

Radical Museology, or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?

The future of the public museum, able to represent the interests of the ninety-nine percent rather than to consolidate private privilege, has never seemed bleaker. Or has it?

In the face of austerity cuts to public funding, a handful of museums of contemporary art have devised compelling alternatives to the mantra of bigger is better and richer. *Radical Museology* presents the collection displays of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museo Nacional de Reina Sofia in Madrid and MSUM in Ljubljana as outlines of a new understanding of the contemporary in contemporary art.

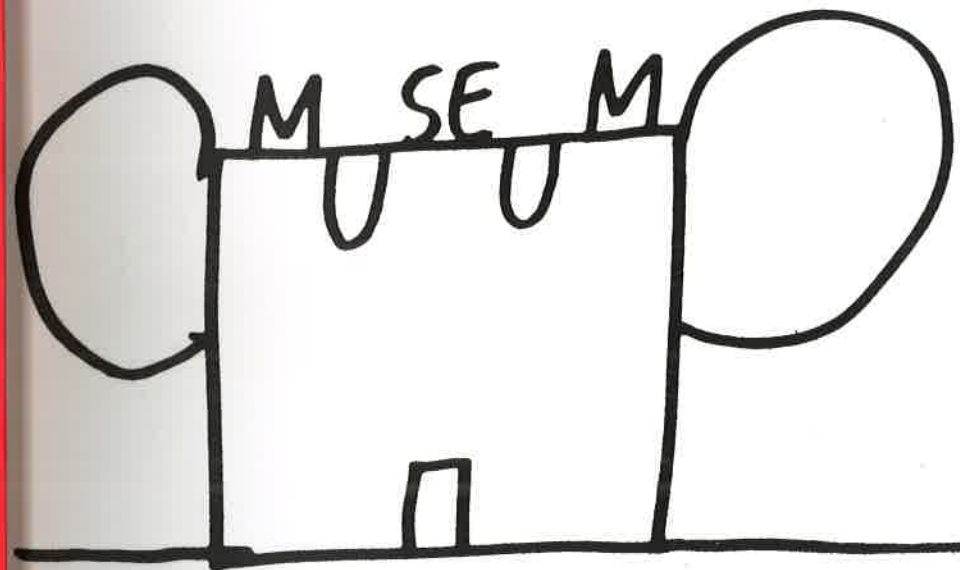
Radical Museology is a vivid manifesto for the contemporary as a method rather than a periodization, and for the importance of a politicized representation of history in museums of contemporary art.

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CLAIRE BISHOP

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in Museums of Contemporary Art?



With drawings by Dan Perjovschi



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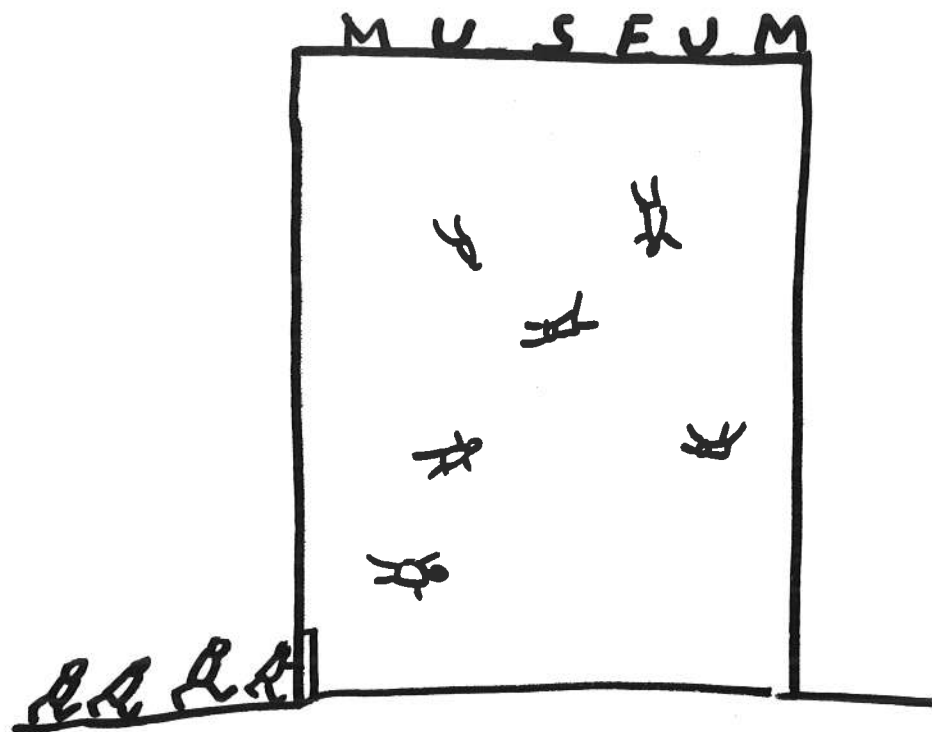
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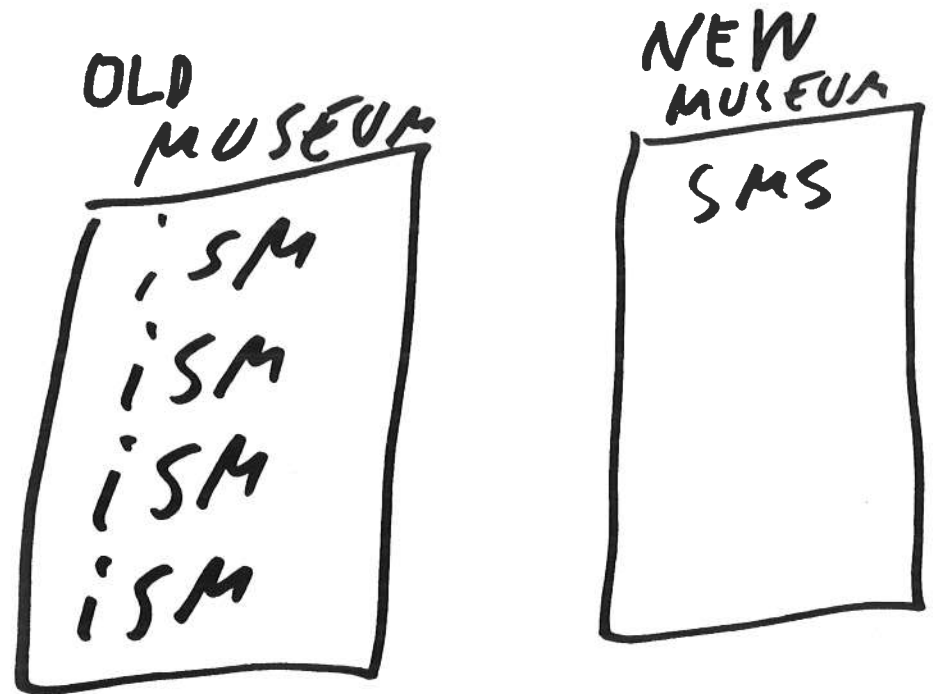


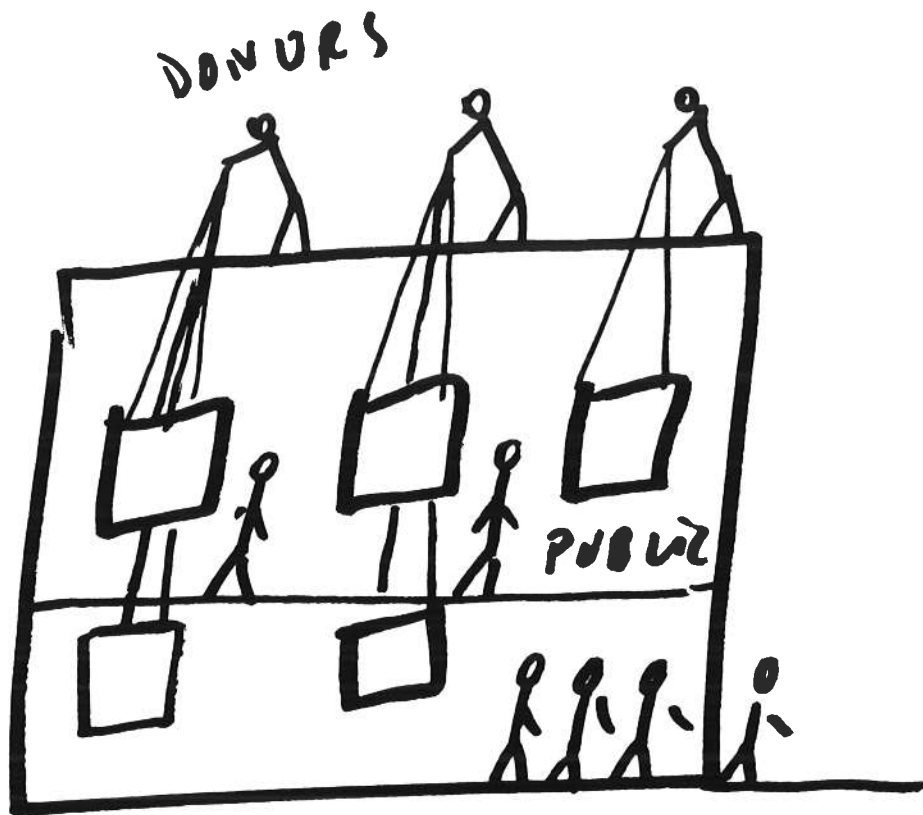
I.
GOING INSIDE

It's remarkable to think that the last polemical text to be written on museums of contemporary art by an art historian was Rosalind Krauss's "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum" back in 1990. Her essay is indebted to Fredric Jameson's critique of late capitalist culture not just in its title but also in its relentless pessimism. Drawing from her experience of two contemporary art museums—the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and the projected site of Mass MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts—Krauss argued that a profound encounter with the work of art had become subordinated to a new register of experience: the unanchored hyperreality of its architectural container, which produced effects of disembodiment that, in her view, correlated to the dematerialized flows of global capital. Rather than a highly individualized artistic epiphany, viewers to these galleries encountered a euphoria of space first, and art second.¹ Krauss's essay was prescient in many ways: the decade to come saw an unprecedented proliferation of new museums dedicated to contemporary art, and increased scale and a proximity to big business have been two central characteristics of the move from the nineteenth-century model of the museum as a patrician institution of elite culture to its current incarnation as a populist temple of leisure and entertainment.

Today, however, a more radical model of the museum is taking shape: more experimental, less architecturally determined, and offering a more politicized engagement with our historical moment. Three museums in Europe—the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, and Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (MSUM) in Ljubljana—are doing more than any individual work of art to shift our perception of art institutions and their potential. All three present compelling alternatives to the dominant mantra of bigger is better, and better is richer. Rather than following the blue-chip mainstream, these museums draw upon the widest range of artifacts to situate art's relationship to particular histories with universal relevance.² They do not speak in the name of the one percent, but attempt to represent the interests and histories of those constituencies that are (or have been) marginalized, sidelined and oppressed. This doesn't mean that they subordinate art to history in general, but that they mobilize the world of visual production to inspire the necessity of standing on the right side of history.

It is no coincidence that each of these museums has also engaged in the task of rethinking the category of 'the contemporary'. Throughout this essay, I will be setting two models of contemporaneity against each other. The first concerns presentism: the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking. This is the dominant usage of the term 'contemporary' in art today; it is underpinned by an inability to grasp our moment in its global entirety, and an acceptance of this incomprehension as a constitutive condition of the present historical era. The second model, which I want to develop here, takes its lead from the practice of these three museums: here the contemporary is understood as a dialectical method and a politicized project with a more radical understanding of temporality. Time and value turn out to be crucial categories at stake in formulating a notion of what I will call

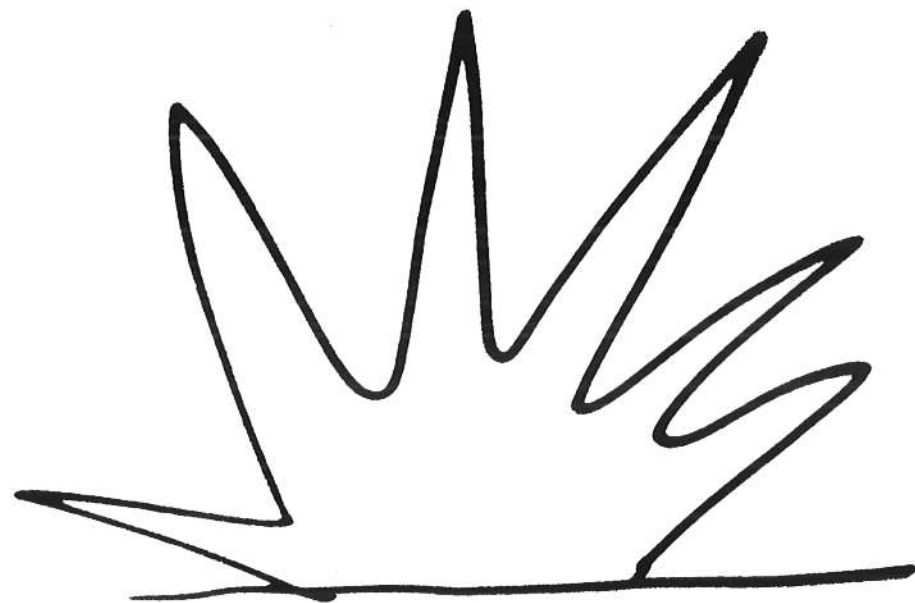




a 'dialectical contemporaneity', because it does not designate a style or period of the works themselves so much as an *approach* to them. One of the consequences of approaching institutions through this category is a rethinking of the museum, the category of art that it enshrines, and the modalities of spectatorship it produces.

II. MUSEUMS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Although the last twenty years have seen a huge diversification of museums as a category, a dominant logic of privatization unites most of their iterations worldwide. In Europe, there has been an increasing dependence on donations and corporate sponsorship as governments gradually withdraw public funding from culture in the name of 'austerity'. In the US, the situation has always been thus, but is now accelerating without any pretense to a separation of public and private interests: an art dealer, Jeffrey Deitch, was appointed head of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in January 2010. Two months later, the New Museum controversially installed the collection of its multimillionaire trustee Dakis Joannou and employed the artist Jeff Koons—already in Joannou's collection—to guest curate the exhibition. Meanwhile, it is well known that the Museum of Modern Art in New York regularly rehanges its permanent collection on the basis of its trustees' latest acquisitions. Indeed, it can sometimes seem as if contemporary museums have ceded historical research to commercial galleries: Gagosian,



MUSEUM



ART

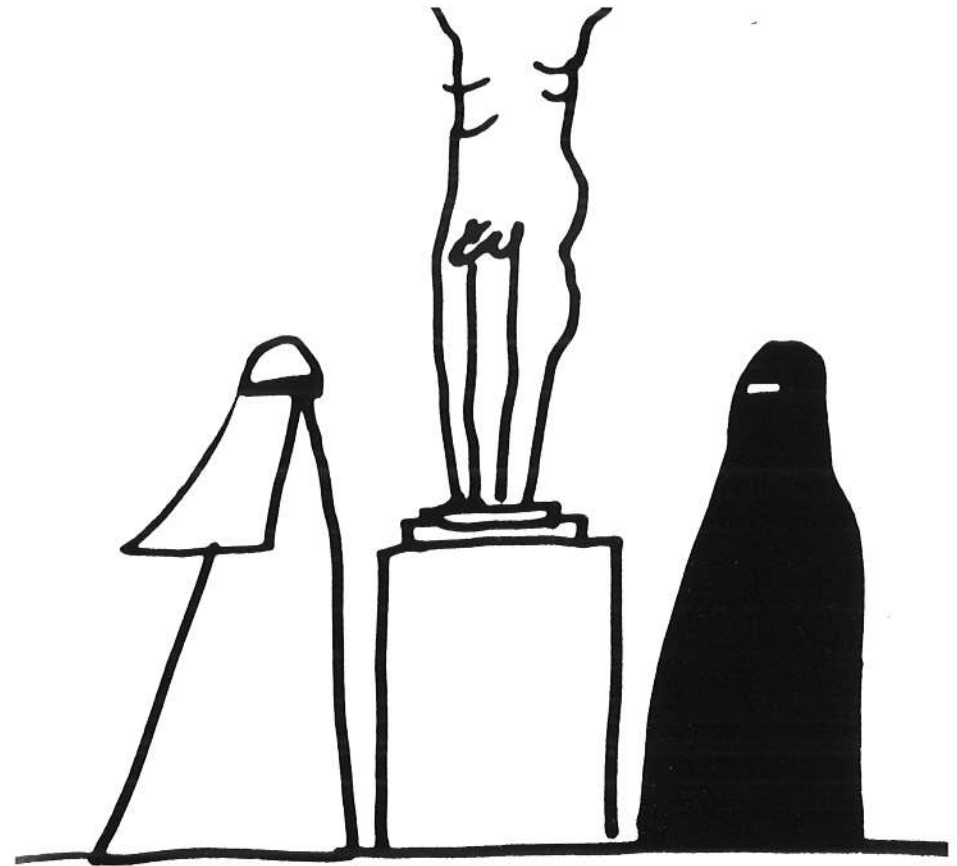
for example, has mounted a series of blockbuster shows of modern masters (Manzoni, Picasso, Fontana) as carefully curated by famous art historians as those in a traditional museum.

In Latin America, although publicly funded institutions of contemporary art have existed since the 1960s—for example in São Paulo and Lima, where two museums form part of university campuses (MAC-USP and LiMAC)—the highest-profile contemporary art spaces are all private: Jumex in Mexico City (established in 1999), MALBA in Buenos Aires (2001), Inhotim near Belo Horizonte, Brazil (2006). In Asia, the biggest collection-based contemporary art museums have been established under the aegis of wealthy individuals (such as the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2003, or the Dragon Museum in Shanghai, 2012) or corporations (such as the Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, 2004). It is only recently that the Chinese government has opened its first state-run contemporary art museum, the Power Station of Art, based in a former Shanghai industrial plant (October 2012), to be followed by the M+ museum in Hong Kong, slated to be the world's largest contemporary art museum, which will open in 2015. However, many Asian museums could just as well be described as kunsthallen that show temporary exhibitions, as their commitment to a collection policy is negligible: think of the Beijing Today Art Museum (2002), Shanghai's Minsheng Art Museum (2008) and Rockbund Museum of Art (2010), or the Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou (2010).

As critics have observed, the visual expression of this privatization has been the triumph of 'starchitecture': the museum's external wrapper has become more important than its contents, just as Krauss foresaw in 1990, leaving art with the option of looking ever more lost inside gigantic post-industrial hangars, or supersizing to compete with its envelope. Although museums have always endorsed signature architecture, the extreme iconicity of new museum buildings is

comparatively recent: I. M. Pei's Pyramids for the Louvre in 1989 are an early benchmark, while the most recent avatars in Europe are the Pompidou Metz by Shigeru Ban and Zaha Hadid's MAXXI, Rome, both of which opened in 2010. The future shadow of Abu Dhabi adds further, intercultural tension to this list: a franchised Louvre and a Guggenheim will form part of a slew of eye-popping over-scaled buildings destined to house art and performance. Looking at this global panorama of contemporary art museums, what binds them all together is less a concern for a collection, a history, a position, or a mission than a sense that contemporaneity is being staged on the level of *image*: the new, the cool, the photogenic, the well-designed, the economically successful.³

When did contemporary art become so desirable a category? Back in 1940, an artists' manifesto, designed by Ad Reinhardt, queried MoMA's ability to show the present rather than merely exhibit the past, asking "How Modern is the Museum of Modern Art?" Artists picketed the museum and demanded more exhibitions of contemporary US art, rather than endless shows of early twentieth-century European painters and sculptors.⁴ It is telling that for MoMA's director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., modern denoted aesthetic quality (the progressive, original, and challenging) compared to the safe, academic, and "supine neutrality" of the contemporary, which simply meant work by living artists.⁵ In the post-war period, institutions tended to favor the term 'contemporary art' as a substitute for 'modern': the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London was founded in 1947, opting to show temporary exhibitions rather than building up a permanent collection, as did many similarly titled venues.⁶ In these examples, once again, the 'contemporary' refers less to style or period than to an assertion of the present. By contrast, the Institute of Modern Art in Boston was renamed the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1948 as a way to distance itself from MoMA's vanguard internationalism; it turned to the more



NEW

capacious category of the 'contemporary' to legitimate a regionalist, commercial, and conservative agenda.⁷

The New Museum in New York is an important transitional case in the story of museums becoming presentist. Established in 1977 as an alternative to MoMA and the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New Museum initially built up a 'semi-permanent collection' under the aegis of its first director, Marcia Tucker. Begun in 1978, the collection was devoted to the kind of work that then had no place in the traditional museum: dematerialized, conceptual, performance, and process-based art. These works represented marginalized subject positions and staked out a position against Reagan-era politics. The museum's idea was to destabilize the idea of collecting by keeping its sights on the present: work would be selected from shows in the building, as a form of documentation, but after a decade these works would be deaccessioned to create room for more recent pieces. This model of collecting was not new: it was more or less the same as that implemented in 1818, when the Musée de Luxembourg in Paris became the Musée des artistes vivantes—a name chosen to position the institution in direct contrast to the Louvre, which was reserved for artists who were 'historical' (i.e., dead). This model was also followed by Barr at MoMA as of 1931: works would either be deaccessioned after fifty years, or passed on to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for posterity—a practice that continued until 1953. What makes the New Museum's 'semi-permanent collection' distinctive is that it formed a bridge between alternative art practices of the 1970s (informed by institutional critique and systems art) and the market logic of the 1980s (exemplified by the continual turnover of Charles Saatchi's collection).⁸ On the one hand, the semi-permanent collection functioned as an 'anti-collection', allowing works to flow in and out, refusing a correct or authoritative story of contemporary art. On the other hand, this perpetual motion rendered the museum "compliant with notions of obsolescence and

the march of fashion.”⁹ Tucker later recognized that the collection’s semi-permanence refused access to the past in favor of the present, rather than setting the two in dialog. Today, there is no mention of the New Museum’s collection of circa 670 works on the institution’s website, which states that it is a “non-collecting institution.”¹⁰ The emphasis is instead on high-profile solo shows by living (or recently deceased) artists, group exhibitions, and a triennial, and there is very little to differentiate its activities from those of the Guggenheim, Whitney, MoMA, or even the Metropolitan, all of which now show contemporary art. The only discernible difference is branding: the New Museum’s demographic is younger and hipper.

III. THEORIZING THE CONTEMPORARY

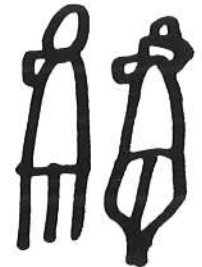
In tandem with this proliferation of contemporary art museums, the study of contemporary art has become the fastest-growing subject area in the academy since the turn of the millennium. Here, the definition of ‘contemporary’ has become a moving target par excellence: until the late 1990s, it seemed synonymous with ‘post-war’, denoting art after 1945; about ten years ago, it was relocated to start somewhere in the 1960s; now the 1960s and 1970s generally tend to be viewed as high modernist, and the argument has been put forward that we should consider 1989 as the beginning of a new era, synonymous with the fall of communism and the emergence of global markets.¹¹ While each of these periodizations has its pros and cons,



MET



MoMA



New
Museum

the central drawback is that they operate from a Western purview. In China, contemporary art tends to be dated from the late 1970s (the official end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the democracy movement); in India, from the 1990s onwards; in Latin America, there is no real division of the modern and the contemporary, because this would mean conforming to hegemonic Western categories—indeed, a prevalent discussion there still revolves around whether or not modernity has actually been realized. In Africa, contemporary art dates variously from the end of colonialism (the late 1950s/1960s in Anglophone and Francophone countries; the 1970s in the case of former Portuguese colonies), or as late as the 1990s (the end of apartheid in South Africa, the first African biennials, and the start of *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*).¹²

It almost goes without saying, then, that the attempt to periodize contemporary art is dysfunctional, unable to accommodate global diversity. Most recent theorists have therefore positioned it as a *discursive* category. For philosopher Peter Osborne, the contemporary is an ‘operative fiction’: it is fundamentally a productive act of the imagination, because we attribute a sense of unity to the present, one that encompasses disjunctive global temporalities we can never grasp; as such it is a time of stasis.¹³ For Boris Groys, modernism was characterized by a desire to surpass the present in the name of realizing a glorious future (be this avant-garde utopianism or the Stalinist five-year plan); contemporaneity, by contrast, is marked by “a prolonged, potentially infinite period of delay,” prompted by the fall of communism.¹⁴ For both Osborne and Groys, a future-oriented modernism has been replaced by a static, boring present (“we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future”).¹⁵ Groys points to the secular ritual of repetition that is the video loop as contemporary art’s instantiation of this new relationship to temporality, which creates, he argues, a “non-historical excess of time through art.”

Other theorists have claimed the contemporary as a question of temporal disjunction. Giorgio Agamben, for example, posits it as a state of being founded on temporal rupture: “contemporariness,” he writes, “is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*,” and it is only by this untimeliness or “dyschrony” that one can truly gaze at one’s own era.¹⁶ He evocatively describes contemporariness as being able “to fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch” and “being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss.”¹⁷ Anachronism also permeates the reading of Terry Smith, one of the few art historians to tackle this question. He has persuasively argued that the contemporary should be set equally against the discourses of modernism and postmodernism, because it is characterized by antinomies and asynchronies: the simultaneous and incompatible co-existence of different modernities and ongoing social inequities, differences that persist despite the global spread of telecommunications systems and the purported universality of market logic.¹⁸

These discursive approaches seem to fall into one of two camps: either contemporaneity denotes stasis (i.e., it is a continuation of postmodernism’s post-historical deadlock) or it reflects a break with postmodernism by asserting a plural and disjunctive relationship to temporality. The latter is of course more generative, as it allows us to move away from both the historicity of modernism, characterized by an abandonment of tradition and a forward propulsion towards the new, and the historicity of postmodernism, equated with a ‘schizophrenic’ collapse of past and future into an expanded present.¹⁹ Certainly, an assertion of multiple, overlapping temporalities can be seen in many works of art since the mid-1990s by artists from countries struggling to deal with a context of recent war and political upheaval, especially in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.²⁰ Art historian Christine Ross has argued that contemporary artists look backwards in order to “presentify” the modernist

regime of historicity and thereby to critique its futurity; artists are less interested in Walter Benjamin's approach to history as radical discontinuity, she writes, than in "potential[izing] remains as forms of resistance to and redeployment of modern life."²¹ However, other critics have questioned whether these artistic efforts are ultimately more nostalgic and retrospective than prospective: Dieter Roelstraete has lambasted contemporary art's turn towards history-telling and historicizing for its "inability to grasp or even look at the present, much less to *excavate the future*."²²

A less contested approach to disjunctive temporalities can be found in the revival of interest in anachronism among art historians. Its central advocate, Georges Didi-Huberman, has argued that anachronism is so pervasive an operation in art throughout history that we should see its presence in *all* works: "in each historical object, all times encounter one another, collide, or base themselves plastically on one another, bifurcate, or even become entangled with each other."²³ Building on the work of Aby Warburg (1866–1929), Didi-Huberman puts forth the idea that works of art are temporal knots, a mixture of past and present; they reveal what persists or "survives" (*Nachleben*) from earlier periods, in the form of a symptom in the current era. To gain access to these stratified temporalities, he writes, requires a "shock, a tearing of the veil, an irruption or appearance of time, what Proust and Benjamin have described so eloquently under the category of 'involuntary memory'."²⁴ Taking their lead from Didi-Huberman, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood demonstrate in *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010) the co-existence of two temporalities in works of art circa 1500, as culture shifted from religious Medieval to secular Renaissance. Arguing against the historicist idea that each object or event belongs in a specific time and place (the idea upon which anachronism is founded), they instead propose the term 'anachronic' to describe the way in which works of art perform a recursive temporality.²⁵

Handwritten text in black ink on a white page. The word "History" is written twice, once above the other, in a cursive, slanted font. A large, thick black arrow curves from the top left towards the top of the word "History". Another large, thick black arrow curves from the top right towards the bottom of the word "History".



Collection



recent
acquisition

Nagel and Wood's investigation, while compelling, is mono-directional: by their own admission, they "reverse engineer" from the work of art backwards (into its own past, its own chronotopology), rather than beginning with a diagnosis of the present that necessitates research into the early Renaissance as a means to mobilize a different understanding of today.²⁶ By contrast, what I call a dialectical contemporary seeks to navigate multiple temporalities within a more political horizon. Rather than simply claim that many or all times are present in each historical object, we need to ask *why* certain temporalities appear in particular works of art at *specific* historical moments. Furthermore, this analysis is motivated by a desire to understand our present condition and how to change it.²⁷ Lest this method be interpreted as yet another form of presentism, a preoccupation with the now masquerading as historical inquiry, it should be stressed that sightlines are always focused on the future: the ultimate aim is to disrupt the relativist pluralism of the current moment, in which all styles and beliefs are considered equally valid, and to move towards a more sharply politicized understanding of where we can and should be heading. If, as Osborne claims, the global contemporary is a shared fiction, then this doesn't denote its 'impossibility', but rather provides the basis for a new political imaginary. The idea that artists might help us glimpse the contours of a project for rethinking our world is surely one of the reasons why contemporary art, despite its near total imbrication in the market, continues to rouse such passionate interest and concern.

Where do museums fit into this? My argument is that museums with a historical collection have become the most fruitful testing ground for a non-presentist, multi-temporal contemporaneity. This is in direct contrast to the commonplace assumption that the privileged site of contemporary art is the globalized biennial; the operational logic of the latter remains locked within an affirmation of the zeitgeist, and any navigation of the past tends to serve only as a foil for

younger artists. Of course, for many curators, the historical weight of a permanent collection is an albatross that inhibits the novelty so essential to drawing in new audiences, since the incessant turnover of temporary exhibitions is deemed more exciting (and profitable) than finding yet another way to show the canon. Yet today, when so many museums are being forced to turn back to their collections because funds for loan-based temporary exhibitions have been slashed due to austerity measures, the permanent collection can be a museum's greatest weapon in breaking the stasis of presentism. This is because it requires us to think in several tenses simultaneously: the *past perfect* and the *future anterior*. It is a time capsule of what was once considered culturally significant at previous historical periods, while more recent acquisitions anticipate the judgment of history to come (in the future, this *will have been* deemed important). Without a permanent collection, it is hard for a museum to stake any meaningful claim to an engagement with the past—but also, I would wager, with the future.²⁸

Of course, most museums have only experimented with their holdings to the extent of devising thematic hangs, in the belief that an abandonment of chronology is the best way to refresh permanent collections and make them more exciting and contemporary (in the presentist sense). This experiment began at MoMA with *Modern Starts* (1999), where it was rapidly jettisoned in favor of a return to canonical chronology, but the approach continues today at Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou.²⁹ But while thematic hangs have permitted a greater diversity of displays, they also give rise to the hermeneutical question of historical anchoring: if the past and the present are collapsed into transhistorical and transgeographical clusters, how can the differences between places and periods be understood? Perhaps more importantly, do they prevent the museum from expressing its commitment to, or preference for, one historical reading over another? It is not hard to argue that the relativism

CHRONOlogy



of thematic collection hangs post-2000 is in perfect synchronicity with museum marketing: a gallery to please every demographic, without having to align the institution with any particular narrative or position.³⁰ It is therefore striking that almost all of the literature on museum collections since 2000 has assumed that Tate Modern's four collection suites offer the 'good' riposte to MoMA's 'bad' example.³¹ Few have criticized the Tate, and yet its approach to history is just as apolitical as MoMA's devotion to chronology: its wings revolve around the collection's strengths (Surrealism, Abstraction, Minimalism), connecting these movements both to recent work and historical precursors, but these rooms are presented as interchangeable modules, endlessly open to reshuffling.³² Meanwhile, the lack of chronology in the exhibition display is anxiously overcompensated for by the presence of huge timelines decorating the foyer walls of each floor, which struggle to populate the Western narrative with new global additions.³³

In the rest of this essay, I will turn to new collection display paradigms that have not only succeeded Tate Modern but which also present a new category of contemporaneity: the Van Abbemuseum, the Museo Nacional de Reina Sofía, and MSUM Ljubljana. Each of these institutions has hung its collection to suggest a provocative rethinking of contemporary art in terms of a specific relationship to history, driven by a sense of present-day social and political urgencies, and marked by particular national traumas: colonial guilt and the Franco era (Madrid), Islamophobia and the failure of social democracy (Eindhoven), the Balkan Wars and the end of socialism (Ljubljana). Driven by clear political commitments, these institutions stand apart from the presentist model of the contemporary art museum in which market interests influence what is displayed. These institutions elaborate a dialectical contemporaneity both as a museological practice and an art-historical method.



The Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. Photo: Peter Cox

IV. TIME MACHINES: THE VAN ABBEMUSEUM

The Van Abbemuseum was founded in 1936 around the collection of a local cigar manufacturer in Eindhoven, Henri van Abbe. The museum comprises two buildings: the original structure from 1936 (a symmetrical suite of modestly proportioned, top-lit galleries) and a postmodern extension, which opened in 2003, with five stories and an auditorium. Its current director, Charles Esche, joined the museum in 2004 after running the Rooseum Centre for Contemporary Art (Malmö), curating several biennials (including Gwangju, Istanbul, and Riwaq), and setting up two alternative institutions in Edinburgh, the Modern Institute and the ProtoAcademy. Since his arrival, the Van Abbemuseum has been relentlessly experimental, exploiting the full resources of the institution—its collection, archive, library, and residencies—to present a catalog of possible ways to exhibit its holdings in single-gallery installations referred to as ‘Plug Ins’.³⁴ The first phase of this research, “Plug In to Play” (2006–2008), conceived the museum displays less as a historical narrative than as a series of discrete installations, some organized by in-house curators, some by guest curators, and some by artists. Rather than staging temporary loan-based exhibitions, the museum used the collection *as* a temporary exhibition.³⁵ This dynamic period of experimentation lasted for three years, but while “Plug In to Play” creatively exploded the range of ways in which the collection

might be displayed, and in extraordinarily vivid ways, the drawback was that they produced only a fragmented menu of possible options for displaying modern and contemporary art, rather than deploying these strategies to produce a narrative.³⁶

The next phase was an eighteen-month, four-part program called “Play van Abbe” (2009–2011), in which the museum attempted to think of itself as a series of interconnected displays, rather than as a concatenation of individual installations. The first part, “The Game and the Players,” emphasized institutional transparency and historical contingency: “Who are these ‘players’ within a museum and which stories do they tell? How does the current director present the collection? In what way does an art museum position itself—both in the present and in the past?”³⁷ One display showed works that were acquired by Edy de Wilde when he was director between 1946 and 1963 (Plug In #34), while a further display (Plug In #50) showed the original kernel of the museum collection: twenty-six paintings (none by major international figures) bought by Henri van Abbe in the 1920s and 1930s. “Repetition: Summer Displays 1983” reinstalled a collection display curated by Rudi Fuchs when he was director, in order to ask how we perceive this conservative period today—thereby drawing a sharp contrast between Fuchs’s and Esche’s approaches.³⁸ These curatorial frames rendered the displayed works subject to a double temporality: as individual voices speaking in the present, but also as a collective chorus once considered essential at a previous historical moment.

The second part of “Play van Abbe,” titled “Time Machines,” grew out of the museum’s ambition to be a ‘museum of museums’ or a ‘collection of collections’, showing the history of ideological display and exhibition archetypes and models. Again, repetition was a key strategy: the museum revived the project, set in motion by Jean Leering when he was director in the 1960s, of



Installation view of “Plug In #18: Kijkdepot” (Viewing Depot), part of “Plug In to Play”, 16 December 2006–28 November 2009, Photo: Peter Cox



Installation view of “Repetition: Summer Display 1983,” part of “Play van Abbe: The Game and the Players.” Work by On Kawara, Jannis Kounellis and Marcel Broodthaers, 28 November–7 March 2010, Photo: Peter Cox



Installation view showing archive of the "Degenerate Art Show" (1937) and the "Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung" (1937) (on left) and the history of exhibition display (on right). Part of "Play van Abbe: Time Machines - Reloaded," 25 September - 30 January 2011. Photo: Peter Cox



Museum design of the Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) in 1968, part of "Play van Abbe: Time Machines - Reloaded," 25 September 2010 - 30 January 2011. Photo: Peter Cox

collecting reconstructions of historical environments. In 2007 the museum had already commissioned a reconstruction of Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Workers' Reading Room* (1925); in 2009 it fabricated László Moholy-Nagy's *Raum der Gegenwart* (1930), invited the artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh to reconstruct Lina Bo Bardi's exhibition display system for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (1968), and commissioned the Museum of American Art in Berlin to remake El Lissitzky's *Abstraktes Kabinett* (1927-1928). The third part, "The Politics of Collecting—The Collecting of Politics," featured conceptually oriented art from Eastern Europe and the Middle East: the former region because it relates to the past and possible future of communism, and the latter because it addresses contemporary Islamophobia in the Netherlands, as well as provides a platform for artistic projects that oppose the ongoing occupation of the West Bank. For example, *Picasso in Palestine* (2011) realized a proposal by Khaled Hourani, the artist-director of the International Art Academy Palestine, to bring a Picasso painting to Palestine for the first time, and to exhibit it at his institution.³⁹ The final part, "The Pilgrim, the Tourist, the Flaneur (and the Worker)," proposed three different models of spectatorship, with accompanying audio guides that allowed these epistemological biases to become explicit.⁴⁰

Esche directly connects his reorganization of the collection to the political upheavals of 1989 and the changes to museums that have taken place since then, as institutions follow the market far more closely, expanding both the geographical scope of collections and their physical limits by building extensions. Post-1989, clusters of ever-changing narratives seem to have replaced one unifying art historical discourse; Esche nevertheless argues that the task of the museum is to take a position, because relativism is the dominant narrative of the market, where everything is equalized by exchange value. Accordingly, Esche's selections and priorities as a director are based around a set of ideals and identifiable concerns: the emanci-



Installation view of "Picasso in Palestine," exhibition of Pablo Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1943) at the International Academy of Art Palestine, Ramallah. 24 June – 20 July 2011. Photo: Ron Eijkman

patory drive of modern art and its continuation in certain strands of contemporary art (there is, for example, a notable absence in the Van Abbemuseum's collection of works with a high-profile market status—no Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, or Matthew Barney); the memory of cultural internationalism and a need for planetary thinking, as the museum places continual emphasis on the legacy of communism and the possibilities for its reactivation; the social value of retelling histories that lead to other imagined futures, by revisiting marginal or repressed histories in order to open up new vistas. These motivating questions, combined with the museum's creative use of the archive and documentation, which are continually

integrated into the displays, position the contemporary museum as a partisan historical narrator. Yet last year the Van Abbemuseum was threatened with a twenty-eight percent cut to its budget, due to the city council's objection to its low visitor figures and refusal of cultural entrepreneurship. Ironically, this complaint was made by the Social Democrat party; the solution, in their eyes, was more populist blockbuster exhibitions. Eventually, the cuts were reduced to eleven percent, in part due to online international support and lobbying.



Installation view of Museum of American Art Berlin, ethnographic display of the Museum of Modern Art New York and reconstruction of El Lissitzky's *Abstraktes Kabinett*. Part of "Play van Abbe: Time Machines – Reloaded," 25 September 2010 – 30 January 2011. Photo: Peter Cox



Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. View of the Sabatini building. Photo: Joaquín Cortés

V. ARCHIVE OF THE COMMONS: THE REINA SOFÍA

While innovative exhibition design has been central to historical displays at the Van Abbemuseum, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía has embraced a more classical approach to the installation of twentieth-century art. Founded in 1992, the Reina Sofía occupies two enormous buildings in the center of Madrid: an eighteenth-century hospital by Francesco Sabatini, and a large extension by Jean Nouvel. The present director, Manuel Borja-Villel, joined in 2008, after ten years as director of Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). It should be stressed that despite the formal similarity between the Van Abbemuseum and the Reina Sofía as old buildings with new extensions, they are hardly equals: the former is a regional museum in a small Dutch city, while the latter is the national museum of contemporary art in Spain's capital, triangulated with two other major art collections, the Prado and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. The Reina Sofía's collection of masterpieces and central location ensure there is never an anxiety about viewing figures; the steering question for the museum is not *whether* people will visit the museum but *how* they will view the works.

At first glance, the Reina Sofía's program seems to be business as usual, dominated by major solo and group exhibitions. Yet the presentation of the permanent collection has undergone important



Installation view of Gillo Pontocorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, *Statues Also Die* (1953) and a vitrine of publications by Franz Fanon, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Albert Camus and others. Part of "From Revolt to Postmodernity, 1962–82," 2012. Photo: Joaquín Cortés

changes in the past few years as the museum has adopted a self-critical representation of the country's colonialist past, positioning Spain's own history within a larger international context. For example, the gallery introducing the third collection suite, "From Revolt to Postmodernity, 1962–82," begins with Agnès Varda's photographic series *Cuba Is Not the Congo* (1963), while a vitrine of publications by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus is placed alongside Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's film about African art and the effects of colonialism *Statues Also Die* (1953); in the center is a large projection of Gillo Pontocorvo's anti-colonial film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). As this display typifies, one of the most notable characteristics of the collection hang is the presence of film and literature alongside works of visual art. The Cubism display opens with a large projection of Buster Keaton's *One Week* (1924), drawing attention to a simultaneous use of distorted perspectival forms in painting and popular culture. In one of the most emotionally devastating suites,



Installation view of Pablo Picasso, *Three Lambs' Heads* (1939) and Alain Resnais, *Night and Fog* (1955). Part of "Art in a Divided World, 1945–68," 2012. Photo: Joaquín Cortés



Installation view of Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937), printed matter and maquette of the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic (1937). Photo: Joaquín Cortés

"Art in a Divided World, 1945–68," the opening gallery contains a single Lee Miller photograph of US troops at Buchenwald (1945) adjacent to two works by Picasso, illustrations for Pierre Reverdy's *Song of the Dead* (1946) and the painting *Three Lambs' Heads* (1939), which are installed next to a large projection of Resnais's Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog* (1955). The room immediately following this contains Antonin Artaud's radio recording *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947): a theater of cruelty and absurdity expresses the impossibility of retrieving aesthetic meaning after the unspeakable horrors of World War II.

The commitment to expanded historical contextualization can also be seen in the presentation of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), the main draw of the collection. This is still presented amid several rooms of Picasso's drawings and paintings, but now framed by other works from the Civil War era, including propaganda posters, magazines, war drawings, and a maquette of the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic, where the painting was first shown in 1937. *Guernica* itself is installed directly opposite a gallery showing Jean-Paul Dreyfus's Civil War documentary *Spain 1936*. A filmic record of civilian trauma and destruction therefore confronts Picasso's painterly version as two forms of monochrome reportage. The effect is to ground *Guernica* in social and political history, rather than in an art-historical discourse of formal innovation and singular genius. This attention to contextualizing art within visual culture can also be seen elsewhere in the museum, where movements that would otherwise be relegated to the archive due to their lack of visibility (such as Lettrisme and the Situationist International) are now given due space, represented through publications, films, newspaper cuttings, and audio recordings.

While all these galleries present art conventionally thought of as modern rather than as contemporary in terms of periodization, I would argue that the total system of display is dialectically con-



Installation view of Lettrist International publications, poetry recordings, and film, 2012.
Photo: Claire Bishop

temporary: as the curators point out, the museum presents constellations of work in which conventional artistic media are no longer the priority, which are driven by a commitment to emancipatory traditions, and which acknowledge other modernities (particularly in Latin America).⁴¹ Temporary group exhibitions, meanwhile, are used as testing sites for rethinking the museum's overall mission and collection policy. In 2009, for example, the museum initiated "The Potosí Principle," curated by Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann, and Max Jorge Hinderer. The exhibition argued that the birthplace of contemporary capitalism might not be the Industrial Revolution of northern England or Napoleonic France, but the silver mines of colonial Bolivia.⁴² The show juxtaposed seventeenth-century colonial paintings with recent work by



Installation view of "The Potosí Principle: How Can we Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?", 12 May – 16 September 2010. Photo: Joaquín Cortés

artist-activists critical of globalization (particularly the exploitation of migrant workers by neoliberal elites in China, Dubai, and Europe), implicitly drawing a connection between these two forms of colonization.⁴³

The display activities of the Reina Sofía nevertheless remain only the most visible and symbolic of the museum's activities, which also penetrate deeper behind the scenes to affect acquisitions policy, research, and education. Borja-Villel has developed a method by which to rethink the contemporary museum, using triangular diagrams to express the dynamic relationships underpinning three different models—the modern, the postmodern, and the contemporary. In each diagram, corner A denotes the guiding narrative or motivation, corner B refers to the structure of intermediation, and corner C alludes to the museum's destination or goal.⁴⁴ In the modern museum model, exemplified by MoMA, the guiding

narrative is linear historic time, advancing towards the future on a Western-centric horizon; its *dispositif* is the white cube, destined for the modern notion of the public. In the postmodern museum, exemplified by Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou, the apparatus is multiculturalism, seen in the equation of contemporaneity with global diversity; its structure of mediation is marketing, addressed to the multiple demographics of economically quantifiable 'audiences'.⁴⁵

Borja-Villel's alternative to these scenarios is informed by recent writing on the 'decolonial' (seeing the world from the perspective of the global south) and the commons (which seeks to produce new models of collective ownership). The starting point for this museum is therefore *multiple modernities*: an art history no longer conceived in terms of avant-garde originals and peripheral derivatives, since this always prioritizes the European center and ignores the extent to which apparently 'belated' works hold other values in their own context. The apparatus, in turn, is reconceived as an *archive of the commons*, a collection available to everyone because culture is not a question of national property, but a universal resource. Meanwhile, the ultimate destination of the museum is no longer the multiple audiences of market demographics, but *radical education*: rather than being perceived as hoarded treasure, the work of art would be mobilized as a 'relational object' (to use Lygia Clark's phrase) with the aim of liberating its user psychologically, physically, socially, and politically. The model here is that of Jacques Rancière's "ignorant schoolmaster," based on a presumption of equality of intelligence between the viewer and the institution.⁴⁶

These ideas are beginning to be implemented at the Reina Sofía. The question of multiple modernities is addressed by the museum's collaboration with Red Conceptualismos del Sur, a research network founded in 2007 that attempts to preserve local histories and

the political antagonism of conceptual art practices produced under the Latin American dictatorships.⁴⁷ Cooperation with this network necessarily influences how the museum acquires work from this region. Rather than buying up artists' archives, like Tate's activities in Latin America or Viennese institutions in Eastern Europe, the Reina Sofía devises new ways of operating. For example, the Chilean group CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte, 1979–1985) recently offered their archive to the Reina Sofía, lacking confidence that a Chilean institution could preserve it. The Reina Sofía paid two researchers to catalog the archive and worked to ensure that an institution in Chile would house it; in return, the museum received an exhibition copy of this archive. In the case of CADA, whose work consisted primarily of performances, actions, and interventions, the line between work of art and documentation is negligible. However, this documentary status increasingly defines the most politically engaged art of the late twentieth century.⁴⁸ In order to redefine the Reina Sofía as an 'archive of the commons', the museum is therefore attempting to legally recategorize works of art as 'documentation'.⁴⁹ This recategorization increases accessibility to works of art—for example, the public can go to the library and handle them, alongside publications, ephemera, photographs of works of art, correspondence, prints, and other textual materials.⁵⁰

Finally, education brings these activities together. The museum believes that representation of the other is not enough (for example, by collecting works from far-flung cultures) and that it needs to find new forms of mediation and solidarity between the intellectual culture of the Reina Sofía and social movements. The museum's education program, therefore, is not limited to the usual art appreciation classes for children, young adults, and students—these all continue to exist, although their content has somewhat shifted (such as the workshop "Viewing the Viewers," in which teenagers are made aware of the museum as a discursive apparatus). The muse-



Beatriz Preciado speaking at the "Somateca" seminar, part of the Programa de Prácticas Críticas, 2012–2013. Photo: Joaquín Cortés/Ramón Lores

um's education budget has been directed towards the maintenance of long-term programs, such as the "Programa de Prácticas Críticas" (Program for Advanced Studies in Critical Practices), a free six-month seminar for young artists, researchers, and activists who, due to the recession and high unemployment, constitute one of the most disaffected groups in the city.⁵¹ At the moment, public funding underwrites all these initiatives, although with the election of the right-wing People's Party in November 2011, budgets have already been slashed by eighteen percent.



Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (MSUM), Ljubljana. Photo: Dejan Habicht

VI. REPETITIONS: MSUM LJUBLJANA

My third and final model for curating the contemporary is the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, or MSUM) in Ljubljana, which opened in Autumn 2011. Designed by the Slovenian firm Groleger Arhitekti, the museum is located in Metelkova, a former military base during the Yugoslav period that was squatted in the 1990s and to some extent remains the epicenter of alternative culture in the city. The museum's director, Zdenka Badinovac, has served since 1993 as director of the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, which also administers MSUM, and her staff work across both sites. It goes without saying that the annual budget of the Moderna Galerija and MSUM is barely comparable to that of the Van Abbemuseum, much less to that of the Reina Sofía; part of the reason for including it in this essay is to show what can be done with straitened finances in a small city without a developed art system. (Ljubljana's only commercial gallery recently decamped to Berlin, where several of Slovenia's leading artists are now also based.) Unlike my first two examples, Ljubljana also offers a case study of contemporary art at the cross-section of 'multiple modernities': Slovenia only became independent in 1991 following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and is located in a region that was rapidly torn apart by ethnic conflict, most intensely in Bosnia and Croatia. The museum thus has to reconcile two conflicting

projects: the desire for nation-state representation and the obligation to hold its own in a globalized contemporary art world insistent on transnational (or even postnational) cultural production.

The question of historical representation is particularly fraught in museums throughout former Yugoslavia. When deciding how to show and collect art from the period 1945–1989, one of the central questions is whether to align with art from Western Europe, with whom—in Slovenia’s case—there was frequent contact (particularly with neighboring Italy and Austria) or to identify with art from the former Soviet bloc, with whom there was less frequent contact, but whose ideological context is more comparable to ex-Yugoslavia.⁵² The second contested area concerns the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, where the representation of history is arguably even more charged: how to acknowledge and display the trauma of conflict and genocide that ravaged this region? These questions have received vastly different answers in different parts of former Yugoslavia. In Zagreb, a vast new Museum of Contemporary Art (the MSU) opened in 2009; although it has an outstanding collection of primarily Yugoslav art from the 1960s onwards, the weight of the war is largely carried by *Šejla Kamerić’s* *Bosnian Girl* (2003), a billboard-size self-portrait with superimposed writing, taken from graffiti by a Dutch soldier near Srebrenica in 1994: “No teeth...? A mustache...? Smel (sic) like shit...? Bosnian Girl!” Dispatched in one biting but attractive billboard, the trauma of the wars barely resurfaces. In Sarajevo, by contrast, the National Gallery closed its doors in September 2011 due to lack of government support and funding, and the National Museum followed the same path in October 2012.⁵³

In Ljubljana, the first display encountered by the viewer is titled “War Time”: it includes a small anonymous documentary photograph of the occupation of Metelkova in 1993, alongside Jenny

Holzer’s *Lustmord* (1993–1994), a photo series of text on skin, alluding to the rape of Bosnian women. Thereafter, the museum’s entire display is organized around thematic categories relating to overlapping temporalities: “Ideological Time” (the socialist past), “Future Time” (unrealized modernist utopias), “The Time of the Absent Museum” (approximately the 1980s–1990s, when artists compensated for the absence of a developed art system by self-organizing and self-criticizing), “Retro Time” (the late 1990s, when artists began to self-historicize), “Lived Time” (body and performance art), “Time of Transition” (from socialism into capitalism) and “Dominant Time” (present-day global neoliberalism).⁵⁴ Contemporary art is therefore staked as a question of *timeliness*, rather than as a stage on the conveyor belt of history; the necessary condition of relevance is the presentation of multiple, overlapping temporalities, geared towards the imagination of a future in which social equality prevails.⁵⁵

These displays formed part of the museum’s inaugural hang, “The Present and Presence,” which asserted these two words as central to an understanding of contemporary art. ‘The present’ refers to the period in which Slovenia (and Europe more broadly) is now living, which started with the fall of communism. ‘Presence’, by contrast, is staked in opposition to both capitalism (seen as a return to the past) and future-oriented communism; it is not modernism’s forward march of progress, never glancing back, but a bringing into consciousness that which modernity has suppressed. One of the museum’s tasks is therefore self-reflection: the attempt to compare the ideals of Yugoslav ‘self-management’ with what Badinovac calls the “authentic interests of contemporary art.”⁵⁶ Once again, contemporaneity is staked as an antinomic relationship to temporality: unlike the Tate’s ‘something for everyone’ relativism, MSUM is committed to taking “the side of traditions that have historically proven to have emancipatory social potential.”⁵⁷ This means not only eschewing the



Installation view of IRWIN, *East Art Map* (2000–2005), part of "The Present and Presence," 2011. Photo: Dejan Habicht

big players of the contemporary art market in favor of works that expand the horizon of possibilities for collective experience, but also giving space to practices that have been historically overlooked. For example, the Moderna Galerija's display of "Art of the Partisan Resistance" presented drawings and prints by the anti-Nazi forces as equal in significance to other twentieth-century art movements.⁵⁸

When it comes to funding, the situation is dismally familiar: as a result of the 2012 election, which returned to power the neoliberal Slovenian Democratic Party, the museum has suffered dramatic cuts in cultural funding. The museum has dealt with this by *repeating* the presentation of their inaugural collection display, in a slightly expanded and revised form. "The Present and Presence—Repetition 1" justified this repetition in a five-point manifesto. The first point states the fiscal reality: due to budget cuts, no new display



Installation view of "The Body and the East Archive," part of "The Present and Presence – Repetition 1," 2012. Photo: Dejan Habicht

or catalog are possible, so recycling is necessary. Four further points argue for the appropriateness of repetition: rather than succumbing to the pressure to give consumers the new, the museum advocates the value of rereading; repetition is one of the fundamental features of contemporary art (video loops, re-enactment, etc.), so it is appropriate to repeat an entire collection display; repetition constructs history—through publications, research, the art market—so a repeated display retroactively helps to construct responses that produce history; finally, repetition is driven by trauma, and in Ljubljana this is twofold—the traumatic absence of a contemporary art system and the unrealized emancipatory ideals of communism. The museum has subsequently rehung "The Present and Presence" two more times: "Repetition 2" (October–November 2012) and "Repetition 3" (January–June 2013), focusing on movement and the street, respectively.