

‘Contemporary, Contemporaneity’

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(An essay commissioned as part of the Keywords Project)

You enter a room within the German Pavilion of the 2005 Venice Biennale, to find it empty except for a group of uniformed guards who look at you, and begin to dance wildly while announcing, in four languages: “Tino Sehgal, Tino Sehgal! This is so contemporary, so contemporary, so contemporary, so contemporary!” You have encountered a work by the Berlin-based conceptual artist Tino Sehgal entitled *This Is So Contemporary* (2003). Like many of his contemporaries, his art takes the form of staging “situations,” which are calibrated to raise awareness of an often-overlooked quality of the situation in which they are encountered. In this case, he dramatizes the question of how strongly a setting, such as an art gallery, and a set of expectations, such as those we assume when entering an art gallery, might shape the context of our experience in such a place, perhaps overriding anything new or previously unseen in that space. This is *so* contemporary: an immediate, instantaneous yet infinitely repeatable event, an intensely felt, personal *and* shared experience, one that is evidently open-futured yet instantly readable, and singular while also, apparently, resonant of a world much larger than that of art.¹

Encounters such as these evoke, but also challenge, the widespread, everyday use of the word “contemporary” to mean “now,” “of the present moment,” or “up to date.” More precise definition is usually avoided, or deferred, on the grounds that analysis would be premature; the situation should be accepted for what it is—join the excitement, go with the flow, you will see its shape soon. Thus veteran critic Peter Plagens, in a leading magazine, *Art in America*, writing about “The Art of Being Contemporary”: “...my own

¹ See Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011), 322-3, and the General Introduction for a discussion of how contemporary art relates to contemporary life.

definition of the field is more or less seat-of-the-pants (i.e., a rolling, continuously filtered aggregate of what I see in galleries and contemporary art museums, plus the same for what I read about it in periodicals and online).”²

“Contemporary,” in such cases, becomes a holding term, its task is to temporize, while letting the institutions around one, or the language world in which one lives, do the defining. Yet this unthink, in effect, returns “contemporary” to the root meaning of the word “modern,” and confines it to a service, rather than a substantive, role. As well, it swims against the main, and rising, tide of actual contemporary usage, as we can see if we review it in relation to historical and recent uses of “modern” and its cognates.

The word “modern” is given a long list of meanings in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. First, the root, adjectival definition (2.a.), with us at least since late Middle English (14th and 15th centuries): “Of or pertaining to the present or recent times, as distinguished from the remote past; pertaining to or originating in the current age or period.” The second meaning (2.h.) is an applied one, a mid-nineteenth and, especially, a 20th century usage: “Of a movement in art and architecture, or the works produced by such a movement: characterized by a departure from or a repudiation of accepted or traditional styles and values.” Contrastive periodization is, clearly, essential to the core, modern meaning of “modern”: that which is modern is, first and foremost, no longer of a time, age, or period that has passed. This is itself a modernization: the 6th century AD Latin usage derives from *modo*, “just now,” and becomes *modernus*, “modern,” on analogy to *hodiernus*, “of today.” The OED recognizes this movement of meaning by listing “Being at this time; now existing,” as its first definition, while acknowledging it to be obsolete, rare. In everyday usage everywhere, “contemporary” has taken over this role.

This is true also of a range of professions and disciplines. Thus contemporary history, which aims to identify the forces from the recent past that are shaping the “present age,” uses a pragmatic, always advancing, time line based on living memory (80 years) or a generation (25-30 years). Contemporary philosophy is distinguished from its modern foundations primarily by the post-World War II split between the analytic and continental

² Peter Plagens, “The Art of Being Contemporary,” *Art in America*, vol. 98, no. 11 (December 2010); 39.

approaches that prevail today. In the case of literature, Raymond Williams asked the question “When was Modernism?”, and identified the change as having occurred, definitively, by the 1950s:

In the nineteenth century, it [the word ‘modern’] began to take on a largely favourable and progressive ring; Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* was published in 1846, and Turner becomes the type of modern painter for his demonstration of the distinctively up-to-date quality of truth to nature. Very quickly, however, ‘modern’ shifts its reference from ‘now’ to ‘just now’, and for some time has been a designation always going into the past with which ‘contemporary’ may be contrasted for its presentness. ‘Modernism’ as a title for a whole cultural movement and moment has then been retrospective as a general term since the 1950s, thereby stranding the dominant version of ‘modern’ between, say, 1840 and 1940.³

This applies most accurately to Europe. Elsewhere, in other arts and in other aspects of culture and thought, the shift from modernity to contemporaneity occurs at other times, and in distinctively different ways. Tracing these has been a major task of historians and theorists in all the relevant disciplines ever since.

“Contemporary” becomes a key word for these purposes when we recognize that it has an etymological depth, and an analytical potential, that now outmatches that of “modern.”⁴ In medieval Latin, *contemporarius* was formed from *con* (“together”) and *tempus* or *tempor* (“time”); in late Latin this became *contemporalis*, then, in early seventeenth century English, *contemporaneus*. Since at least that time, it has been capable of calibrating a number of distinct but related ways of being *in* or *with* time, even of being, at once, *in* and *apart from* time. Current editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* give four major meanings. They are all relational, turning on prepositions, on being placed “to,” “from,” “at,” or “during” time. There is the strong sense of “Belonging *to* the same time, age, or period” (1.a.), the coincidental, but also entangled sense of “Having existed or lived *from* the same date, equal in age, coeval” (2), and the mostly adventitious

³ Raymond Williams, “When Was Modernism?” in his *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), 32. Notes from a lecture given in 1987.

“Occurring *at* the same moment of time, or *during* the same period; occupying the same definite period, contemporaneous, simultaneous” (3). In each of these three meanings there is a distinctive sense of presentness, of being in the present, of beings that are present to each other, and to the time that they happen to be in while also being aware that they can live their lives in no other (this does not of course exclude imaginative projection to other times, including the sense—much favored in fictional and televisual dramatizations—of being a contemporary to those living in those times).

The OED’s fourth definition of “contemporary,” dating from the middle of the nineteenth century in English, brings these radically diverse conjunctions of persons, things, ideas and time together, and heads them in one direction: “Modern; of or characteristic of the present period; especially up-to-date, ultra-modern; specifically designating art of a markedly *avant-garde* quality, or furniture, building, decoration, etc. having modern characteristics.” This now strikes us as odd, even anachronistic, as a definition of the word “contemporary.” Perhaps because it lists those elements of contemporary life and art that are most modern, yet that exceed modernity as known to that point, and thus—the definition hopes—are most likely to lead, define and eventually constitute the modernity to come. When, however, we pair the two sets of definitions of “modern” and “contemporary,” we realize that a contemporary conception of being in time has not only reached parity with the modern one, it has eclipsed it. *It is in our own time* that the two concepts have finally exchanged their core meaning: contemporaneity has overtaken modernity as the fundamental condition of *this* “time, age, or period.” Modernity is now our past; this is how it remains present to us, as a residual postmodernity. It is, however, no longer an ambiguous, “always already,” perpetually atemporal interzone, nor is it a quasi-modernity awaiting a new direction (both options were suggested by varieties of “postmodernism” during the 1970s and 1980s). Rather, it is a strand within contemporaneity, not vice-versa.

Yet this changeover has not been a simple transfer, or translation, from one state (modernity) to another, similar one (contemporaneity). The state of what it is to be a state, the conditions of what counts as a condition, are changed. We might anticipate, then, that whatever one might identify as characteristic of contemporaneity it will not be

singular but rather multiple in nature, because of the word's multiple meanings, as described above'. As we have seen, the *Oxford English Dictionary's* four definitions reveal a multiplicity of ways of being in time, and of so existing with others—who may share something of our own temporality but may also live, contemporaneously, in distinct temporalities of their own—and thus also share a sense of the strangeness of being in time, now. This is to take what we might call *particular* contemporaneity to mean *the immediacy of difference*. “Difference” is understood in three strong senses: difference in and of itself; difference to proximate others; and difference within oneself. To be contemporary in this particular sense, then, is to live in the thickened present in ways that acknowledge its transient aspects, its deepening density, its implacable divisiveness, and its threatening proximities. Giorgio Agamben’s answer to “What does it mean to be contemporary?” is to articulate “contemporariness” as experienced by those philosophers, poets, scientists and artists who, he presumes, are most capable of grasping its multiplicitous character.⁴

These considerations imply that something may be said of contemporaneity in a more *general* or *historical* sense.⁵ In the Oxford dictionary, the word “contemporaneity” is defined, simply, as “a contemporaneous state or condition,” one that could, of course, occur at any place or time, and be experienced, presumably, at any scale—by individuals, groups, and entire social formations. Yet if we read this word through the richness we now see in “contemporary,” we recognize its potential to name a broad, worldwide situation, the most definitive characteristic of which is the experience—at once subjective and objective, individual yet shared, entirely particular while being inescapable for all—of being immersed, utterly, in a world marked by an unprecedented diversity and depth of difference, by the coexistence of incommensurable viewpoints, and by the absence of an all-encompassing narrative (including those of modernity and postmodernity) that will

⁴ An indispensable review of “modern” in these contexts is given in Hans Robert Jauss, “Modernity and Literary Tradition,” *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). An English translation is in *Critical Inquiry*, vol.31, no.2 (Winter 2005): 329-364. An excellent review of the term “modern” bearing upon the visual arts may be found in chapter 1 of Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁵ For a fuller exposition, see, for example, Terry Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity and Contemporaneity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

enlist the participation of all. In these senses, contemporaneity itself is the most evident attribute of the current world picture, encompassing its most distinctive qualities, from the interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multitude of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being.⁶

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "What is The Contemporary?", in *What is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39-54.