Periodizing Contemporary Art? • ALEXANDER ALBERRO

NEW FORMS OF SPECTATORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY ART?

The years following 1989 have seen the emergence of a new historical period. Not only has there been the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the heralding of the era of globalization, but technologically there has been the full integration of electronic or digital culture, and economically neoliberalism with its goal to bring all human action into the domain of the market has become hegemonic. Within the context of the fine arts, the new period has come to be known as "the contemporary." Between 1989 and 1991, several factors came together that resulted in a seismic change that, I believe, significantly realigned the manner in which art addresses its spectator--indeed, in which it constructed the spectator.

The categories that allow us to think about contemporary art are uneven and have been coming together for a while. Many of them have their origins in the perceptual modes required by art of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. For instance, tactical media projects that combine documentary information and expressive politics were extensively developed by artists working in the 1960s and '70s (such as the Tucaman Arde collective in Argentina and the Guerrilla Art Action Group in the United States) before they were adopted by counter-globalization artists working with the Internet. Similarly, a number of projects of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s were characterized by their intensity and their call for expressive response—for example, the work of Kinetic and Op artists such Jesús Soto, Bridget Riley, and the members of GRAV, as well as Postminimalist artists such as Robert Smithson or James Turrell. This art prefigured some of the ideas explored in contemporary digital images and sculptural installations (by artists such as Andreas Gursky and Olafur Eliasson) that overwhelm cognition and produce sheer affect.

Causality is one of the main problems that I want to address in this response, which explores several theories of change or transition. Of particular concern is the twofold movement, in which the foregrounding of continuities—the insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, from modern to contemporary—slowly turns into a consciousness of a radical break, while at the same time the enforced attention to a break gradually turns "the contemporary" into a period in its own right. Indeed, I will argue that this period in art we now call the contemporary has been coming together for a while, and it parallels other contemporary hegemonic formations such as globalization and neoliberalism, which come to be fully in place by the late 1980s.

By summoning the concept of a hegemonic formation, I mean to signal that I do not think that the consolidation of the contemporary is just a question of periodization. I use periodization as a tool with which to think the whole social formation, a tool that allows us to think the society in its totality. But I use the concept of hegemony--defined as an ensemble of economic, political, cultural, and ideological practices that are organized in a complex way, but still within a larger, overdetermining structure of domination-- as an apparatus with which to think totality and difference at the same time. . Hegemony allows us to see the totality as being constructed by divisions, contradictions, and what Chantal Mouffe would call "antagonisms." For me, the most important thing about this model is that insofar as it encompasses contradictions and antago-

nisms, it also opens the possibility of different subject positions that can occasion different forms of agency. Some of these forms of agency will ultimately reproduce the hegemonic social order, but others will develop as alternatives or even oppositions to it.

If, as I suggest, sometime at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s a new historical period or hegemonic formation with distinct features came fully into place, and this new period or formation has affected the way in which the interrelated categories of art, history, geo-politics, and technology are constituted, the question arises, how might we best describe this period? I want to enter this debate by exploring a number of questions concerning the crystallization of contemporary art. For instance, what exactly is the nature of the transformation in question? What motivated it or gave it justification? What is its relationship to social, political, economic, technological, and cultural developments? Will this new period be specific to the arts and limited to considerations of aesthetic change alone? Or can the contemporary be somehow described in an abstract way that takes into account the rise of globalization, for example, or the development of a new technological imaginary?

Thinking of the contemporary as a periodallows us to enhance our ability to explain occurrences and events that are unfolding. The first is social and political (and to a large degree economic) and relates to what has, since the end of the Cold War, come to be referred to as "globalization." As the cultural historian Michael Denning writes, "behind the powerful accounts of globalization as a process lies a recognition of a historical transition, of globalization as the name of the end, not of history, but of the historical moment of the age of three worlds" (a period that, in Denning's view, extends from the Potsdam conference of 1945 to the unforeseen collapse of "the Second World" in 1989). What the three worlds shared was a commitment to secularism, planning, equal rights, education, and modernization. To speak the word "globalization" is to say that these worlds and their ideals have not only failed, but are gone. The one thing globalization clearly means is that the world is now more interconnected than ever. Globalization thus stands as an attempt to name the present--it is a periodizing concept, especially when it announces the end of internationalism, or, even more ominously, the end of history.

Globalization takes a number of forms within the context of the artworld. One is the thematic or iconographical representation of global integration in a diverse body of works. The range of examples would include, among many others, Allan Sekula's Fish Story (1989¬95), a global exploration of ports and the shipping industry at the end of the twentieth century; Ursula Biemann's Black Sea Files (2005), which focuses on the geopolitics of oil; and Pavel Braila's Shoes for Europe (2002), which documents the painstaking process of refitting the wheel gauges used on Central and Eastern European trains to the Western European standard. Another form that globalization takes within the art world is the proliferation of large global exhibitions in temporary contexts (that is to say, biennials, triennials, Documenta, art fairs, and the like). The impact of the intricate model of discourse that these well-attended and extensively reviewed events advance has been enormous not only on the exhibition of art but also on its production and distribution. Some of these exhibitions are meant to extend the Western art world to places such as Shanghai and Istanbul, while others are meant to bypass the Western art world (as with the

Havana, Dakar, and Cairo biennials), to create an alternative pole. As Martha Rosler stated in a recent roundtable discussion: "The global exhibitions serve as grand collectors and translators of subjectivities under the latest phase of globalization." And yet, the structure of these global exhibitions follows the logic of the market: "the means of selection have been institutionalized . . . Artists are commonly put forward by other interested parties, such as powerful galleries and curators, whose investment is often linked to prospective sales." To this we could add that even--or especially--the most peripheral global exhibitions work as research and development arms of the Western art market, unearthing an endless supply of new goods for distribution. Others have been more sanguine about the proliferation of exhibitions that take globalism as their theme, describing these events as "the true sites of enlightened debate on what contemporary art means today, a position thoroughly abdicated by museums." Moreover, the neoliberal economy of globalization has been accompanied by new collecting practices. Gone is the chic collector who seeks cultural capital, let alone the connoisseur of early modernism; art collecting today is largely dominated by purchases of sheer speculation.

Yet another form that globalization takes in art is the dynamic manifestation of counter-globalization artistic practices. These engagements or new antagonisms range from the videos and paintings of Khaled Hafez, which challenge the stultifying uniformity of artistic globalization; to the photographs of Yto Barrada, which draw attention to the very real and material territorialization of global power at specific sites; to the tactical media projects of the Bureau d'études, which combine an artistic treatment of information with politics; to the elaborate drawings of Mark Lombardi, which chart the global relationships of the world's most powerful people, countries, and corporations.

Second, the contemporary is witnessing the emergence of a new technological imaginary following the new communication and information technologies of the Internet, and the development in the 1990s of the global hypertext space known as the World Wide Web. The full integration of electronic and digital culture that has developed in the contemporary period reverberates in a number of ways within the context of art and art history. For one thing, technological art objects have increasingly come to replace tangible ones in art galleries and museums, which have seen an upsurge of high-tech hybrids of all kinds, from digital photography, to film and video installations, to computer and other "new media" art. The white cube has begun to be replaced by the black box, and the small screen film or video monitor by the large-scale wall projection. For another thing, the image has come to replace the object as the central concern of artistic production and analysis. In the academy, the rise of visual studies is symptomatic of this new preeminence of the image. Furthermore, this shift from analogue to digital has had a number of unpredictable effects in regard to the imaginary. One of the most striking of these is the proliferation of art works (the film installations of William Kentridge come immediately to mind, as does The Atlas Group Project by Walid Raad) that employ fiction and animation to narrate facts, as if to say that today the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought, that the real is so mind-boggling it is easier to comprehend by analogy.

Such a quantitative growth of new media has led to a reinvention of our concepts of communi-

cation, information, community, property, space, and even the concept of the subject itself. As a network, the World Wide Web provides the means for a virtually direct and diversified interactivity, the flexible and advanced distribution of information, and greater possibilities for the integration of art, technology, and social life. The technological possibilities of the new media--what Sean Cubitt has referred to as the "transience" (as opposed to the "ephemerality") of media arts--compel us both to leave behind once and for all the notion that artworks are stable, isolated objects and to challenge the rights, economies, and forms of production traditionally associated with them. Of course, this is not something that is inscribed in the technology itself. It is not that before the World Wide Web there were stable art objects and now their reality is virtual. It is rather that the new media makes us aware of how our experience of the world as such was always already minimally virtual in the sense that a whole set of symbolic presuppositions determine our sense of reality.

Third, the reconfigured context of contemporary art prompts a thorough reconsideration of the avant-garde. Peter Bürger's argument in Theory of the Avant-Garde that an avant-garde worth defending is one that seeks to reconnect artistic practices with the life world in order to transform the latter looms large over recent debates. Some, like Okwui Enwezor, find the legacy of the avant-garde "of limited use" in the present, seeing it as doing "little to constitute a space of self-reflexivity that can understand new relations of artistic modernity not founded on Westernism." Others have proposed that the avant-garde promise of aesthetic equality has reemerged in the form of a "relational aesthetics" by artists who make work out of social interactions—work that engages, and is made out of, social communities. Another reconceptualization of the avant-garde, advanced by, among others, the philosopher Jacques Rancière, shifts the focus away from the pursuit of rupture, the new, and progress (whether political or artistic) to the notion that the avant-garde aesthetically anticipates the future by actualizing "sensible forms and material structures for a life to come." From this point of view, art's role in making transformations in the life world intelligible and preparing communities for the future is of central concern. A resurgence of interest (in the art world at least) in concepts of utopia, community, collaboration, participation, and responsible government, all of which encode a desire for change, has accompanied these new notions of the avant-garde.

Fourth, the new period is witnessing the surprising reemergence of a philosophical aesthetics that seeks to find the "specific" nature of aesthetic experience as such. What the relationship is between this return to a pursuit of aesthetic essence and the proliferation of new-media artworks and visual culture in the past two decades is a key question here. The resurgence of philosophical aesthetics has coincided with a new construction of the spectator. When, for example, prominent contemporary artists claim that "meaning is almost completely unimportant" for their work and that "we don't need to understand art, we need only to fully experience it," they place value on affect and experience rather than interpretation and meaning--rather than contextually grounding and understanding the work and its conditions of possibility.

This shift from the cognitive to the affective negates some of the most productive intellectual achievements of twentieth-century critical theory, which had attempted to reveal the social

construction of subjectivity, even if it was understood as always already provisionally configured. It also throws hermeneutically based disciplines such as art history into crisis. This is in no way to suggest that aesthetic experience is purely mythical. Rather I mean to argue that we have aesthetic experiences, not because of some ontological postulate, but because we have been constructed as spectators in traditions that put those values and those experiences at the center of cultural life. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that not all of the returns to aesthetics have been content with the pursuit of essence. There have been a number of contemporary artists and writers whose work posits aesthetics as ontologically social, as a vital means by which to bring on the stage new objects and subjects. For instance, the meaning of Isaac Julien's video installations or of Yinka Shinibare's photographs and sculptures is located not in the artworks' essence or even in spectatorship per se (with its inherent requirement of a suspension of disbelief). Rather, meaning in such art is determined by usage and is located after spectatorship, in the experience-based knowledge that requires an active participation on the part of the public.

New forms of art and spectatorship--a new construction of the spectator--have crystallized in the past two decades. These new forms of art and this new spectatorship have come to be discursively constructed as "the contemporary." There is no question that these new modes owe a great deal to their modernist forbearers, and that there is much that carries over into the present. However, since the late 1980s these new art forms have outstripped their debt to the past, and the hegemony of the contemporary now must be recognized. But so too must the fact that what constitutes the period remains open and unsettled, subject to a battlefield of narratives and stories. How the contemporary is symbolized and historicized, and hence its very identity, is the prize struggled over by a number of competing forces. There is presently too much at stake for those concerned with contemporary art history and with the history of the contemporary to remain on the sidelines of this polemical debate.

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