly, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 398–401; and Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter, eds., *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

and just about every social media platform.⁶⁰ Is contemporary composition simply, but blindingly, the plethora of relatively recent past compositions, all appealing for an infinite afterlife?

Claire Bishop recently voiced a variant of this concern. “While many artists use digital technology, how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital? How many *thematize* this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitalization of our existence?”⁶¹ Focusing on “mainstream contemporary art,” she mentions one work each by Frances Stark, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Ryan Trecartin as exceptions that prove her rule: that, against all expectations about “the digital revolution,” analogue content remains prevalent—in the work of Tacita Dean, Zoe Leonard, Manon de Boer, Rodney Graham, and Fiona Tan, among many others. She rightly observes that these artists value the visible labor that went into manufacturing these machines, the hands-on approach required to use them, and the slower times that their use entails. Their approach, then, is closer to valuing the outmoded technologies as *vintage* (as surviving, when cared for, into our time) rather than *retro* (ready for re-use, like every other past).⁶²

Curiously, Bishop did not consider digital media artists who do pursue in their work exactly the questions she would wish. From the “expanded cinema” generation, Jeffrey

60. See Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction To Its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011). I comment on parallels to the contemporary visual arts in my essay “Comparing the Arts; or, Figuring Planetaryity,” in *The Planetary Turn: Art, Dialogue and Geoesthetics in the 21st Century*, ed. Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 175–192.

61. Claire Bishop, “Whatever Happened to Digital Art?,” *Artforum* (September, 2012), 437.

62. In his commentary on Bishop’s article, Wes Hill draws on this distinction made by Simon Reynolds. He also makes the interesting suggestion that artists such as Dean et al. may be “employing outmoded aesthetics in order to beat the inevitable *out-of-fashion-ness* of their work to the punch,” second-guessing their inevitable relegation of an art historical past by, instead, aligning it “with a history of the artist’s choice.” See Wes Hill, “The Outmoded in Contemporary Digital Culture,” *Contemporary Visual Art + Culture Broadsheet*, vol. 4.3, no. 2 (June 2014), 56.

Shaw, Jean-Michel Bruyère/LFKs, Dennis Del Favero and the iCinema artists, among many others, remain inventively active. The next generation is also producing powerful work, various in its formats, contents, and affects: among them, Cai Fei, Trevor Paglen, Ed Atkins, Antoine Catala, Josh Kline, Ian Cheng, Janine Al-Ani, Hito Steyerl, and John Rafman. Each of these artists, in different ways, raise critical questions about the pervasive use of digital media to construct surveillance societies devoted to consumerist culture. Yet their interests are not confined to this reflexivity: any subject is, in principle, open to them. The expectation that art using digital mediums should have digitality, virtuality, and the world of the Internet as its priority subject matter coincides, in an odd but equally disabling parallelism, with the presumption that Indigenous contemporary art, if it is to be authentic, should address itself to Indigenous issues only. Such expectations turn urgent identity politics into the p.c. straightjacket of identitarianism.

Most of the artists just mentioned do escape retro recursion and vintage nostalgia. Yet many do not. The label “Post-Internet Art” surfaced around 2006 to highlight work by artists who accept wholeheartedly, or with ironic fascination, the massively expanded reproductive capacity of digital technologies and the seemingly infinite disseminative capacities of the Internet, and who incorporated aspects of these processes into assemblages readily suited for display in museums and art galleries, and for circulation through the art market.⁶³ Cory Arcangel made his initial reputation by modifying well-known computer games in amusing ways. His more developed work makes visible the digital infrastructure that usually remains invisible; he foregrounds computing machinery in his installations, and in his screened projections,

63. See Marisa Olson, “Postinternet: Art After the Internet,” at http://www.marisaolson.com/texts/POSTINTERNET_FOAM.pdf.

emphasizes incidental aspects of common online applications, such as the color gradations once used by Photoshop, or the gradient patterns used by YouTube. Jon Rafman's project *9 Eyes of Google Street View*, pursued since 2011, probes Google (do whatever it takes) Inc.'s drive toward the total surveillance and monetization of the world as it composes itself in real time. Rafman searches the site for images of moments of human interaction that the company's cameras picked up in their relentless effort, using nine cameras on the roof of its roving cars, to record 360 degree views of every structure in every street in the (drivable) world. While the aesthetic of Google Street View is bland surfaces, Rafman finds scenes such as gangs fleeing from a robbery, a mugging, young and not so young prostitutes plying their trade, domestic abuse, alone individuals in isolated landscapes, abrupt transitions from urban to natural environments, moments of incidental beauty, and the like. Recursive subjectiles reappear, however, when he posts these scenes on his website as chains of single image photographs, and when they appear in galleries as mounted photographs displayed in sequence at eye level.⁶⁴

Coming from the other side of the artworld and moving in the reverse direction can be just as disappointing: thus Laura Owens' awkwardly flat, dreary 2013 *Untitled* series of painted enlargements of screen shots flecked with Paintbox squiggles. These are representative of the confusion into which fine painters such as her have been thrown by the misleading fiction that we now live in an "Internet Era."⁶⁵ This confusion was compounded at the curatorial level in the exhibition *Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, late 2014 through early 2015. On the walls, it convincingly discounted its own,

64. See <http://9-eyes.com>. For related work, see the exhibition "Public, Private, Secret," International Center for Photography, New York, 2016–17, and its related webpages, at <http://www>.

[publicprivatesecret.org/exhibition/](http://www.publicprivatesecret.org/exhibition/) and <http://www.publicprivatesecret.org>.

65. On which see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013).

William Gibson-inspired premise: that “Atemporality, or timelessness, manifests itself as an ahistorical free-for-all, where contemporaneity as an indicator can no longer be found, and all eras coexist.”⁶⁶ Actually, that was the 1980s, a moment that, for many of the artists in the show, was school time, and that the others were recalling. Such temporal spiraling is, precisely, an indicator of their contemporaneity, their sense of being lost within the present, of having been spun out of its time while continuing to act (in the case of Josh Smith, for example) as if they were the newest thing. In his review of the show, David Salle dismisses its curatorial conceit as a red herring: “[T]he Web’s frenetic sprawl is the opposite of the type of focus it takes to make a painting, or, for that matter, to look at one,” and highlights instead, in the substantive work, the artists’ commitment to structure, that is, “discovering and molding pictorial form for its own sake.”⁶⁷ While his comments on specific paintings were on target, this generalization is a retreat—into the general idea of artistic autonomy, and into the modernist composition.

THE INTERNET IS A DEAD ZONE

Quite recently, the mood has changed. The editors of *e-flux journal* introduced their 2015 collection of essays, *The Internet Does Not Exist*, with these remarks:

The Internet does not exist. Maybe it did exist a short time ago, but now it remains as a blur, a cloud, a friend, a deadline, a redirect, or a 404. If it ever existed, we could not see it. Because it has no shape. It has no

66. See <http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1455>.

67. David Salle, “Structure Rising,” *Art News*, posted February 23, 2015, at <http://www.artnews.com/2015/02/23/structure-rising-forever-now-at-moma/>.

face, just this name that describes everything and nothing at the same time. Yet we are still trying to climb on board, to get inside, to be part of the network, to get in on the language game, to show up in searches, to appear to exist. We thought there were windows but actually they're mirrors. And in the meantime we are faced with more and more — not just information, but the world itself.⁶⁸

“Too much world” is Hito Steyerl’s slogan for the current social composition, its ragged rush between image and object, virtuality and reality, data and thing:

Data, sounds, and images are now routinely transitioning beyond screens into a different state of matter. They surpass the boundaries of data channels and manifest materially. They incarnate riots or products, as lens flares, high rises, or pixelated tanks. Images become unplugged and start crowding off-screen space. They invade cities, transforming spaces into sites, and reality into reality.⁶⁹

Within this world, the Internet has become just one among other vehicles for these routine mash-ups of transitional matter, and is, for many users, becoming increasingly clunky in its operations:

In the past few years many people — basically everybody — have noticed that the internet feels awkward, too. It is obviously completely surveilled, monopolized, and sanitized by common sense, copyright, and conformism.

68. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, “Introduction,” in *The Internet Does Not Exist*, ed. Julieta Aranda et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 5.

69. Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” in *The Internet Does Not Exist*, ed. Julieta Aranda et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 12.

It feels as vibrant as a newly multiplexed cinema in the '90s showing endless reruns of *Star Wars: Episode 1*.⁷⁰

Steyerl presents and parodies this condition in her video *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013).⁷¹ Postinternet compositionality seems destined to keep on deleting itself.

WORLDING

In his path-breaking 2011 book, *The Right to Look: A Counter-History of Visuality*, Nicholas Mirzoeff usefully tracked the worldwide dialectical struggle, waged during the modern period, between modes of visualization used by the powerful, and those used in struggles against such power.⁷² He argues that “The Plantation Complex” dominant from around 1660 to 1860, was opposed, in Europe, by “revolutionary realism”; “The Imperial Complex” that sought to prevail between 1860 and 1945 was opposed, throughout the colonial world, by many and various Indigenous counter-visualities; while, since 1945, “The Military-Industrial Complex” has been resisted, again throughout the world, including in the First and Second Worlds, by what he names “decolonial neorealism.” The military-industrial complex has added entertainment and information to its range, and has transmuted into what he calls a “post-panoptic visuality.” Opposition to it, he believes, as do I, must take the form of a “planetary visualization.” Reviewing the world picture as of 2010, he concludes: “Several outcomes seem possible from this swirling crisis: a new authoritarianism,

70. Steyerl, “Too Much World,” 16.

71. See the discussion with Marvin Jordan, “Hito Steyerl: Politics of Post-Representation,” *dismagazine*, 2016, at <http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics->

[of-post-representation/](http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics-of-post-representation/).

72. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counter-History of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

a perpetual crisis, or, just possibly, a time in which my claim to the right to look is met by your willingness to be seen.”⁷³ We find evidence for each of these outcomes everywhere today: they are key elements in the texture of the contemporary condition. But we need to look at them more closely, and from broader perspectives, at the same time.

Visualizing the worlds-within-the-World from a planetary perspective is difficult enough for those scientists bent on understanding the movement of matter within vast reaches of space, and its bearing on our live on the planet Earth. To this enterprise we need to add a better understanding of the world making of humans and animals. Scientific popularizers such as Carlo Rovelli struggle to incorporate these dimensions into their “theories of everything.”⁷⁴

When we speak, as I did in my introductory remarks, of world composition, and of a worldly art, we draw attention to the work of artists who are showing us the actual processes of placemaking, world picturing and connectivity that are, as I have said, the primary constituents of contemporary world-being. More specifically, we may ask, are they showing us the processes through which the World is composing us? What is it about these big scale kinds of composition that remains limited, recursive, zombie? Most importantly, we want to know, what might a future coeval composition look like? How do we get to it from here?

For three centuries, the map of the continents and oceans — notably the Mercator projection that underlay the geopolitics of “The Imperial Complex” — served as the subjectile for the visual imagining of planetary scale.⁷⁵ Following the images of

73. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 309.

74. See, for example, Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 2015), notably the circuitous shortcomings of his last, longest, and least lucid chapter on human “subjectivity.”

75. See Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (University of California Press, 1997); and Andrew Herod and Melissa W. Wright, *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

Earth from space disseminated after the voyage of Apollo 17 in 1972, the “World Map” has gradually been replaced with an imagery of clouds moving across flowing oceans and glimpses of similar, spread out land masses: the image of the “Blue Earth.”⁷⁶ Even more recently, as an impact of economic globalization and the spread of new electronic technologies, the rhizome of networked interconnectivity, somehow adjacent to the visible material world yet with an invisible freedom of movement across it, has begun to emerge as a subjectile.⁷⁷ Artists of all kinds, all over the world, working in every medium, mixing mediums, and in transmedial terms, have for decades been deploying one or more of these subjectiles in their efforts to imagine aspects of place making, world picturing, and connectivity.⁷⁸ Web artist John Klima is an example of an imagineer of the technoglobal: thus his game-based interactive web project *Stand-Alone Earth* (2001).⁷⁹ Around the same time, artists such as Seth Price, in his important essay *Dispersion*, undergoing constant revision since 2002, and Julie Mehretu, in paintings such as *Dispersion* of the same year, evinced a slightly more critical consciousness of the dispersive effects of globalization. This has been less evident in their more recent work.⁸⁰

In marked contrast, and more thoroughly than any of his contemporaries, Allan Sekula (1951–2013) devoted his art to penetrating the veils of abstraction and ideological obfuscation generated by globalized capital as it seeks our consent to its values. While some artists rest content with displaying

76. See Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter 1.

77. See, for example, Manuel Lima, *Visual Complexity: Mapping Patterns of Information* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011).

78. Terry Smith, “Worlds Imagined by Contemporary Artists: Working Towards

a World Picture,” in *Art to Come: Essays in Contemporary Art History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

79. See <http://www.cityarts.com/train/>.

80. Seth Price, *Dispersion*, 2002–, <http://sethpriceimages.com/post/42277603863/dispersion-2002-seth-price-download-pdf>.

dazzling maps of the incidence of electronic exchanges around the world, and others in serving the “lords of the universe” by parodying their lifestyles and sense of self-advertisement, Sekula concentrated on the day-in, day-out labor of those who are obliged to make the machinery of globalization function in actuality. His major projects, such as *Fish Story* (1989–1995), *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes* (1989), and *Black Tide* (2003), tracked these processes in the maritime industries that continue to be a key connector on a global scale between system designers, producers, and markets. Through exacting photographs of particular places and people arranged into essayistic sequences, *Fish Story* followed container cargo as it traverses land and sea — mainly between Asia, the United States (including the seaport of Los Angeles, his hometown), and Europe — on board trucks, ships, barges, and trains. The incessant movement of this system is shown to be anything but inevitable, and its apparent implacable inevitability is revealed as a fragile construction, entirely dependent on the people and the things it relentlessly exploits. Sekula brought to this enterprise an exceptionally sophisticated theorization of “critical realism” as a mode of artistic practice in contemporary circumstances, an unusual knowledge of the details of labor history, and a deep immersion in literature, especially the rich legacy of writing connected with the sea as a symbolic domain. If *Moby Dick* has attracted directors as various as John Huston and Ron Howard, and *Heart of Darkness* directors such as Frances Ford Coppola and Nicholas Roeg, Sekula approaches their achievement in his last major work, the film *The Forgotten Space* (2010), made with Noël Burch. Based on *Fish Story*, it elaborates the photo-sequences of that work into a film that offers us studied panoramas of maritime sites, narrative engagement with workers in and around the industry, and absorptive imagery of the sea itself. Voiceover and camera movement combine to create an often reflective, at times poetic, but always grounded evocation of human and

natural entanglement. Sekula's concern with tracking global flows echoed in the acute and subtle work of some of his contemporaries, notably Isaac Julien, Steve McQueen, and Fiona Tan.⁸¹

It should not surprise us that imagery of the rivers flowing into the sea, and of the oceans swirling across four-fifths of the planet, should surface so strongly in the work of artists interested in exploring the primary planes of worldly connectivity. In 1998, Richard Misrach spent much of the year traveling the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, taking photographs of the proximity—in what is known locally as “Cancer Alley”—of vast industrial complexes, human habitations, and the wetlands. He revisited the area in 2010 in connection with what became the Petrochemical America exhibition and book project, working with landscape architect and graphic designer Kate Orff. The outcomes mix Misrach's haunting still photographs of the devastated landscapes, the huge plants hovering over modest workers' homes and abandoned cemeteries, with Orff's charts and diagrams (“throughlines”) that use public record information to visualize over time the extent of resource exploitation, the disregard for environmental laws, the impacts on public health, and incidence of political collusion in the specific places up and down the river recorded in the photographs.⁸² This is a more potent picturing of environmental catastrophe than the industrial sublime that pervades many other treatments of these subjects, by, for example, Edward Burtynsky.

At the Whitney Biennial of 2014, a Babel of multi-media works (over 100) was eclipsed by one single screen projection:

81. I discuss works such as Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010); McQueen's *Gravesend* (2007); and Tan's *Disorient* (2009), in the coda to *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (2011).

82. See Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America* (New York: Aperture, 2014); and aperture,

conversations, September 17, 2012, “Richard Misrach and Kate Orff discuss Petrochemical America,” at <http://aperture.org/blog/richard-misrach-and-kate-orff-in-conversation/>. On the broader topic, see T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

an 87-minute video entitled *Leviathan*, by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, produced in 2012 at the Sensory Ethnography Lab, Harvard.⁸³ It was shot off the coast at New Bedford, Massachusetts, a former whaling capital, famous as the mythic point of departure in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Without plot, narrative, singular heroes, symbolic moral struggle, or voiced speech, the film achieves an extraordinary, at times sublime, intensity due to its seemingly total immersion in the world of industrial fishing. While in the broadest sense it returns to the origins of documentary—to the Griersonian ideal of objective, unmediated, reportage of that which is ordinary, ignored, hidden, or suddenly shocking—in another sense it is utterly contemporary. It uses recent technologies such as tube cameras and clusters of microphones to take us inside the nets as the fish are scooped up, dragged at speed, spilled into trays, then sorted and carved. The machinery is similarly wired, as are the workers, with the result that we view everything as it is being experienced—seen, heard, moved, touched—by the fish, the water, the machines, and the workers. No commentary, no distancing, no ethnographic analysis. Forceful editing and sound-changes take us, dramatically, from one nose-close envelopment to another. Yet it is not this unrelieved, uncompromising immediacy alone that makes *Leviathan* contemporary. It is, rather, that such in-your-face immersion reveals, without directly picturing it, the larger figure of contemporary global connectivity: the leviathan that is the modern fishing industry, a massive globalizing machine that is, like all others conceived and operating along similar lines (in mining, containerization, financialization, massive data manipulation, and electronic transfer), hell bent on consuming to extinction the worlds on which it feeds.

John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2014) draws viewers of its three adjacent screens into a similarly intense proximity

83. See <https://www.fandor.com/films/leviathan>.

with industrial-scale hunting and fishing—in this case, for whales, seals, polar bears, and human slaves—but does so across a temporal scale that brings the Age of Imperialism up to the present period of massive movements of displaced and desperate peoples across the globe. Beginning with a voice over of a BBC interview with a group of young Nigerian migrants who have survived a crossing of the Mediterranean by hanging onto tuna fishing nets after their boat sank, accompanied by underwater shots of diving cormorants, sharks trapped in nets, isolated boats, a hooded man standing in low tide looking out to sea, and a dark-skinned man in a room holding a small clock, *Vertigo Sea* expands into a forty-eight minute, multi-layered meditation on the dependence of humans on the oceans. Beautiful sequences of majestic humpback whales at home in their natural settings, from the BBC Natural History Unit, are accompanied by horrific imagery, shot in the nineteenth century and recently, of their being hunted down and slaughtered on board ships. Meanwhile, before or soon after, whales are shown eating seals; seals gobble shoals of fish; crocodiles attack wildebeest; slaves are thrown overboard from listing ships; the atomic bomb is tested at Bikini Atoll; and two leftwing women are “disappeared” into the sea from military helicopters during the dictatorship period in Argentina. To the artist, coming to terms with that memory became the “ethical center” of this work.⁸⁴ Surging, swelling, symphonic music accompanies the long takes, explosive sound the dramatic, usually violent close ups. These rhythms are slowed, at times, for periods of silent mediation, usually on the strangeness wrought by the ravages of time. Actors occupy unexpected settings. A black man in an eighteenth-century military uniform surveys, from a commanding height,

84. See “John Akomfrah in Conversation with Anthony Downey,” January 16, 2016, at <https://vimeo.com/154862309>.

a seemingly uncolonized landscape. A well to do white woman wanders among items from an aristocratic household scattered, as if by shipwreck, on a pebbled beach, while clocks lie all about, in a Daliesque fashion. While these enacted sequences are less successful, on the whole *Vertigo Sea* succeeds in transferring—or, in the artist’s words, “migrating”—imagery from categories such as nature documentary, historical film, and the official archive into a fluid affective space, where the actions and actors, the times and places that were filmed, become reactivated as ghosts of modernity’s evil empires, of its unconscionable exploitations, revenants that the sea will ceaselessly regurgitate, even as we humans come to rely on it more and more for our survival.

COMPOSING ART, SOCIETIES, AND WORLDS

We have seen enough to be able to say that there is no such thing as “*the* contemporary composition,” if by that we imagine a coherence tending towards a totality of any kind. Its actuality is not to be found today in the visual arts, in social formations, or in the world at large. Peter Osborne is right to say, “The concept of the contemporary is a productive act of the imagination to the extent to which it performatively projects a non-existent unity onto the disjunctive relations between coeval times. In this respect, in rendering present the absent time of a unity of present times, all constructions of the contemporary are *fictional*, in the sense of fictional as a narrative mode.” The contemporary condition is, he suggests, “an *operative* fiction: it *regulates the division* between the past and the present within the present.” That is, it projects the false sense that our contemporary condition, “albeit internally disjunctive,” is “a single historical time.” Such a notion, as he says with some regret, is

“inherently problematic but increasingly inevitable,” a kind of necessary evil.⁸⁵

There is no doubt that, in many artworlds today, the concept of “the contemporary” is a mindless vacuity, a mystification about the contemporary condition as somehow at once absolutely up to date and beyond historical time. It is prompted by neoliberalism’s annexation of the upper reaches of the market for art, and by its relentless consumption of public goods, assets, and domains. Little is excluded from its voracity, not even the smallest, and seemingly marginal cultural sectors, such as, in Europe, the alternative arts infrastructure so carefully built by so many over recent decades.⁸⁶ Yet it is precisely in these domains, and in the kind of art that I have been discussing, that we see contemporaneity being grasped as a constructive necessity. Everyone involved knows that an amorphous cloud of self-serving fictions saturates the self-evidence of contemporary life, obscuring neoliberalism’s relentless drive toward the monetization of everything and every relationship, its insistence on sequestered profit-taking, and its creation of zones for the defense of privilege. Yet we continue to make art, curate exhibitions, administer grants, and run agencies; organize, demonstrate, and politicize; analyze, interpret and educate; build and rebuild enabling infrastructure. I will conclude by highlighting the work of a few more composers of a critical contemporaneity.

Speaking of infrastructural activism brings us to the most recent developments in the curating of art. Contemporary art and curatorial practice have been converging since the

85. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, 22–23.

86. See Maria Lind and Raimund Minichbauer, eds., *European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios for the Future of Public Funding of the Arts in Europe* (London: eipcp/IASPIS, 2005); and Anthony Davies, “Take Me, I’m Yours: Neoliberalising the Cultural Institution,”

Mute, April 18, 2007, at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/take-me-im-yours-neoliberalising-cultural-institution>. For recent commentary, see the essays in *Curating and Politics Beyond the Curator: Initial Reflections*, ed. Heidi Bale Amundsen and Gerd Elise Mørland (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2015).

late 1960s, with consequences for the compositional modes of both. With installations in museums and alternative gallery spaces becoming the medium preferred by increasing numbers of contemporary artists, it was a matter of time before the staging of exhibitions of the work of other artists, and the radical reinstallation of museum collections, became a favored activity.⁸⁷ In parallel, certain curators began to conceive of their exhibitions as essays or as arguments, not only about the work of an artist, or about an episode in the history of art (including the survey of art today), but also about aspects of what we are calling the social composition. Thus Harald Szeemann's breakthrough documenta 5 in 1972, a sprawling inquiry entitled *Questioning Reality—Pictorial Worlds Today*.⁸⁸ While a myriad of related but subtly different kinds of artistic composition and exhibitionary thinking has been spawned by this convergence, two overall tendencies are becoming clear. Since the 1960s, artistic practice has become increasingly a matter of curating every aspect of one's working life, while professional art curating—the making of exhibitions, and the variety of closely related, paracuratorial tasks—has become more and more modeled on artistic composition. Within each tendency, a number of compositional modes can be distinguished, and their evolution traced, something I have attempted to do in recent publications.⁸⁹

87. See Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); and Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

88. See http://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_5; and Hans-Joachim Müller, *Harald Szeemann: Exhibition Maker* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2006).

89. The convergence is traced in Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators

International, 2012); twelve “modes of exhibitionary meaning” employed by curators and artists since the 1960s are traced in “Artists as Curators/Curators as Artists: Exhibitionary Form since 1969,” in *When Attitudes Become Form; Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, ed. Germano Celant (Venice: Fondazione Prada, 2013), 519–530, in Italian 711–17; and eight kinds of curating emerged from the discussions in *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), as highlighted in the introduction, “The Discourse.”

Epic narrative, such as that deployed in Matthew Barney's *The Cremaster Cycle* (1995–2003) and his *River of Fundament* (2015), seems to share a lot with the worldly cinematic installations I discussed above. Yet their plotting is open-ended, trans-epochal rather than epic, evoking the diasporic movements of displaced individuals, families, and peoples, their consonance with long-term historical flows, and thus the inadequacy of “great men” as the casual agents of History. However anti-heroic, or better, mock-heroic, Barney's figures usually turn out to be, he remains committed to the quest.⁹⁰ His cycles are, at least, more elaborately plotted than the installation cinema of ASE+F, which has recently declined into overblown, endless, and regressive parodies of postmodern pointlessness.

The sudden embrace of performance art in 2010 by a number of leading museums of modern and contemporary art in the United States and Europe belied the fact that, as RoseLee Goldberg has long argued, performance had been central to avant-garde practice for at least a century, since the Futurists in Venice in 1910 and the Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916.⁹¹ Welcomed by museums anxious to break up the slow shuffle of long lines of viewers contemplating one object after another, performance provides the visiting multitudes with something moving to look at, and the frisson of an event that seems to have entered the museum from another kind of venue outside it (such as a contemporary dance space). More historically conscious viewers have appreciated the *reperformance* of path-breaking performances from the 1960s and 1970s, when “live art” — in its reach for the actuality of lived experience — was a crucial contributor to the great transformation that art everywhere was

90. See “The Intensity Exhibit: Barneyworld at McGuggenheim,” in my book *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chapter 6.

91. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

undergoing. For all of the inherent interest in performance today, fresh forms of contemporary composition remain difficult to discern.

The same might be said of “unmonumental” assemblage, the compositional mode ubiquitous among artists for whom modern sculpture, and late modern, post-Minimalist art, remain challengingly problematic. There is a good reason why this mode is so widespread: it charts the impact of contemporary social and world scale *decomposition* on the urge to fashion materials by hand and by eye. From the abject imagery of the 1990s through to the “new materialism” in some recent theory, it responds to artists’ instinct — natural in the circumstances — to register the wounding of contemporary consciousness, the self-harm that the present keeps doing to itself.⁹²

There are occasional exceptions that may be hinting at a new kind of composition. Many of Tino Sehgal’s “constructed situations,” for example, are adroitly scripted to evoke extraordinary levels of interaction between the “players” and spectator/participants through the posing of searching questions, often in direct dialog. Based in the minimalist delineations of late modern dance, when staged in museums, galleries, art fairs, or even as part of private collections, they exemplify the transmedial compositional modes discussed earlier. As well, they are intensely contemporary, not only in their existence as events for those participating, but also in the artist’s insistence on a total absence of any record of the event, from its announcement to its archiving. More suggestive, however, is the gentle yet persistent tone of the exchanges, their pairing of structured questioning with no anticipation of a given answer, their evocation of anxiety and the urge to

92. Key texts range from Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October*, no. 78 (Autumn 1996): 106–124, to his recent book *Bad New Days* (London: Verso, 2015), that focuses on abjection,

the archival, mimetic excess, and precarity as key concepts in contemporary practice. See also Richard Flood et al., *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* (London: Phaidon, 2007).

communicate, their gradual breaking down of reserve, and their awakening of the desire for mutuality — all of these are qualities essential to coeval composition. They cannot, of course, guarantee it. Similarly, certain staged performances orchestrated by Tania Bruguera — such as *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008) in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, and *#6 (Havana Version)* (2009) — engaged participants in the challenges of “acting freely public spaces” that are usually constrained by both visible barriers and invisible codes, whatever the complexion of government. While sharing Sehgal’s focus on small gestures, and on the encouragement of close, even intimate relations between strangers, Bruguera’s “demonstrations” are more directly confrontational for both participants and the authorities involved.⁹³

Works such as these depend on the co-operation of varying numbers of people for their preparation, and for their execution. In practice, they build temporary collectives that are dedicated to creating a sense of commonality, and to sustaining it in unusual situations, such as museums, and in challenging circumstances, such as public squares. In this, such works are artworld echoes of the approach of activist groups that use visual imagery, collective curating, and participatory engagement to challenge illegitimate political authority, and to build alternative forms of governmentality. These groups have been thinking for many years about the increasingly fragile connectivity between place and world, locality and the impacts of distant power. In the United States, for example, the Critical Art Ensemble, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, the Radical Cartography projects, and the Yes Men were consistently effective in the years before the Occupy movement gave a wider social form to the kind of work that artists with these orientations all over the world

93. Carrie Lambert-Beatty et al., eds., *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary* (New York: Charta Books, 2009).

had been doing.⁹⁴ Local focus is crucial in creating coeval commonality. Two recent examples: in Pittsburgh, Conflict Kitchen is a restaurant that serves cuisine from countries with which the United States is in conflict. Began as a community art project by artist John Rubin, who works with teams of students and faculty from Carnegie Mellon University, Conflict Kitchen became a process of finding coevality through cooking, talking and eating together in a continuously inventive variety of shapes and forms.⁹⁵ The *Free Trade Zones Project: Southwest Corridor, Northwest Passage*, led by Brian Holmes and Rozalinda Borcila, focuses on drawing attention, through website postings, leafleting, collective walks, and public demonstrations, to the “zones of exception” for the trading of goods and services in the Chicago area that have been established by federal government agencies working with multinational companies.⁹⁶

Coeval communality has to be continually created, and constantly recreated. Every collective has to begin again and again, as new members join, others leave, and circumstances change. The experience of CASCO, the Office for Art, Design, and Theory, which was founded in Utrecht in 1990, is typical. With admirable directness and refreshing simplicity, its mission statement encapsulates what is also one of the main themes of this essay:

94. Grant Kester has discussed “socially engaged art” in a number of books, such as *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Duke University Press, 2011); and features them in *Field: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, of which he is editor, see <http://field-journal.com>. See also the political mappings in Lize Mogel and Alexis Begat, eds., *Radical Cartography* (Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press, 2010), especially Ashley

Hunt, *A World Map in Which We See*; Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2010); Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); and his *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015); and Yates McGee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2016).

95. See <http://conflictkitchen.org/about/>.

96. See <http://southwestcorridornorthwestpassage.org>.

The aim of our work is to contribute to forming non-capitalist cultures and possibilities for life for which we believe art could play an essential role, not as an insular avant-garde but in alignment with other initiatives and social movements. Instead of accumulation, alienation, apathy, and competition, a culture that we envision is comprised of sharing, caring, and living and working together. In this light, we see our organization and space as a micro society that might reflect such vision. It's a tough but worthwhile venture.⁹⁷

At the opposite end of the scale, on the most macro level, a similar spirit inspired the *Framework Convention on Climate Change*, affirmed by 195 nations in Paris on December 12, 2015, and now undergoing a painful process of ratification by member countries. The declaration began with these words:

Recognizing that climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet and thus requires the widest possible cooperation by all countries, and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, with a view to accelerating the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions⁹⁸

The agreed action plan is based on a continuously affirmed, and regularly checked, consensus building between “developed,” “developing,” “less developed” and “at risk” nations. The procedure so far has been to ask each nation to volunteer plans to reduce carbon emissions and move their economies onto fossil-free sources of energy. Everyone knows that the total of these proposals falls far short of what the world needs, not only because of inequities of power

97. See <http://www.cascoprojects.org/mission>.

98. United Nations, Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Adoption of*

the Paris Agreement, December 12, 2016, at <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf>.

between nation states, but also because of the fragility of consensus on the issues within many, indeed most, of these states. Nevertheless, the negotiators in Paris were aware that they had to proceed by acknowledging these inequalities, while at the same time affirming the aspirations of all parties, places, and polities. As the groundwork, they insisted on the universality of a number of rights, items they regard as essential components of any viable world picture:

Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.⁹⁹

This patching and pasting of contending values reveals just how far we have to go before we can explain, even to ourselves, how we might go about doing what we must do now: create a contemporary composition.

99. United Nations, Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Adoption of the Paris Agreement*.

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PEN = 0,3,1,0, WEIGHT = 50, SLANT = 0, SUPERNESS = 0.6

The typeface used to set this series is called Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font (MTDBT2F), designed by Dexter Sinister in 2010 after MetaFont, a digital typography system originally programmed by computer scientist Donald Knuth in 1979.

Unlike more common digital outline fonts formats such as TrueType or Postscript, a MetaFont is constructed of strokes drawn with set-width pens. Instead of describing each of the individual shapes that make up a family of related characters, a MetaFont file describes only the basic pen path or *skeleton* letter. Perhaps better imagined as the ghost that comes in advance of a particular letterform, a MetaFont character is defined only by a set of equations. It is then possible to tweak various parameters such as weight, slant, and superness (more or less bold, Italic, and a form of chutzpah) in order to generate endless variations on the same bare bones.

Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font is essentially the same as MetaFont, abiding the obvious fact that it swallows its predecessor. Although the result may look the same, it clearly can't be, because in addition to the software, the new version embeds its own backstory. In this sense, MTDBT2F is not only a tool to generate countless PostScript fonts, but *at least equally* a tool to think about and around MetaFont. Mathematician Douglas Hofstadter once noted that one of the best things MetaFont might do is inspire readers to chase after the intelligence of an alphabet, and "yield new insights into the elusive 'spirits' that flit about so tantalizingly behind those lovely shapes we call 'letters.'"

For instance, each volume in The Contemporary Condition is set in a new MTDBT2F, generated at the time of publication, which is to say *now.*

Dexter Sinister, 23/09/16, 09:55 AM