

BECOMING PAST  
HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY ART



JANE BLOCKER

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ART

*Jane Blocker*



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The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

For my teachers,  
especially Carol, Kevin, and Della,  
and for my students

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# HISTORY AS PROSTHESIS

*History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the now.*

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

## **The Problem of the Contemporary**

To be a historian of contemporary art is to work in a rather challenging and uncomfortable profession. First, no one can really agree on what we’re talking about when we use the term *contemporary*, a word that develops etymologically from *tempus* and yet yields little understanding of time. *Current, recent, new, up-to-date, modern, now, present, on the horizon*—*contemporary*’s synonyms are as numerous as they are vague. Second, whatever the contemporary is, it’s clear there’s way too much of it. Terry Smith nicely explains the unique obstacles set in the way of the contemporary art historian when he writes: “Look around you. Contemporary art is most—why not all?—of the art that is being made now. It cannot be subject to generalization and has overwhelmed art history; it is simply, totally contemporaneous.”<sup>1</sup> The spatial spread of the global contemporary overwhelms because there is no end of the “now” in sight.

As a consequence of that temporal and spatial flood, we attempt to erect levees, taxonomic sandbags to divert some of it elsewhere, but we’re not really sure where the dams should go. What constitutes “the now” as a period designation? The problem with the contemporary is that, inasmuch as its temporal parameters relate to an individual’s

lifetime (my contemporary is decidedly different from my students'), it is indexical, a fugitive, a shifter in Roman Jakobson's sense. Richard Meyer, in his recent book *What Was Contemporary Art?*,<sup>2</sup> describes the surprise felt by many middle-aged academics when he realizes that "rather than referring to art since 1945, art since 1960, or even art since 1970 [what are for us and our generation of art historians the logical moment from which the contemporary can be said to have embarked], 'contemporary' meant to [my students] the work of artists exhibiting today and in the immediate past."<sup>3</sup> I definitely feel his pain. The contemporary, of course, skews to a younger demographic. More contentious than any other historical period designation, the meaning of "contemporary" is only discernible in the specific context of its utterance and only for the specific audience it is hailing at any given moment.

Moreover, as soon as the number of years to which one can apply that name expands to sixty or seventy, its descriptive force is significantly diminished.<sup>4</sup> This is the problem with which Amelia Jones wrestles in her introduction to a survey textbook on contemporary art since 1945. "How can what is defined as *in existence now*—the contemporary—be written into (a) history? Is the notion of 'contemporary art history' or a 'history of contemporary art,'" she asks, "a contradiction in terms?" The challenge, she goes on to explain, is to explore "the complexities both of contemporary art as a now 'historical' phenomenon (as the years between 'now' and 1945 expand in number) and of contemporary art as potentially the cutting edge of what people calling themselves artists (or understood by others as such) are making and doing in this increasingly complex and globalized economy of cultural practices."<sup>5</sup> The contemporary, Jones suggests, flows in two directions at once: back toward history in the past tense and forward toward the cutting edge in the present progressive.

Not only is it a rather elusive category, but the slipperiness of the contemporary also causes actual panic. The charges read against it at academic conferences, in books and journals, and in the halls of art history departments are lengthy (I've heard them all): it isn't serious enough or distant enough in the past to warrant historical inquiry; we are too chummy with it and lose our objectivity; it blurs the distinctions between history and art criticism; it can't be researched because

there is no archive; it examines only that which is currently fashionable; it is self-involved; it is not all that new; it is an academic subfield that lacks rigor and is merely popular.<sup>6</sup> I believe that such claims are largely a manifestation of a profound lack of understanding of the contemporary's complex ontology and a certain level of denial about the degree to which other historical periods are equally plagued by subjectivity and self-involvement. To accuse the contemporary of being fashionable or popular is tautological; it is simply to accuse it of being contemporary. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his small essay on the topic, explains that the contemporary, like fashion, "can be defined as the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity," what he calls *dys-chrony*.<sup>7</sup> Like a sun always in the process of setting, the contemporary dips toward but never fully crosses the imaginary horizon between the present and the past, thus it feels too close, too personal, too subjective to be taken seriously as history. As such, however, it also makes evident the arbitrariness of all historical time and the imaginary and purely conventional nature of any historical distance that scholars deem to be sufficient.

Moreover, it is important to note that scholars' unease with this *dys-chrony* manifests itself in the dismissive rhetoric they use to describe the contemporary, a rhetoric that is very often cast in generational terms. That is, the contemporary is personified as an adolescent and associated with the indiscretions of youth—it is lazy, narcissistic, capricious, puerile, superficial, romantic, and unaware that previous time periods were young once too. Thus it must be re-proached, disciplined, and encouraged to mature. Although it is clear that Meyer does not necessarily share all of these views, his caution to the contemporary reads in similarly paternal terms. "We may . . . have developed too much love for the new and now," he counsels as though he were talking about a lovesick teenager, "while retaining too little for the old and then."<sup>8</sup> That paternalism, the close and yet alienated relation between symbolic fathers and their symbolic children, between the becoming past and the present, is, I argue, endemic to the contemporary (this indeed will be the subject of later chapters).

Even if we could sort out the timing, bridge the generation gap, and fix some date sufficiently far back to bear the weight of historicist gravitas (1960 to the present, say), and even if we could limit the

geographic reach (maybe exclude some of the more remote places—whatever those are), we would have dealt only with the term’s material definition, and of course at some point even that would have to be adjusted as the future continues to arrive. The other, much more interesting problem, to which I have already alluded, is the contemporary as a contradictory operation, a confounding mechanism, and a paradoxical logic. Agamben describes the complex temporal contortions to which the contemporary historian is subject when he writes: “The time of fashion [the time of the contemporary] . . . constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is also always too late. It always takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a ‘not yet’ and a ‘no more.’”<sup>9</sup> As soon as one names the moment of the immediate present “contemporary,” one performatively produces that moment as now and simultaneously ushers it into the past. The name discursively recognizes that moment in already familiar terms, situates it and lays it aside with other contemporary moments now gone, manages it with a retrospective gaze. Contemporariness, Agamben avers, “is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.*”<sup>10</sup> The contemporary peculiarly announces itself as “of its time,” close enough to breathe down time’s neck, but also, as a result, to be tripped up by time, to fall out of step with it.

Connected and separated at once, looking forward while turning back, gliding into the future while standing awkwardly in the past, the historian of the contemporary flails about and falters. This is the humorous balletic spectacle I imagine artist Tino Sehgal was thinking of when he created his work *This Is So Contemporary* (2005), in which he trained museum guards periodically to dance about the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale while singing “This is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary.” “The dance,” as curator and critic Francesco Bonami describes it, “is very simple, nothing elaborate, as if the guards were dancing among friends in a disco.”<sup>11</sup> Sehgal does not allow photo or video documentation of his work, but the few bootleg images of the performance one finds on the Internet show it to have been a rather awkward affair. Not only is the dance rather silly and the song amateurish, but also, as soon as the work is proclaimed

to be “so contemporary,” it is utterly uncontemporary, downright old-fashioned. What is more, the work is now, as I write this, nearly a decade old (it will be older still by the time you read this). To paraphrase Agamben, the locution “I am in this instant contemporary” is contradictory, because the moment in which the subject pronounces it, he is already no longer contemporary.<sup>12</sup> Ridiculously, this is the song and dance that my book seeks to perform, the untenable moment it seeks to occupy. Even worse, I am trying to watch myself as I perform it.

## **Pathology**

This kind of self-awareness is common in scholarship on the contemporary, which is obliged to talk about the present moment while at the same time analyzing why that moment makes talking about it so difficult. By all accounts, there is something very wrong with the present, and it seems to have to do with some crisis, some pathology, in memory or history, or both. Many scholars (such as Michel de Certeau, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Carolyn Steedman, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Andreas Huyssen, and Pierre Nora) have attempted repeatedly over the last forty or more years to diagnose this affliction. Kerwin Lee Klein names the problem the “memory industry” and dates its origins to the early 1980s (a decade that, for some, coincides with the start of what we call the contemporary as a historical period) with the publication of Pierre Nora’s “Between Memory and History.”<sup>13</sup>

Nora, reversing the centuries-long philosophical tradition of repudiating memory and praising history, or the tendency among professional historians since the nineteenth century to consider history a matter of steely masculine objectivity and memory as unreliably feminine, asserts that we are lamentably experiencing a simultaneous loss of memory and an excess of history; the loss of the real and of experience at the hands of representation; the loss of a premodern mode of being in relation to instrumentalized historicism. “No society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own,” he writes.

Not only by volume, not only by new technical means of reproduction and preservation, but also by its superstitious esteem, by its veneration of the trace. Even as traditional memory

disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to furnish some proof to who knows what tribunal of history.<sup>14</sup>

Nora describes contemporary archivization as an obsessive-compulsive reaction against technological advancements. Interestingly, the problem that seems to plague (and that Nora takes to be a unique feature of) his own contemporary (the late 1980s) was already the subject of a similar lament by Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1870s. In his essay “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” Nietzsche describes his own observations as “unfashionable” because they “attempt to understand something in which our age justifiably takes pride—namely, its historical cultivation—as a detriment, an infirmity, a deficiency of the age, and furthermore, because I am even of the opinion that all of us suffer from a debilitating historical fever and that we at the very least need to recognize that we suffer from it.”<sup>15</sup> The culture’s fervid relationship with history, which Nietzsche describes as indicative of the late nineteenth century, seems to have grown more scarlet in the digital age.

Although Andreas Huyssen deploys his terminology differently from Nora (for him, memory and history are not antagonists but nearly synonymous), he arrives at a similar diagnosis. He calls the contemporary condition a “memory boom” and argues that on one hand we are surrounded by mnemonic technologies, memorials, and museums, while on the other we feel an overwhelming sense of historical crisis, the threat of forgetting.<sup>16</sup> “Historical memory today is not what it used to be,” he warns. “It used to mark the relation of a community or a nation to its past, but the boundary between past and present used to be stronger and more stable than it appears to be today.”<sup>17</sup> This shift is, for Huyssen, the sign of a crisis in temporality brought on by high-tech information systems, global capital, museal culture,<sup>18</sup> and the overwhelming expansion of media. The contemporary, *this* Now, is characterized by seemingly infinite amnesia brought about by seemingly infinite memory (such as the decision by the Library of Congress in 2010 to archive every electronic tweet since the microblogging site Twitter was established in 2006). As the

curators of a 2009 exhibition titled *Lost and Found: Crisis of Memory in Contemporary Art* write: “No other period was as obsessed with the idea of memory as we are: it invades our daily lives, recalling our anxious need to continuously retain a huge amount of information; but it also shapes our biggest fears and worries. How many times a day do we feel the need to ‘save’ something: a phone number, a word document, an email, an mp3 piece, or any other ‘file?’”<sup>19</sup>

To write about the contemporary (any contemporary) is difficult enough, but to write about *this* contemporary, when temporality itself has become the subject of inquiry and spirited debate, significantly complicates matters. “I would argue that our obsessions with memory function as a reaction formation against the accelerating technical processes that are transforming our *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) in quite distinct ways,” Huyssen writes.

Memory . . . represents the attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload.<sup>20</sup>

He argues that excess memory is a symptom of our panicked attempts to slow down, to resist, to recover, to claim, to drop an anchor in a chaotic storm of new media. In the eye of that storm, he tells us, lies the dissolution of time and the nonsynchronous. *Huyssen’s* contemporary, the period that he claims manifests what he terms this “sense of crisis” (he was writing in the early nineties), is situated in a former future, the end of the twentieth century on the eve of the new millennium.

On one hand, what he describes seems only to have gotten worse a decade or more into the globalized and techno-driven twenty-first century (Nicolas Bourriaud’s cumbersome terms “altermodern” and “heterochronical,” Agamben’s “dys-chrony,” and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “heterotemporal” are symptomatic of this),<sup>21</sup> while on the other, it seems important to point out, reports of a similar crisis occur at least half a century further back in time to a point just *before* the current

information age. Writing in 1945, engineer Vannevar Bush considered new technologies to be the solution to the crisis of memory rather than its cause. In his famous article “As We May Think” he argues that technology (he proposes the Memex, a protoccomputer) must be brought to bear on the problem of the *then* contemporary researcher’s limited memory in the face of information overload. “There is a growing mountain of research,” he complains. “But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down today as specialization extends. The investigator is staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers—conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear.”<sup>22</sup> Bush is disjoined from his *own* contemporary—roughly the period surrounding World War II—to the degree that he anticipates a future in which machines will help organize and store the mountains of information in which his present is buried. He seems presciently to describe a twenty-first-century phenomenon: the ungraspable nature of the information age and the forgetfulness and temporal disorientation it induces.

At the same time, however, to use Agamben’s phrase, even Bush “arrives too late” for the past. He indulges in anachronism by describing as present something that can be just as easily located in a former age, something from the previous century. For the feeling he describes as so contemporary—being bogged down by commerce and technology and staggered by the speed of life—may be said to coincide just as much with nineteenth-century modernity’s disillusionment with the industrial age as with the Cold War or millennial eras. Thus we might see Nietzsche, Bush, and Huyssen as engaged in an awkward dance called “This Is So Contemporary,” a repeated claiming of temporal disorientation as uniquely characteristic of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century presentness. It is surely no coincidence that this contradictory state of affairs, this pathological condition, has developed at precisely the same moments in which there have been wholesale reexaminations of historical method (for example, Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Hayden White, Dipesh Chakrabarty), contentious debates within the academy, and society at large, about history’s abuses and lapses, truths and lies; historians’ biases and privileges; the purpose and function of the past.<sup>23</sup>

What all that historiographic reexamination suggests is that

history has become, as I will explain more fully in chapter 1, an impossible problem. It is impossible, though, not for the reasons Huyssen and Nora lay out (or not solely for those reasons), not because of epic historical events or trends such as the development of new communications technologies and the resulting archival compulsion. Rather, its impossibility is a consequence of how those events or trends are examined and understood—that is, it may have to do more with the misapplication of historical methods in the present that are mistakenly and stubbornly retained from the past. Such methods privilege stable and coherent origins (even as we question how we understand historical agency, cultural interaction, and the causes of historical change) that consider the past as a fixed ideal to which the historian must return and from which she cannot deviate (even as we pay more attention to the inherent biases and subjectivities of the historian), that adopt linear temporalities (even as our sense of time is undone by new technologies and scientific discoveries), and that enforce the rigid dichotomy between the real and representation (even as we debate how reality is itself a cultural product).

One example of this can be seen where Huyssen describes what he calls the “current transformation of temporal experience,” that is, a profound change in the world, which has jammed or radically altered our natural reception of temporal information. Rather than see temporal experience as subject to interference from specific historical conditions, and time itself as linear, other scholars, such as neuroscientist David Eagleman, describe a revolutionary transformation in our understanding of how the brain experiences (and possibly always has experienced) temporality. Pronouncing time a “rubbery thing,” Eagleman, inspired by the neurobiological experiments into the human perception of time undertaken by physiologist Benjamin Libet in the 1970s, makes the remarkable claim that there is an infinitesimally small yet extremely significant temporal lag between the moment when we experience something and the moment we recognize it as such.<sup>24</sup> During that lag, the brain is assembling all the data of experience into a coherent order, a kind of instantaneous historical narrative, and through that narrative it constructs what we understand reality to be. “We are not conscious of the actual moment of the present,” Libet remarks in tacit agreement with Agamben. “We are

always a little late.”<sup>25</sup> Contemporary reality is thus, from the neurobiological perspective, “a tape-delayed broadcast.”<sup>26</sup> As though he were responding to Huyssen’s and Nora’s assertions about the contemporary preoccupation with memory, Eagleman claims: “Living in the past may seem like a disadvantage, but it’s a cost that the brain is willing to pay. It’s trying to put together the best possible story about what’s going on in the world, and that takes time.”<sup>27</sup> What this means is that, despite some historians’ concerns that the contemporary simply cannot be historicized, that history as such cannot begin until an appropriate space of time (fifty or more years, for example) has elapsed, biologically speaking, we are always already living in historical consciousness.

The implications of this fact were made evident to me early on in my career when I was conducting dissertation research on Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta, who had been killed only six years before I began my doctoral studies. At that time, the published literature on the artist’s work consisted only of two small exhibition catalogs from one-person shows, a few catalogs from group shows, and a handful of newspaper articles and exhibition reviews. Since Mendieta made primarily ephemeral works of earth and body art, there was an archive of slides, photographs, and Super 8 films documenting that work, as well as some sculptural objects, but much of the archive had not yet been organized. It was with some trepidation that I pursued that research topic, because, intimidated as I was at the time by the prevailing art historical view of contemporaneity, I feared that it was not sufficiently historical. To my amazement, I discovered that despite these concerns Mendieta had *already been historicized*, that (like the human brain’s efforts to organize sense perception) her life and work had been fitted into a narrative almost as quickly as it had been experienced. It wasn’t that I arrived too early on the scene, as Meyer and others might fear, but that I arrived too late. The contemporary, as much as we may want to consider it otherwise, is being made history as it happens (which returns us to Agamben’s notion of disjuncture and anachronism). The important question is not whether there is (or should be) contemporary art history, but how. And “how” is the primary concern of this book.

## Prosthesis

Artist Dario Robleto has said that the architectural structures in and around which his works are displayed (handmade frames, cabinets, tables, boxes, shelves, drawers, and plinths)—whether inspired by the museum vitrine or pedestal, the commercial display case or shop-window—are “the stage the artwork is standing on while it performs its song.”<sup>28</sup> One could describe an introduction as a similar type of structure—the pedestal on which the book stands, the frame or stanchion that circumscribes and draws attention to the ideas it contains. The miniature stage on which this book is propped, the inert object that holds it up for view, is the prosthesis, the concept and operation of the prosthetic. And the song that this book keeps trying to sing while it stands uncomfortably on its wooden leg is the one written by Sehgal, “This Is So Contemporary.” Intentionally silly, ironic, but also deeply complex, the song is (in keeping with Robleto’s sensibilities) a ballad in which the singer laments the heartbreak that the very word *contemporary* has created. She tries to understand the temporal disjunctions, the anachronistic contortions in which the historian is caught.

With its song and dance, this book tries to be a history of the contemporary (it tells stories about the recent past of contemporary artists, including Dario Robleto, Matthew Buckingham, Steve McQueen, Ross McElwee, and the performance group Goat Island) while at the same time trying to understand precisely *how* to be a history of the contemporary. It wants to know how it is doing history even as it’s doing it; therefore, like Robleto, it has to think about its own apparatuses, to think about the stage on which it stands. Thus it must begin by articulating what is meant by the prosthesis.

From Robleto’s perspective, the rather grim task of carving for oneself a prosthetic limb serves as a powerful image of the most sincere form of art making. In the Civil War era (a period Robleto has studied seriously), infamous for an extraordinarily high number of surgical amputations, soldiers routinely and pragmatically set about the task of making their own artificial arms and legs. “If you can just get your head around how strange that would be,” he remarks in wonderment, “to remake your own body yourself with a piece of wood and