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ALEXANDER DUMBADZE AND SUZANNE HUDSON

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ART

1989 TO THE PRESENT

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**C O N  
T E M  
P O R  
A R Y  
A R T**

1989 TO THE PRESENT

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# INTRODUCTION

ALEXANDER DUMBADZE AND SUZANNE HUDSON

This volume comprises newly commissioned essays on contemporary art since 1989. The contemporary art world has expanded exponentially—in size and complexity—over the last two decades, precipitating a general uncertainty as to what matters and why, much less how we should look at, write about, and historicize these recent practices. Admitting from the outset the implications of this profound and often antagonistic situation, we have eschewed producing a descriptive text of our own and have instead brought together nearly fifty leading international creative, critical, and curatorial voices to examine what contemporary art is today. This book follows the principle given poetic shape in the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant, in which a company of individuals feels a single region of the elephant's body. One might grope a leg, while another the tusk, or an ear. Each touch yields a different tactile experience, as well as a distinct vantage from which to extrapolate the contours of the whole. Precisely because of the variability of the animal's features—much less the horizon of one's perception—the resultant points of view are at once catholic and incommensurate.

The history presented in this book is necessarily partial, and the better for its aggregation of conflicting opinions, interpretations, and approaches. It goes without saying that *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* is neither meant to be absolute nor prescriptive, but investigative, even speculative. It aims to generate a picture of a heterogeneous whole through the specificity of positions moored in disparate practices, locations, and philosophies. It

is with this goal in mind that the essays in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* emphasize the virtues of partisanship in the task of understanding the recent past, and the book's success depends upon the vigor of debate it generates—debates we hope will provide the groundwork for successive histories of contemporary art.

While the essays themselves establish a discussion of the contemporary quite apart from our brief introduction of them, one basic point of structural and historiographical organization is our periodization of the contemporary from 1989. We do this for a number of reasons. The unprecedented growth of the contemporary art world coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the tumultuous events surrounding the Tiananmen Square protests. The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, the Solidarity Movement in Poland, and the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern Bloc irrevocably modified the landscape of contemporary European Art; it also provided the economic means for local collectors to become highly influential players in the international art world. Meanwhile, the contemporary art scene in China, post-Tiananmen, evolved into an economic and cultural phenomenon independent from Western critical and economic systems of distribution, and as such represents a willful excision from, or the complete indifference to, the New York–Western Europe “hegemony” of contemporary art.

No matter the importance of such cities as New York, Berlin, or Beijing, the contemporary art world has experienced not just a multiplication of centers, but a deep constitutional adjustment regarding the nature of borders, travel, and the global economy. The increased number of biennials and triennials spread across the globe—something virtually unheard of before 1989, with the exception of stalwarts like São Paulo and Venice—made artists “peripatetic travelers” who created site-specific installations

in response to the phenomena of globalization. Oft criticized for engendering a touristic, entertainment-oriented experience, these shows likewise gave rise to a kind of participatory art, taking advantage of the absence of traditional institutional structures for new, contingent presentational styles.

Such differences in exhibition practice notwithstanding, it may seem contentious to link aesthetic change to the geopolitical shifts of 1989—an argument that applies to other momentous dates, such as 1945 and 1968, which routinely arrange the writing of art history, the teaching of its classes, as well as the chronological installations of museum collections. To be sure, the events of 1989 and the years surrounding it were prepared for by longer-term cultural, economic, and political histories, the implications of which are decisive for the comprehension of the recent past. But much art produced in the last twenty years arises, on the one hand, from artists who have grown up, been educated, and work in a context removed or critically distant from normative, Western art historical and social historical concerns. On the other hand, for those who have been educated in the Western/North Atlantic tradition—an obviously diverse body of individuals—many have at best an ambivalent relationship to the history of Western art and see themselves participating in an integrated international art system.

Despite these many transformations, the problems of power, distribution networks, conflicting senses of history, and the various contingencies surrounding both ideas of subjectivity and political agency remind us of how fraught this moment of art production and reception really is. When taken together, these complex conditions have gradually serrated the art made after 1989 from the art preceding it. Related to this, the authors assembled in these pages are, by and large, members of generations formed by the events

of 1989, rather than the Vietnam War. (This latter fact has the advantage of setting aside the animating tensions between social art history and formalism that have driven much of “high” art critical writing since the 1970s, while making apparent the ways in which both approaches have been retooled, whether by means of new philosophical reference points or emergent aspects of practice.)

But to reiterate: There are numerous connections—many of which go back decades, if not longer—that caution against taking a stance of historical exceptionalism. Nevertheless the social and political alterations of the last twenty or so years have impacted how artists and commentators look at both their practice and the world, often regarding art as a source of critique as well as a tool for comprehending contemporary life under coeval conditions of holistically integrated cultures and temporalities. It is here that *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* begins and leaves us, *in medias res*, which does not obviate the gesture toward understanding but renders it urgent.

## **A User’s Guide to *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present***

The ubiquity and variance of contemporary art since 1989 challenges art historians, curators, and critics attempting to account for works of art created and circulated in a truly, if imperfectly, global context. At the root of this problem is how to order thematically art defined by a multiplicity of contents—art that is far from determined or accommodating to extant, particularly Western, critical categories. Indeed, the openness of post-1989 art abets both its possibility and

potential vacuity, and in response, we have grouped the essays into fluid rubrics that range from theoretically oriented problems to medium-based investigations: The Contemporary and Globalization; Art After Modernism and Postmodernism; Formalism; Medium Specificity; Art and Technology; Biennials; Participation; Activism; Agency; The Rise of Fundamentalism; Judgment; Markets; Art Schools; and Scholarship.

Each section is prefaced by a brief editorial statement, which introduces the material in broad strokes. We have included three essays per section to highlight the respective range of standpoints, and while the approaches and writing techniques vary from the straightforwardly scholarly to the self-consciously casual, each text is relatively brief in length. The essays are meant for a wide audience—as befits the topic at hand. Their concision provides a forum for deft, polemical interventions. We have made the editorial decision to avoid the imposition of a house style in order to show how the essays reflect recent developments in the contemporary art world and current methodological approaches to its interpretation, whether through a case study, survey-of-literature, journalistic brief, or experimental script.

The essays also manifest critical pedagogical concerns: Authors implicitly or otherwise evaluate the distinction between primary and secondary material; balance social, historical, material, theoretical, and aesthetic issues; and come to terms with the distinctions between contemporary art history and criticism. While *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* originated in the academy—one of the main impetuses for this book arose from our experiences in the classroom—it is, most importantly, also intended for artists, curators, critics, and anyone interested in a strongly argued, sustained, and disputatious inquiry into the structures and belief systems of the international contemporary art world.

# 1

## THE CONTEMPORARY AND GLOBALIZATION

In the middle of the twentieth century there was much art-world excitement regarding “internationalism”—the notion that art might reflect or impact the complex relations between distinct, politically sovereign nations. Greatly accelerated by the geopolitical events of 1989, critical attention has shifted to globalization, a difficult, even slippery term that downplays political powers, emphasizing how the deregulation of trade has largely eroded traditional nation-state boundaries. The forces of globalization—often abstracted away from the specific people, corporations, or governments that occasion its usage—its proponents believe, have promoted an effortless, even naturalized, flow of materials, goods, and services. For globalization’s detractors that “unification” levels local distinctions through processes of acculturation.

**Tim Griffin** argues in his essay “**Worlds Apart: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Rise of Biennials**” that globalization is fundamental for understanding how institutional frameworks now shape contemporary art. Certainly, globalization was celebrated in the early to mid-1990s in conjunction with the rise of international biennials. Many curators, critics, and artists believed in the potential of working in interstitial spaces and traveling to and among them. These optimistic attitudes changed with the turn of the millennium, when globalization became something actively to counter both in art and in



writing, for reasons ranging from its flattening of difference to multinational corporations' disregard for human sovereignty and environmental responsibility.

Of late, commentators have focused on the rise of the contemporary, a concept that sits alongside globalization. Like modernism, the contemporary suggests an aesthetic phenomenon that is necessarily global in scope, and for **Terry Smith**, as he outlines in his **“‘Our’ Contemporaneity?”**, this also represents a historical shift toward a cultural condition that continually reveals new worlds, new senses of being, and ultimately new ways to exist in our collective, yet particularized, time. Modernism arose in fits and starts around the world, and meant different things in different places. The contemporary assumes globalization as its foundational criteria and in a narrow sense describes what it literally means to be with the times. The contemporary speaks less about stylistic concerns (although they are implied) or ideological beliefs (they are still coming to the fore). In the conjunction of globalization and the contemporary we find two central concepts for comprehending on a macro level art production and distribution of the last twenty or so years. The question becomes just how this will be historicized. As **Jean-Philippe Antoine** suggests in his **“The Historicity of the Contemporary is Now!”** a new type of art historical practice is already under way, one which need be reciprocally informed by the work done by artists who assume the role of historian.

# Worlds Apart: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Rise of Biennials

*Tim Griffin*

If art is necessarily bound up with its institutions—in other words, made legible as “art” only through and within its various apparatuses of production, display, and circulation, in addition to its discourses—then nothing is so crucial to our conception of contemporary art as globalization. Yet this is only to suggest that nothing else is so implicated in art’s dense weaving (or even dissolution) into the broader cultural field today.

To explain, *globalization*, utilized as a term in recent economic and political theory, often pertains to, in the words of Fredric Jameson, “the sense of an immense enlargement of world communication, as well as of a horizon of a world market.”<sup>1</sup> Within artistic circles, the word has been used more specifically to describe an exponentially increased audience for (and financing of) contemporary art, attended by a radical proliferation of public and private museums and exhibitions throughout the world and, further, an expanded and ever-more rapid travel network and exchange of information among constituents of art on all points of the compass. (To illustrate this point simply with a hypothetical example: A work produced and debuted in São Paulo, Brazil, can be purchased in the artist’s studio by a committee of visiting trustees from a major institution in New York, where the piece is placed on view within the next month for tens of thousands of both local

audiences and tourists from dozens of countries.) Precisely such circumstances, however, demand that art be seen in correspondence with the larger context of a world shaped principally by the forces and flows of global capital.<sup>2</sup> For amid a postindustrial landscape it becomes clear, as put succinctly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their benchmark volume on globalism, *Empire* (2000), that “the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than imagining that art can be placed at an idealistic remove from these societal shifts, we arrive at a better grasp of art’s real contours—or better, of art’s institutions—by examining just to what degree it is steeped in those shifts. And nowhere in art is such an examination so possible or sustained—or so telling of both contemporary art’s predicament and potential, or of its waning and waxing singularity within the greater field of culture—as among biennials of the past twenty years. In fact, in order to grasp the conditions for art-making today fully, one begins most productively with a consideration of their historical development and implications.

Arguing as much is partly to posit a crossing of two postwar trajectories: First, of art and its various models of critique; and, second, of socioeconomic currents destabilizing nation-states and their ideological bases world-round. If in the 1960s, minimalist sculptors implicated the viewer’s body in their work, capitalizing on a phenomenological experience of the object in space, the following decade—in the wake of such artists as Daniel Buren calling for a sustained exploration of art’s “formal and cultural limits”—would see the rise of institutional critique and its efforts to disavow any sense of art’s autonomy: The notion of any display space or viewer that was objective or, more precisely, independent of social matrices of class, race, gender, and sexuality (Dan Asher, Sherrie Levine, Martha Rosler, Mierle Laderman Ukeles).<sup>4</sup> By the 1980s,

such engagements were extended by artists (Group Material, Hans Haacke, Christian Philipp Müller) to those social and economic terms and conditions that made any institution itself possible, with these artists' critical intention still being, to cite art historian Miwon Kwon's signal text "One Place After Another" regarding early iterations of *specificity* in art, to "decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden yet motivated operations—to reveal the ways in which institutions mold art's meaning to modulate its cultural and economic value, and to ... [make] apparent [art's] imbricated relationship to the broader socioeconomic and political processes of the day."<sup>5</sup>

Such a longstanding mission, often undertaken in the immediate context of the museum, would only have been amplified in the face of such political developments in 1989 as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the execution of pro-democracy demonstrators in China's Tiananmen Square. While artists in previous decades might have wanted audiences to interrogate conditions of viewership and of art's relationship with culture more generally, here were world-historical events forcing a mass reconsideration of ideology, of subjectivity and subject-hood, and of national and postcolonial identity (and even of the terms East and West, North and South)—all of which were already being eroded or challenged by widening forces of commerce and technology. In fact, if artists were, as Kwon has also noted in her essay, already being prompted by the trajectory of institutional critique to move outside the conventional realm of art—relocating their practices in the discursive framework of any site they chose, and steeping their art-making in research and, moreover, in other disciplines, from anthropology to archaeology and so on—such endeavors would naturally gravitate toward the suddenly recalibrated coordinates of contemporary society.

As curator Okwui Enwezor aptly put it in a brief text written in 2007, the world-historical events of 1989 “spurred a critical appraisal of the conditions of artistic production and of the systems by which such production was legitimated and admitted into the broader field of cultural production,” resulting in a “shift in curatorial language from one whose reference systems belonged to an early twentieth-century modernity to one more attuned to the tendencies of the twenty-first century.”<sup>6</sup> The very ground under the institution of art had shifted; and if the museum was, as an initial object of postwar artistic critique, nevertheless linked to the idea of the modern nation-state, artists and curators alike would now seek alternative discourses and frameworks for their projects.

Numerous biennials provide ample, concrete evidence of such efforts being prompted by such a changing postwar landscape. For instance, the inaugural Johannesburg Biennial, curated by Lorna Ferguson, opened in 1995, just a year after South Africa’s first multiracial elections, in an effort to establish the country as part of a larger global community (a second iteration, curated by Enwezor, was titled “Trade Routes” and explicitly revolved around the theme of globalization). The Gwangju Biennale was created the same year, against the backdrop of South Korea’s first freely-elected government after a decades-long military dictatorship; titled “Beyond the Borders,” its first exhibition aimed to present work reflecting the dissolution of longstanding arbiters of identity, from political ideology to nationality. Further to the West, Manifesta—a self-described roving “European Biennial of Contemporary Art”—began in 1996, taking the fall of the Berlin Wall as a cue for reconsidering a new Europe (in terms of political ideology, economic structures, and novel communication technology) both in its own right and in relationship to the world at large. And, looking back to more than a decade before Manifesta’s

creation, we find a precedent for such a multinational scope in the Havana Biennial: Created specifically to highlight artists of the Third World on the global stage (though later iterations of this exhibition would include Asian artists, effectively expanding its purview more generally to non-Western artists) this large-scale exhibition took region, as opposed to country, as its organizing principle.

If all these exhibitions were intended at their respective inceptions to create a stage for art within which audiences could discern a kind of destabilizing of cultural perspective—a redrawing of the societal map, as it were, that was Copernican in its altering of the terms for center and periphery, and subsequently for object and context—it is still more provocative that most historians and curators contemplating the biennial phenomenon of the past twenty years cite the 1989 Centre Georges Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* as a singular precedent for such investigations. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, this exhibition included work from the global “margins” not only to counter museums’—and, more specifically, the Paris Biennial’s—privileging of work produced in Europe and the United States, but also to put into question the very Western ideation of art. (Notably, the Paris Biennial was created in 1959 by André Malraux.) As Martin would say at the time in an interview with art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “[T]he questions of center and periphery are also related to issues of authorship and oeuvre..., especially since the artist’s role and the object’s function are defined [elsewhere] in an entirely different manner from our European way of thinking.”<sup>7</sup> In turn, the exhibition would feature not only Western artworks by such artists as Nancy Spero and Cildo Meireles but also objects playing unique traditional roles within their specific societies, including a Tibetan Mandala and a Navajo sand painting, among other pieces. While such displays would necessarily ask audiences