

## ART NOW: BEYOND THE CONTEMPORARY

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The notion of the modern, used within artistic discourse, can function analytically since one can relate modernity in culture to larger historical patterns, such as the rise of capitalism. For me the term 'contemporary' is not embedded in this way in a larger explanatory analysis, and thus I don't find it useful as an analytical category. I use the term out of convenience (it has become so widespread as to be more or less unavoidable at present), but don't expect it to be load-bearing, to help explain things in any deeper way. Used to describe art in a situational manner, to refer to art made in times adjacent to the present moment, its referent is something of a moving target and it doesn't really help us much when we want to take the more external perspective on time which historical explanation requires.

Being concerned with the present moment is of course a good thing – we need to live *in* the now, even if we don't always want to be living *for* the now - but accepting some ideology of the contemporary doesn't really help with this. The 'moving target' nature of the contemporary leads to many cases where academic fieldwork which was done in what was then the present moment is (because of the time taken by the process of scholarly production) published and read as comment on the art of an arbitrarily-defined moment in the recent past, but without the value of historical contextualization which the study of such art needs. Art made in any given present moment is often deeply engaged with art made in past moments – many works by Picasso or De Chirico, for instance, sprang from a dialogue with the art of other times. Ai Weiwei's *Forever Bicycles* installation of 2011 cannot be comprehended in any meaningful way without reference to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, first made almost exactly a hundred years earlier in 1913. Instead of valorizing certain things being made now as 'contemporary', why not treat the whole field of visual production surviving into the present moment as a potential source of inspiration for now (whether we are a maker or a spectator of art)? The very old can be just as paradigm-busting for our present-day consciousness as the very recent – can be radically new to us even if not newly made - so why bracket it off from consideration? As Picabia once said, 'there is no antiquity' - to think that there is 'antiquity' is perhaps to suffer from a lack of empathy with humans from other times and places.

In my writing on Chinese art I have tended to avoid a focus on the 'contemporary' period alone, wishing to deal with it alongside earlier modern moments as part of a continuum. I put modern and contemporary Chinese art together in my most recent book *Chinese Art and its Encounter with the World*, for instance, as well as in my immediately previous book-length study, *Water and Art*. This refusal of an artificial distinction between modern and contemporary is particularly

important in the case of non-Western art, since it has become easy for Western institutions to incorporate art from other parts of the world within decontextualized presentations of the contemporary without any serious threat to Western cultural hegemony. Some contemporary Chinese artists are now widely known in the West, yet Chinese modernism remains an almost unexplored territory. Western museums of modern art seem unlikely to move their Matisses and Mondrians to make wall space for it any time soon, since to do so would threaten Western-centred cultural narratives in a more fundamental way than can currently be accommodated.

A similar desire to refuse the ideology of the contemporary lay behind a decision of the Museums Advisory Group, which came up with the conceptual plan for the projected institution M+ on Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District waterfront site. The group chose to make 'now' the temporal focus of M+ instead of using the loaded term 'contemporary' (it also broadened the focus from 'art' to 'visual culture' as a whole, and chose 'here' – i.e. Hong Kong – as its spatial focus rather than – say – 'China'). By not proposing a contemporary art museum for West Kowloon the intention was to further open up the range of objects that could potentially be displayed – not only would all kinds of visual culture be included but potentially that culture could come from any time period. Relevance to 'now' – something open in nature and subject to constant curatorial redefinition and justification – would be the only given temporal frame. Undoubtedly there will be a pressure to normalize M+ as the conceptual plan is actualized (already Hong Kong Government officials frequently refer to it as a 'museum', when the whole point of the '+' sign is to indicate that it is conceived as more than that), and it will be interesting to see if as a result it comes to be more like a standard model for a contemporary art museum.

Of course, we can see that the whole of consumer culture has an economically necessary orientation towards the newly-produced product, and a valorization of the contemporary helps art to sit happily within this field. But to the extent that thinking about art has some autonomy from the marketplace surely we would want to consciously move away from this undue emphasis on the newly-produced. The important thing is to place new and not so new art within the same frame, not to denigrate the former in favour of the latter (or vice versa). Such a phenomenon of denigration seems to occur in the field of classical music, where most orchestras tend to serve up a diet of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music to a twenty-first-century audience, but rarely risk the presentation of recently-composed music. Although there are those in the contemporary art world who seem happy to ignore earlier art the reverse is also true – art historians can often be allergic to the contemporary. I met this for instance when I submitted an article on recent Chinese art for consideration by a leading Western academic art history journal. Although that journal claims to publish on all areas of art history the editor at that time refused to send my article out for peer review because it dealt with living artists (as if history was a time period rather than a method). If such barriers as this could be broken down then the discourse on

recently-created art could benefit more from insights derived from historical methodologies and knowledge bases, while art history in its turn could benefit from the lively perspectives that art critical writing is capable of, and from its clear desire to engage with the present day.