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FIRST INTRODUCTION

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This introduction was read on the opening day of the event, July 16, 2007.

I would like to propose two subjects to begin our conversations, but before I do that, I want to mention three of the concerns that got me involved in these issues and generated this event. These may be mainly my own interests, and I don't expect that they will correspond to subjects we discuss over the course of the week.

First: the art world produces an avalanche of literature—glossy art magazines, Internet blogs, catalogues and brochures, newspaper reviews—that is basically not read. Here at the School of the Art Institute, for example, we subscribe to about a hundred art journals and magazines, and across the street in the museum library there are another hundred; in my experience the majority go unread—unseen—even by students and artists most interested in the art world.¹ In the world of art fairs, as opposed to biennales, there is virtually no writing that has any conceptual ambitions, or any ambitions to offer more rigorous analyses.² The absence of critical readers—or, often, *any* readers—for these literatures of contemporary art is sometimes chalked up to the fact that such writing is an instrument of the market. That seems to me to be only a partial explanation. So I would be delighted if this event might function, in the end, to make life harder for people who write about contemporary art, and also for people who aim to account for the contemporary art world but do not address that wider nonacademic literature.³

1. The Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago subscribe to approximately one hundred contemporary art journals, out of a print subscription of fifteen hundred. The John M. Flaxman Library at the School of the Art Institute, the companion library across the street—the one most used by art students—has 108 contemporary art journals. The list begins: *Abitare, Adbusters, African Arts, Afterall, Afterimage, American Ceramics, American Craft, American Indian Art Magazine, Aperture, Area, Art and AsiaPacific, Art Calendar, Art Chronika, Art in America, Art India, Art Journal, Art Link, Art Monthly, Art Newspaper, Art News, Art Nexus, Art Now Gallery Guide, Art on Paper, Art Papers, Art Press, Art Review, Art Therapy, Artes de Mexico, Artforum International, Arts of Asia, Artus, Artweek, Asian Art News, Bidoun, Bomb, Cabinet, Calyx* . . . The titles at that end of the alphabet include the few that are seen by a fair number of readers (*Artforum, Art in America*). Although there is no way to measure readership, I think the majority of journals go unopened.

This is what I mean by unread. Thanks to Susan Augustine, Pam Cipkowski, and Holly Dankert for this information.

2. Reviewing Basel Miami in 2007, Peter Schjeldahl says, "Talent counts; ideas are immaterial . . . A decade ago, much new art was eyebrow-deep in critical theory. Now it seems as carefree as a summertime schoolboy, while far better dressed." I didn't quote that at the round table, because Schjeldahl is typically hedging his bets: he isn't for "critical theory," but his piece complains about a condition that could—in theory as it were—be meliorated by an infusion of "critical theory." Nevertheless, he is right about the absence of readable literature, "critical theory" or not. Schjeldahl, "Temptations of the Fair," *New Yorker*, December 25, 2006/January 1, 2007, 148–49, quotation at 148.

3. This is one of the arguments of my *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), and it is explored by a number of the contributors to *The State of Art Criticism*, edited by James Elkins and Michael

Second, biennales and other international art events are sometimes analyzed as dichotomies of two different kinds of art, and I would like to problematize that. On the one hand, so it is said, there are artists interested in aesthetics—often, or normatively, painters—who want to continue various twentieth-century practices. On the other hand, there are artists interested in resisting globalization, commodification, or the machinery of the art market. That dichotomy is a trope in the literature on contemporary art, and I would like to find a way to say something interesting about the conditions under which it appears to be the most interesting way of describing the art world. There are, as a start, categories beyond those two. For example, there are artists who are taken as barometers of the zeitgeist, as Jeff Koons was; artists who are watched as market indicators, like Damien Hirst; and artists who transparently exemplify particular traditions, genres, or subjects, even when those traditions have long been exhausted. In other words, there's an entire fauna of practices beyond the dichotomy of belated aesthetic practice and problematic antiaesthetic resistance.

There is an intransigent essay by Benjamin Buchloh on the 2005 Venice Biennale, in which he castigates the German pavilion, curated by Julian Heynen. The German pavilion had two artists: Thomas Scheibitz, who was doing *recherché* paintings in a faux-social realist style; and Tino Sehgal, whose work was oppositional and antiaesthetic. For Buchloh, Scheibitz's work is "desperate conventionalization" and Sehgal's radicalism is "pointless," but even so, they represent a characteristic desire on Heynen's part to have both a "renewed . . . aesthetic convention" and the "radicality of the anti-aesthetic." Buchloh says Heynen's strategy "was to occupy two mutually exclusive positions simultaneously without having a real commitment to either one," and he adds that this contrast is "typical of the founding contrast of the biennale, between propagandistic interests of the nation-state and critical projects of the avant-garde."⁴ That two-part reading—in terms of aesthetic practice versus antiaesthetic resistance—is a strong but typical instance of the reading of biennales, which I would like to understand (to see what makes it seem plausible, makes it the optimal reading) and think beyond. (In that I'm in agreement with Buchloh.)⁵

Thus, instead of being interested exclusively in art projects engaged in resistance, critique, and subversion, we might want to find ways to describe these inbuilt oppositions, and the entire dynamic of biennale culture in its totality of practices and discourses. We could spend equal time with contemporary international art that is unreconstructed, celebratory, nostalgic, "amnesiac," as Buchloh calls it, aestheticizing, retrospective.⁶ For me, this is the function of an economic

Newman, *The Art Seminar 4* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

4. Buchloh, "The Curse of Empire," *Artforum* 44 (2005): 254–58, quotation at 254.

5. The operation of the dialectic here, as a field that comprises contradictions and is comprised by them, is one I am assigning to my own exposition of Buchloh's text. I do not see it in the text itself, which proposes a vitiated or overdetermined dichotomy.

6. "Amnesiac" appears as part of Buchloh's invective against Scheibitz, which turns on the historical demands that make the sympathetic study of work like Scheibitz's impossible. "Scheibitz's shambles, paraded like the spoils of the former utopian aspirations of abstraction, shift uneasily between décor for a Dresden disco and the window display of a cutting-edge Swiss department store in 1959. Ranging in its pictorial vocabulary from Auguste Herbin and Victor

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or sociological analysis; otherwise we are mining phenomena of globalization in order to create the strongest possible resistance, rather than trying to understand the generative conditions, the current states and processes of globalization. I am just as interested in what happens when Sehgal and Scheibitz are juxtaposed as I am in the way every serious art writer finds it unproblematic to ignore a painter like Howard Behrens: he is among the top three artists on the Princess and Carnival cruise lines, and has a global market comparable to any artist better known in the “serious” art world.⁷

Third, there is the question of the literature on artists who are understood as representatives of some local practice. I find that writing on them is often incomplete, even coy, when it comes to describing what comprises their local character.⁸ The art world needs signifiers of the local and national, but it is also coy about those same signifiers. The notion would be that visual art can somehow express cultures, places, nationalities, and communities, but that because it is visual those cultures, places, nationalities, and communities do not need to be articulated. It’s an enabling obfuscation, I think, and it permits some contemporary art to seem international, to seem to be about differences.

So much for the concerns that got me interested in this subject. On to our event: the fundamental strategy is to bring together people from disciplines that do not ordinarily have much contact in order to do some serious work on the ways in which what is often called contemporary “international” art is conceptualized. In preparing the event, I was especially concerned with two phenomena: first, the huge amount of theoretical and empirical work that has been done on globalization in political theory and related disciplines, and the absence of serious dialogues with those bodies of knowledge when it comes to contemporary art writing; and second, the equally enormous literature of “premodern” forms of regionalism and globalism in art history, and the amnesia about that prehistory on the part of contemporary art writers.

We have two art historians on our Faculty, Shigemi Inaga and Tom Kaufmann, who have an exemplary—I’m tempted to say unparalleled—depth of knowledge about certain elements of the history of the discipline of art history, and we have Fred Jameson and Harry Harootunian, whose analyses of the temporal conditions of modernity and its different experiences are among the most productive of any writers. My notion is to bring these discourses to bear on writing about international or global contemporary art.

(In addition, we have an astonishingly high level of Fellows here. Five of the fifteen Fellows are either writing books on the globalization of art or already

Vasarely to Klein, the installation amounts to a sum of the worst efforts of German and English painters of the '60's . . . all of whom tried to preserve the dilapidated remnants of European abstraction while buttressing their work against an onslaught of logic and lucidity from American Minimalism” (Buchloh, “Curse of Empire,” 255).

7. I thank Judi Behrens for this information. Howard Behrens is one of the world’s leading palette-knife artists; his circle includes Alexandra

Nechita, Martiros Meuchian, and Bill Mack, all (am guessing) unknown to the participants in the Stone Summer Theory Institute. See www.howardbehrens.com.

8. An example of coyness is Francesco Bonami’s “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Agenda,” an essay for the *New York Times* on the current state of Chinese art. “The word on Chinese art right now,” Bonami writes, “is ‘Buy!’ but I’m not convinced we Westerners really understand what is

have written books—that’s more than the Faculty has written!⁹ Several are senior scholars, attending as “students.” We represent, on a rough count, five or six disciplines with investments in these questions.)

By the nature of things, this will be an uneven week: sometimes, I imagine, we will find useful things in social and political theory or in the history of globalization before modernism, and sometimes we’ll be listening politely to people in other fields—as one does in interdisciplinary conferences—wondering what in the world their work has to do with contemporary art. I think that is more than just an interesting risk; I think it is a necessary risk. Without it, the ocean of mediocre writing on contemporary international art will continue to swell, as oblivious of its deeper history as it is of debates over its fundamental terms, unchecked and uninformed by the astonishingly well-articulated discourses in neighboring fields.

going on there.” He remarks on the market, but when it comes to saying what Chinese artists are doing, he says only, “Their capacity to devour and digest global ideas in order to create their own new aesthetic is simply astonishing.” Young Chinese artists, he says, work in several media at once—he says a typical artist might be “working on painting, sculpture, photography, video and (why not?) performance all at the same time.” But other than those two observations, both of which might be applied to artists in many other countries, and neither of which get near the question of what “their own new aesthetic” might be, he says absolutely nothing to answer his own question about the Chinese-ness of contemporary Chinese art. “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Agenda,” *New York Times* Style supplement, February 25, 2007, 71–78.

9. Among the Fellows, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay was working on a manuscript with the title “The Rumor of Globalization: Decentering the Global from the Vernacular Margins”; Charlotte Bydler had published *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2004); Pamela Lee was at work on a project titled “Forgetting the Art World”; Joyce Brodsky was working on a manuscript called “Transnational Art in the Age of Globalization”; and Shelly Errington had written *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).