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symploke, Volume 22, Numbers 1-2, 2014, pp. 361-385 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

symplokē
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AUSTERITY

Volume 18 Numbers 1-2

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THE CONTEMPORIST: AN INTERVIEW WITH TERRY SMITH

JEFFREY J. WILLIAMS

What comes after modernism and postmodernism? For Terry Smith, “In the visual arts, the big story, now so blindingly obvious, is the shift—nascent during the 1950s, emergent in the 1960s, contested during the 1970s, but unmistakable since the 1980s—from modern to contemporary,” as he puts it in *What Is Contemporary Art?* (2009). Surveying painting, sculpture, architecture, and installations from around the world, Smith finds that there are three wings of contemporary art: first, the after-effects of modernism, notably “retro-sensationalism,” like the outsized sculptures of Jeff Koons; second, the transnational turn, with the flourishing of art throughout the world; and third, the mediated, participatory, and networked culture of a younger generation. In several books over the past decade, including *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (2011) and *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012) as well as *What Is Contemporary Art?*, Smith explains where we are now.

Smith began his career writing on modern art, notably in *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America* (1993), which shows the links between art and industrial production in Detroit, with design serving to make modernism normal. Australian by birth, Smith first caught the attention of the art world with an essay, “The Provincialism Problem” in *Artforum* (Sept. 1974), and he has written a good deal on Australian art, including the modern and postmodern chapters of the textbook, *Australian Painting 1788-2000*, 4th ed. (2001), and *Transformations in Australian Art*, 2 vols. (2002). He has also examined modern and contemporary architecture, particularly after 9/11, in *The Architecture of Aftermath* (2006).

In addition, he has edited or co-edited more than a dozen books (many stemming from his directing the Power Institute of Art of the University of Sydney), such as *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith* (1980); *Constructing Australian Art: Eight Critiques* (1986); *In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity* (1997); *First People, Second Chance: The Humanities and Aboriginal Australia* (1999); *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era* (2001); *Jacques Derrida, Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars* (2001, with Paul Patton); *Contemporary Art + Philanthropy: Public*

Spaces/Private Funding: Foundations for Contemporary Art (2007); *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (2008, with Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee).

Born in 1944, Smith did his undergraduate work at the University of Melbourne (BA, 1967), afterward serving as a tutor at the University of Sydney. In 1972-3, he held a Harkness Fellowship at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York in 1972-3, studying with Meyer Schapiro, among others. Returning to Australia, he earned his MA at the University of Sydney with a thesis on "American Abstract Expressionism: Ethical Attitudes and Moral Function" (1976), and then took a position as a lecturer at the Power Institute. He also spent a year at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in 1979, which prompted the idea for his dissertation on modernism and industry. At the Power Institute, he rose to Power Professor of Contemporary Art and Director, moving in 2001 to University of Pittsburgh as a Mellon Professor, although he regularly returns to Australia. He serves on several museum boards, including the Andy Warhol Museum and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.

This interview took place on 8 October 2013 in Terry Smith's office in the Frick Fine Arts Building at the University of Pittsburgh. It was conducted and edited by Jeffrey J. Williams, a professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, and transcribed by Jacob Goessling, a PhD student in the literary and cultural studies program at Carnegie Mellon.

Jeffrey J. Williams: In a nutshell, what is the contemporary?

Terry Smith: Oh god, that's a big question. "The contemporary" is a strange locution, like saying "the modern." It indicates that the person using it is putting it in quotation marks and is provisional about it, so already the term is contested in some essential way. It can be adjectival—"the contemporary fill-in-the-blank"—or a noun. If you name a museum of contemporary art, which people have done all over the world since the 1990s, it describes what it does—it's not a museum of modern art or masterpiece art or traditional art—whereas in art-world discourse people use "the contemporary" trying to find something that won't sign them up for capital C. A., official Contemporary Art, the kind that is driven by the art market. They are looking for something deeper and asking an existential question, "What is it to be contemporary?" So I'm not going to be able to give you a nutshell answer because the question suggests the opposite of that.

What I've tried to do in my recent writing is to register the fact that there are dominant institutional definitions of contemporary art out there. They primarily do two things that are actually wrong and misleading. The first is that they ask everyone to subscribe to what I call "superficial contemporaneity," a kind of flat-world, Thomas Friedman-style acceptance of the present that is generated by globalization. It's profoundly unthought;

it's actually against criticism and about acceptance of whatever seems the most up to date.

The second thing is the distribution of cultural power, which asks you to accept that contemporary art is whatever the major museums, markets, magazines, publicity machines, and auction houses tell you that it is. It's not institutional as a secondary effect but a primary effect of those institutions. It's very narrowing and exclusivist. The key instances are if you look at auction house markets for modern and contemporary art, particularly auction house sales that sell up to a hundred works of art, but usually by ten or twenty artists. The whole point of the auction system is to feed particular works by artists into that system towards the top, because the ones that go at the very top sell for millions and millions of dollars. They are works literally by a list of twenty or so artists, whose works become more and more exclusive. It's actually a money laundering system. But that's a whole other story.

JJW: Really? How so?

TS: It is. That's why you have new markets appearing all over the world, and they are led by people who have made money, often not by legitimate means, in Russia and in India and so on. You only need one or two objects to relate to vast amounts of money, which you can then distribute through the same group of people by reselling. If you resell the work after you've given it the value of X amount of money, then you're able to shift that amount of money to another person in that system. It's not precisely laundering, perhaps, and not yet illegal, but it is about recycling objects between a relatively small number of people, mostly hedge funders and gangsters, for vast amounts of money.

The point I'm making is that this is a system that is structurally exclusive. Similarly, museums can only have four or five one-person shows a year. You can look at the way different kinds of art exhibitions are organized as a system of exclusion. So contemporary art then becomes known to the general public as the kind of art made by the people who are very prominent in the system. It doesn't matter about its qualities as art.

So what I'm against is the superficial leveling and layering and the massive concentrated hierarchies of cultural power of the contemporary art world. My effort to think about contemporaneity is to draw attention to the world that underlies all of this, which is the contemporaneity of difference, of different kinds of difference. Difference brings out the essential quality of contemporaneity, which is to be "with time," *con tempus*, with others, in time, at the same time—but also with awareness that the sense of time of every individual, and every group, every society, every tribe, every historical moment or epoch is essentially different. So what we have is the contemporaneity of different temporalities as experienced by individuals and by individuals in groups, families, clusters. True contemporaneity is the contemporaneity of different types of difference, and the coexistence or

co-temporality of different kinds of difference, which gives us a concept that is much richer than the flat-layered sense of the up-to-date contemporary, or the hierarchy that is very structured and exclusive.

There's a trivial sense that every individual has her own contemporaneity, but at any given time and place there will be a limited number of cotemporalities in play with each other. The ones that make sense are the ones that cluster and shape relationships and move forward and change things, and there are usually only a few of those at any given time and any given place.

JJW: I see what you mean — to say that there are many differences doesn't mean that it's limitless.

TS: No, it doesn't. I'm also against the idea of "anything goes," the postmodern idea of total fragmentation. I'm against ideas that anyone can be an artist or that anything can be art. In a trivial sense, this can be true, but they don't accumulate in any consequential way. To be able to speak historically or to establish any kind of meaning, you have to be able to identify consequence, or differences that make a difference and things that actually shape relationships. You need to be able to describe that, and that's what I mean by contemporaneity.

To me, the contemporary points us towards the condition of being in the world for everybody now, and it does so in a way that hadn't been possible before at that level of generality. It doesn't add up to a totality and it recognizes particularities without subsuming them. It stands against the previous dominant narrative of modernity because it allows for narratives that are focused, special and located, but it doesn't allow for an overall narrative. It may be that we are facing a situation where we'll never again have an overarching narrative of the kind that we had with modernity or with all the great religious stories, or the belief systems of indigenous peoples, which have fantastic originary power and explanations of continuity and ways of absolving difference. What we have in the world today, in any way we look — at the geopolitical level, in economics, the arts, philosophy and so on — is a present that is saturated with ruins. We have a plethora of powerful stories out there, all of them claiming to be universal.

JJW: How would you distinguish your sense of the contemporary from the usual connotations of postmodernism? Jameson obviously has one influential version, and many people think we are still in a postmodern age. How would you distinguish your argument from Jameson's or from the view of art history that we are still in the era of postmodernism?

TS: Pamela M. Lee has written a book called *Forgetting the Art World* where she made a strong argument for not giving up on postmodernity because if you do, she argues, you lose the ability to critique the capitalist system and its various forms, which is basically Jameson's position. Since the

eighties Fred has developed this profound critique of the cultural logic of late capitalism as a narrativizing form, which was to me very convincing for its moment. But I suppose the step I'm taking is, what if even the most critical and flexible readings of postmodernity—which are Fred's and also David Harvey's—still depend on a set of basic world conditions, and explanations of cause and effect, displaced but still determinant, that no longer hold as a totalizing description? Personally, I would prefer if those explanations still held because I prefer a sense of social determination, although I also have a commitment to relativism.

What I'm trying to do is come up with an explanation of the state of world-being that tries to face the fragility of even the most subtle and complex accounts of the relationship between “late capital” and culture and thought. I think the other key element is the recognition that globalization is a useful term for a set of economic and social and other cultural forces that were identified in the seventies but really took hold in the eighties and nineties, but since then has overextended itself and is failing around the world. If you take 2008 as the time when the idea of globalization as a world-dominating set of forces came apart—it's really only held up by the governments producing money to keep it going—it's amazingly fragile. On the level of the relationship between the governance of major countries and economic management, which is really the thing that dominates the world system, a contemporaneity of difference is operating there.

If I had to identify the biggest difference between myself and my friends and colleagues, many of whom are Marxists or neo-Marxists, it would be that I don't believe that so-called capitalism is a system. It's a series of wishful projections on the part of the mad men who are running the thing. In any case, you can see that contemporaneity cries out for a description that isn't thirty or forty years old. The best descriptions of postmodernity, like Fred's, come from 1984, and since then we've had 1989, 2001, 2008.

JJW: What led to your discovery of the contemporary? It strikes me in reading your work that up to about 2000, you were still primarily talking about postmodernity. You wrote the latter chapters of the textbook *Australian Painting*, and in the 2000 edition you are still talking about postmodernism. What changed your mind? I assume it probably happened over a bit of time, but was there a moment? Was there a catalyst or hinge?

TS: That's a good question. In the chapters in *Australian Painting* that I did for Bernard Smith, there is one called “Postmodern Painting” and another on the contemporary Aboriginal art movement, so in a way I was talking about postmodern plurality at that point, which was the conventional wording in the art discourse at the time. Hal Foster made a great critique of pluralism under the heading of “the critique of anything goes.” Once you get into “anything goes,” criticism or criticality goes out the window, so he critiques that idea on the grounds of what he calls resistant postmodernism

or critical postmodernism. To me, that very debate was one of the signs of a shifting.

But to really get to your point, the difference between those two chapters is that white Australian artists, not indigenous Australian artists, were doing a kind of work that exaggerated a provincial distance from New York and England and Europe, where all the main art world energy was at that time. Being white settlers, their whole art discourse and marketing connected with those metropolitan centers, subject to what I called in an essay in *Artforum* in 1974 "the provincialist bind," which was a description of a world system of art. To be a non-indigenous person and a modern artist, the only way out of that condition was in fact to take on postmodern ideas of pastiche and parody and exaggerate your condition of being provincial. So you only made works out of images that were already produced by artists from Europe or American and you appropriated images from everywhere, and then you used Aboriginal imagery to be even more Australian.

The other chapter was on contemporary Australian Aboriginal art. The so-called contemporary white Australian art is postmodern pluralism, and, interestingly, Aboriginal art is contemporary with that art. That's the ordinary sense of being "contemporary with." Ian McLean has written some wonderful stuff about all these issues, and he's just produced a book called *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, which is a provocative exaggeration, but in Australian art discourse the word "contemporary" was used for Aboriginal art before it was used for non-indigenous art. Partly, it's because indigenous art was regarded as either traditional or contemporary but not modern. You can look at auction catalogs, you can look at books to see this—indigenous people were not understood as being capable of producing modern art.

To me, all these shifts of terms are indicative of a much larger change from modern to contemporary through the passage of the postmodern. From my point of view, virtually all the most significant signs of postmodernity are the first signs of the shift to our condition of contemporaneity. Nearly all of them open up the coexistence of inexplicable differences. Fred is a master of profiling the shifting tectonic plates, describing the edges and crevices of the whole of modernity as it crumbles, whereas Žižek and Agamben, and hopefully myself, try to describe the shape of this other place.

My sense of it is that it's more like an ocean. It's not another plate; it will have shapes as flows moving through it. This is, I suppose, the largest philosophical aspect of what we are talking about. For me, what's called deconstruction signals this shift at the level of human thought, of what it is to think. To me, the conjunction of all the forces that we have been talking about is generating a sort of volcano explosion, from tectonic plates into unknowable seas of something else, generating different modes of thinking. Deconstruction is just at the beginning of the edge of seeing what they are. Deconstruction operates by producing dialectics that, instead of resolving, spill out supplements. That's its essential movement of thought, to push the

dialectic back against its inclination toward generating another coherency, or even a suspension. A lot of Derrida's work generates suspensions, but I think particularly towards the end he was trying to make the disjunctions between the dialectic and supplementarity operate on justice, truth, or the older clusters of thought and value, such as friendship, in order to produce different conditions of relation.

But I hadn't figured it out when I did the chapters of Bernard's book. Also, towards the end of *Transformations of Australian Art*, there is a chapter about the relationship between indigenous art and non-indigenous art as being a kind of irresolvable open-endedness, and I end up with a metaphor of the relationship between the two being something like the DNA helix, but more like the dog circling around the campfire. Every remote, indigenous community in Australia, at the campfire, has dogs that are just in and out and in and out. They are usually kicked and they're scrawny, and sometimes they get eaten—there are all sorts of different ways of being a dog around a campfire.

JJW: So in some ways your coming upon the contemporary came out of your view of the postmodern. Was there a turning point?

TS: The tipping point that made me feel that I was onto something bigger than contemporary art discourse, which was trapped into this superficial view of contemporaneity and a power-laden idea of being contemporary, was discussions I had with Jacques Derrida. He'd been in Australia in 1999 to give lectures at the Power Institute in Sydney (we did a little book based on it). We had wonderful conversations in the Sydney town hall with two thousand people—it was just fantastic. Then, when I was in Europe in 2000, Derrida invited me up to Paris and we had a wonderful conversation. I could only go up for a day, but I was explaining to him a project I was going to do at the Getty Research Institute, and then I started to talk to him about the qualities of being contemporary and the possibility of a pure contemporaneity. I benefitted from the enormous capacity for friendship and generosity that the man had, which continued through until the end of his life.

I felt that postmodern explanations weren't accounting for what was happening in contemporary art, its incredible diversity and the rest of it that I could see. I started to see three different ways of approaching contemporary art as generated by its own institutions, as generated by the shift in artistic practice away from being based in mediums towards intermediality. Then there was the fact that art was coming from all over the world and it was very different in character. So it had these incommensurabilities, or the coexistence of incommensurably different kinds of art in the world. I talked to him about the contemporaneity of differences, or the coexistence of incommensurable difference, and he said something like, "Terry, that is probably true, but you can't have a pure idea of contemporaneity. That would be impossible." He went on to say, "Could you have a pure love? You can certainly have the

desire for it, and at certain moments you can have the sense that you have it, but, right then, it's always already over." That triggered in me the thought that being contemporary could somehow possibly be a larger condition.

JJW: So instead of the postmodern condition, the contemporary condition?

TS: Yes. In contemporary art, an earlier idea was the expanded field of art. Sculpture now became an expanded field, architecture too, according to Anthony Vidler. It explains what happened to medium-based art practice since the 1970s.

JJW: That's part of what Rosalind Krauss lays out in "Sculpture as an Expanded Field," as well as in the big text she wrote with several other people, *Art Since 1900*.

TS: Yes, in that essay, which is a famous one in art criticism, she's thinking of earthworks and installations, for instance, Richard Serra's works in the 1960s and 70s and what we call post-studio work. But if you ask, "What do you mean by a field?" it doesn't tell you much about how or why it's doing that. It was an influential idea in the eighties but I wanted a stronger idea. So in 2001, I gave a lecture at the University of Sydney called "Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity, and Art to Come." It's Derrida's idea of democracy as *l'avenir*, that which is to come, that I took and applied to art. So, in the year 2000, if you had asked me, "What is contemporary art?" I would have said that it is art to come, and then I would stop.

JJW: In *Art Since 1900*, as I take it—obviously I'm not in the field, but I'm an interested outsider—Krauss and her co-authors see modern and post-modern art, rather than being painting based, is moving more to installation, which changes how we look at the history of art. In that book, it seems to me that they are still invested in postmodernism, although they see the shift to installations as a mark of the contemporary.

TS: *Art Since 1900* is the product of four authors, each of whom is absolutely expert in their field, all of whom are major innovators in thinking about twentieth-century art from different perspectives that they lay out in the beginning—psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, formalist, and the social history of art. In part because of their role as editors of *October* magazine, they have produced generations of students, and they have different versions of a critical postmodernism that operate very well for the art of the eighties, as well as for the innovators of the sixties who continue to work through this whole period.

The other thing about contemporary art is that you have an overlapping of generations, with people living longer and being productive longer, still

making good art, particularly in this country with the rise of the finances supporting the arts. Artists of achievement can realize their projects much more often, at much larger, sometimes monumental scale, than they ever could except for the great masters in the most concentrated centers of power in the world. So there is a huge quantitative factor operating, and a longevity factor too. You have a contemporaneity of generations, so in effect you've got powerful work being done according to an agenda that was set forty years ago and continues to be revised, disrupted and dispersed, and growing in scale and global reach all the time. These conditions on the ground are different than ever before in terms of the visual arts.

In terms of art historical descriptions, you can't be historical about contemporary art if you are an "anything goes" postmodernist. However, if you are a critical postmodernist, you can and must be historical in your take. It's the recognition of the power of historical forces and the resistance against them that gives you the basis of criticism. People have maintained for forty years now this critical postmodernism as the overall description of the state that we are in, even though contemporary art, from all over the world in what I call "transnational transitions" and in all the art images by younger people collectively on the Internet, all these other currents of art practices have in fact moved on from that framework and are now in a different state.

I introduced three hypotheses to describe this condition in *What is Contemporary Art?*, which follows the lecture from 2000 that I told you about, and I elaborated them throughout that decade. That, and the postmodernism account, are the two accounts that are out there, although a couple more have started to appear to describe the situation and relate it to changes in the history of thought and philosophy, for instance Peter Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* that just came out. It's a very Heideggerian take on the remodernism that I identify as an aspect of Western contemporary art.

Alongside such attempts to theorize contemporary art there is an important art historical enterprise going on now, which is to look back at the histories of art in localities in, say, Brazil and Argentina, which had strong and innovative modernist traditions that impacted on European art. This enterprise also takes us to, say, Uruguay and Guatemala, where there were relatively few modern artists working, yet some widely influential ones in regional terms. The point is to write those histories so that the twentieth century doesn't have an art history that goes mainly through Europe and America but actually comes out of the whole world.

JJW: That's interesting in how it revises our idea of modernism. To start your career, you worked on modernism, one fruit of which is your book *Making the Modern*. Modernism loomed over art as well as literature and music for a good part of the century. Maybe you could talk about your path through modernism.

TS: It goes back to the late sixties in Australia where, in 1968, I got my first job as a tutor, as it is called there. When the Power Institute of Fine Arts, as it was then known, was founded by Bernard Smith, the main art historian in Australia, he wanted to establish an art history department on the model of the Courtauld in London, so there was no teaching of modern art or contemporary art or Australian art. It covered the history of art, almost entirely Western, leading up to the early twentieth century, sometimes a bit further forward with the other faculty.

The key factor, which is relevant to my whole career, was that the department was founded at the bequest of a man named John Power. John Power was a young scion of a medical family, who was sent to England during the First World War to work as a doctor. He inherited a fortune from his father and didn't have to practice from that point, so he decided to become a painter. He actually was quite a good cubist painter of a sort—he exhibited with Léger on one or two occasions—and then died on the Isle of Jersey during the Nazi occupation. Twenty years later, the University of Sydney found itself the beneficiary of the biggest bequest it had ever had, with only one instruction, which I'll quote to you, "Bring the latest ideas and series concerning contemporary art to the people of Australia, and build galleries and lecture halls for that purpose." Millions of dollars were devoted to this, and it gave a charter to the department.

JJW: Which, in retrospect, is what you have fulfilled with regard to the contemporary.

TS: I've tried to. The will was probably written in the 1920s, and he never came back to Australia, but he remembered his childhood and understood that Australia was deprived of its contemporaneity with the kind of art that was happening in Paris and London. For him, it was not just the latest works of art, but the latest ideas that were important. By ideas, he meant ideas about geometry, purity, and truth that abstract art in particular could bring to the world, so he was a pure modernist in that sense, but he used the word contemporary, as they did during that time, to mean contemporaneous.

So Bernard established the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art on the Sydney campus and was first chair of the art history department. Many years later, I served as professor of contemporary art and changed the title of the institute to the Power Institute for Art and Visual Culture--the first anywhere to use this title, I believe. We turned the gallery into the Museum of Contemporary Art, which we established in 1989 on Circular Quay, in the heart of Sydney. The opening exhibitions at the MCA featured contemporary art from around the world, from New Zealand and from Aboriginal art, and also new media art. It was all shown at once and all presented as contemporary, which is normal now but was unusual in 1989.

Anyway, I was a tutor to the lecturers and gradually we introduced courses on modern art. At the same time, I was an art critic for national

newspapers, so on a weekly basis I wrote art criticism for *The Nation Review*, which was based on *The Nation* and came out every week. Eventually I ended up being the art critic for *The Australian*, which was run by Rupert Murdoch at that point. I lasted about a year there, until 1971 or 72 when I wrote a very sympathetic review of an artist who was attacking the Australian involvement in the war in Vietnam. Murdoch said, "that's enough, no more, sack him." He had been complaining about me all year because I was writing increasingly political art columns. I also reproduced a painting of the My Lai massacre, based on the photographs of the dead children and putting Lieutenant Calley's statement next to it, "They were just kids, babies, and yeah, we shot them all." So I wrote the review and also made a direct attack on the Australian government for its involvement in it, and Murdoch said, "That is not art criticism. That is a political statement. Sack him."

JJW: That's a title for a memoir, "Rupert Murdoch and Me." And at the time you were teaching at Sydney?

TS: Yes, we taught critical histories of modernism in many different parts of the world. At that point, the narrative was dominated by formalists, European and American. Bernard Smith had brought out Clement Greenberg, in 1968, as the very first John Power Memorial Lecturer, and he gave a lecture with the title "Avant-Garde Attitudes." His argument was that the avant-garde consists entirely of attitudes and not real art making. Real artists, by which he meant modernists, made work that had the force, power, and conviction of what he called "Old Master Art." He was going backwards through the twentieth century and tossing artists out of the canon, and he regarded pop artists and conceptual artists as illegitimate. They were all the artists that I was writing about, was friendly with and talking about on a daily basis. So one of my first critical essays was an attack on that lecture, published about a month later in a local journal, and a big debate ensued.

However, we were actually quite friendly for a while. When I came to New York a couple years later on a Harkness Fellowship, in late 1972, he was one of my points of contact. At that time, Greenberg welcomed people coming from elsewhere in the world and was kind of a mentor to them—for example, John Elderfield, who had a wonderful career at the Museum of Modern Art. He was an English guy who was in town at the same time, and Greenberg looked after him. The point is that the New York art world at that time was just a few hundred people and young arrivals. You could meet anyone—you just rang them up. Everyone was open-minded and interested in everybody else because anybody could have a great idea, and a lot of people did have wonderful ideas. It was a genuinely avant-garde situation of relatively few people producing the most extreme and extraordinary work they could imagine in intense competition with each other, but also in cooperation with each other. Slightly older people like Robert Morris, and

Sol LeWitt especially, would look after artists no matter where they came from, as they had been helped by John Cage and other people.

About Greenberg, we would go to exhibitions together, which was a very interesting thing to do. I was critical of formalism as an overall system but I really appreciated the concentrated focus on how form is actually achieved. One way of looking at art is to try to imagine form taking shape, or what I call formlessness becoming form. Art critics from that period would look at a work and try to imagine, literally, how it was made through its stages until it arrived at where it did. You also could look at why, what were the motivations, what was the context, and how it all adds up into meaning. Greenberg didn't do the rest of it, but he was very good at the first part.

I understood, having read his early writings, particularly when he was struggling with how to write about people like Jackson Pollock, where what he called "primitive incoherence" comes from. In his first essays about Pollock, you could tell the guy was in a state of shock. He registered how important and powerful this work was but didn't have the language for it for a couple of years. For Greenberg, form was a matter of feeling—not in some general way, but gut-wrenching passion. We went to the Metropolitan in late '72, early '73, to look at a retrospective exhibition by Clyfford Still. They had one or two of his early social realist-type works that no one ever sees, but it quickly got into his great works, the great textures of agonizing surfaces, and then moved to some of his very big pictures from the fifties. So, here we were, standing in front of this large, riveting picture and it's got this massive black and white craggy structure with stretches of red coming down, like a Grand Canyon. And up in the top right-hand corner, there was a horizontal stripe of yellow. Greenberg was almost visibly shaken. He said, "Look at that yellow! That's evil! That yellow is evil!" I look at him, astonished. "Terry, if you can't see that it's a total moral lapse to put that yellow there in just that way, that's it for us." He walked away. I was gone, dismissed—that was the end of the relationship and we never spoke again. He would do this regularly, so I was told.

So, questions of modernism were coming up for me in lots and lots of ways—through the art historical narratives we were teaching that were mainly formalist and not adequate for what was going on. Artists were making work that people like Greenberg and Fried just hated and couldn't deal with. In fact, it was getting to the point among conceptual artists that they would say, "Let's imagine a work that Michael Fried would hate so much that he would never recognize it as a work of art and throw up as soon as he saw it," and they would make that work.

JJW: It must have been very exciting to be on the scene at that point. Also, in Australia, you were not only teaching but also putting together exhibits or involved with contemporary artists.

TS: The sixties in Australia was an economic boom time. None of us were privileged but we were the sixties generation, beneficiaries of developmentalist economics, yet deeply critical of the culture, particularly as the country went towards war, started introducing inequities into the culture, and didn't recognize indigenous people. All those things were points of critique.

I was on scholarships all the way through, and I was also fortunate in terms of art in Sydney. For instance, in the late sixties or seventies, each week you could find in the local newspapers, magazines, and journals seven different art critics writing about what was going on in art at that time. It was a very rich scene. We were involved in building alternative art spaces and creating an art infrastructure that was very energetic, and the Power Institute, which was the second department of art history in Australia after the one in Melbourne, was founded in 1968, and it had fantastic energy, with its charter to bring international art and its ideas to Australia on a constant basis.

JJW: So were people focused on modernism or not quite sure what the next step was?

TS: There wasn't thought of the next step in a big sense; there was only thought of the next avant-garde within modernism. Remember, this is a pre-postmodern moment. One of the reasons I think people hold on so persistently to modernisms and even postmodernism is the fact that we had a hundred years of avant-garde groups successfully transforming the practice of art, wave after wave, place after place, again and again. Think about it: from the 1860s up to the 1960s or 1970s somewhere in the world, usually in Europe or America, some group of artists literally raised the stakes again and again and again. So the late sixties and early seventies were still a moment of that possibility. That's why Greenberg was saying by the sixties that that was gone, and pop art, minimal art, happenings, and all were destroying the future possibility of the avant-garde. Fried as well, and Rosalind Krauss at that point, even though she changed her mind within a few years. Imagine being a part of a small group of people who personally knew that what they were doing had the chance of transforming all of art—not just have a little local impact or introduce a new style, but actually transform art as such. One of the recognitions made obvious by postmodernism was that the avant-garde dream was over.

That happened more in New York, but in Australia in the sixties, I worked with a group of painters who did hard-edge abstract painting. It wasn't very coherent, but they were hoping to achieve for the first time in Australian art an avant-garde breakthrough. That's the other thing—provincial art producing centers were hardly ever the places that produced avant-garde breakthroughs. An exception would be St. Petersburg in 1910, around the

time of the revolution in Russia. Most of the other changes—at least the ones everyone paid attention to—happened in Paris or New York.

JJW: Although of course many of the artists migrated there, as still happens now.

TS: That's true. That's where the centers get their energy; they always suck it up from the provinces, which is what my mentor Bernard Smith pointed out in his book called *Modernism's History*.

JJW: So you came back to Australia in the mid-1970s, and also you went to Birmingham in 1979. You were in some key places. Did that have an effect on your view of modernism?

TS: In 1975, I got back and I taught at the Preston Art School in Melbourne and at Melbourne University for about a year. That was the time of the dismissal of the Whitlam government, the Australian Labor Party, by the Governor-General, which was an important moment in Australia. It was an intensely political moment, and conservatives come into power in Australia for quite a while.

I then went back to Sydney, teaching again at the Power Institute as a lecturer (which is like an associate professor here), in charge of the course on modern art and contemporary art, which was the introductory course. Every student who came into the department, which was about four hundred students each year, began with modern and contemporary art, then went back to the Renaissance and worked through the history.

In 1979, I went to Birmingham because I was profoundly interested in the history of the labor movement. After being in the Art & Language group in New York, which had become involved in direct political action and was working with various groups that would now be called terrorist, we decided that, as well as teaching at the university, it would be important to apply some of the knowledge that we had as artists to the political movements and the trade unions movement in Australia. So we started the organization called Union Media Services, which redesigned their journals, organized parades, repainted their banners, helped them do publicity for television, and so on. We applied the principles of art magazine design to union newspapers—for example, 60% images to 40% text instead of 10% images and 90% text. It was incredibly successful and became what's called the Art and Working Life Movement, which was supported by government cultural agencies. We had trade union arts officers in all the main trade union offices throughout the country, seven or eight of them. I went to Birmingham as part of that.

JJW: How had you encountered it?

TS: In the later seventies, the Power Institute was publishing material and students formed a magazine called *Local Consumption*, and we had Meaghan

Morris, who was at that point writing art and film criticism for a local newspaper. Also, given the embedment of the Australian intellectual system in England, nearly everybody up until the sixties went there to do their degree. In fact, in many departments in Australia, you couldn't do PhDs. Indeed, Bernard wanted me to do that, and that's why he sent me to do my Masters in New York. The structure was very colonial.

But my instinct after the experience in New York was to go to Birmingham because my goal was to write a history of trade union banners. The history of the imagery surrounding the trade union movement in Australia and in England goes back to the mid-nineteenth century or even earlier, with workers' associations and groups. It's a very rich visual tradition in terms of banners, emblems, and certificates of membership. I was into the history of the workers' movement and bringing it up to the present, so I went to Birmingham to develop the theoretical background to help do that. Richard Johnson and a couple of other people at Birmingham were on a similar track, trying to apply Foucauldian notions of contingent histories to the labor movement and labor and capital relations.

My year there was wonderful. I met Stuart Hall, who was in his last year as director, and he was handing it over to Richard Johnson as director. We had terrific people—Michael Green, Angela McRobbie, Simon Watney, Paul Willis. We had a seminar on social amnesia and social memory. I worked on the 1926 general strike, which many people remember in terms of four or five images in the *London Illustrated News*. But it turned out I couldn't go on with that topic because one of my colleagues in Australia had already signed up for it.

When I came back to Australia I decided to write a PhD comparing different kinds of modernist art practices that had evolved in every country in the world during the twentieth century. I was terribly struck by the inequities built into a situation where, in my point of view, Australian artists had produced some works that were comparable to any works produced anywhere, but they were never going to be recognized. There was also the important distinction that those works did not add up to a tradition of an avant-garde; they didn't add up to a modernism in the narrow but demanding sense that Greenberg and others offered, to actually transform art practice as such.

JJW: In "The Provincialism Problem," you compare Pollock and an Australian artist and note how, though they have similar work, everyone knows Pollock but no one knows the Australian artist.

TS: Sidney Nolan. I said something like their achievement is comparable, at least in their early work, and Nolan is regarded as a great Australian artist whereas Pollock is regarded as a great artist. It's the question of consequence, a battle for appropriate acknowledgment, which a provincial artist will always lose unless you revise the history and entire narrative, which is what

is going on now. But it has only been going on for the last ten or fifteen years as an outcome of recognizing contemporaneous difference.

For instance, Diego Rivera is just as good a synthetic cubist painter as Picasso—he made a distinction between the analytic cubism that Picasso and Braque did, and synthetic cubism that they did a few years later when they synthesized work from other traditions—and he did a series of paintings, particularly portraits and some still lifes, that are absolutely stunning. There's one of Zapata that is totally amazing. He's as good as Braque, as good as Léger and others, at the same time and in the same place. But it's only very recently that people have registered this fact.

Of course, in Mexico he's not known for those works but for his murals, which are much more relevant. They're great and fine, but profoundly anachronistic. They constitute mainline modern art for Mexico during that period; it would be ridiculous to do cubist paintings for the National Palace. The modern and revolutionary painting in Mexico by Siqueiros, Orozco, and Rivera is fantastic work, but there is no point in comparing it to Picasso or Pollock, because it's a different kind of work.

JJW: How did you come to write *Making the Modern*?

TS: At first I was going to systematize how every country in the world has modernism, and I was trying to get at why the system was so inequitable. Why is one modernism regarded as less important? I presumed that the answer would come from being able to produce an adequate account of the relationship between the base of the social forces and the art practice that was part of the superstructure. In other words, I had a Marxist understanding of that relationship and I was looking to see the relationship between society in general and the art, what were the art-society relationships in each of these places, and how distinctive local modernisms were generated.

There were fragments but no adequate answer to that question. Bernard Smith made a bit of a start on Australia in one of his very first books, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, but that was published in 1945. My supervisors, at that point Virginia Spate and a philosopher, John Burnheim, said, "That's a fantastic idea, but you should start with the United States because, as you keep saying, mass production started there and that probably had an impact." Good advice, so I started thinking that I would get it done in a few months and then I would go on to Russia, Italy, and around the world, and finally do Australia and it would all be clear. But of course it took ten years and I only did the United States.

In a way, the provincial problem essay was about the contemporary art world as an inequitable world system, and *Making the Modern* was a profile of the ways in which transformations in the social base by capital in the United States had their impacts in the superstructures and produced the visual image of modernity—not of modernism but of modernity, that incorporated modernist art imagery within it.

JJW: I thought it explained the design power of modernism. It made modernism normal so that it became the standard of taste through the middle of the century. The flip side is that modernism made industry natural, too, so it's not just that the base affected the superstructure but the superstructure made the base more palatable.

TS: Modernism had the effect of making everything around it that wasn't it look uncannily old fashioned. That's a modern effect. In my own personal experience, when my family could afford a television set in 1956, everything else evaporated backwards in time. One object from the future, as it were, would have this incredible effect on anything anywhere near it. People forget that, in this country, electrification was just spreading during the 1930s and was not fully achieved until after the war in many parts. The dominant population in many regions was peasants from Europe who didn't have electricity right up until the Second World War. It's as if every time something was designed and put out for purchase, it had the instant effect of being present throughout the whole culture, and moved from being extraordinary in and of itself to establishing normality.

But my argument overall was that the New Deal operation was an effort to normalize not modernism in the narrow art world sense, but a modern outlook. I argue that the New Deal was in fact a deal between the corporations and the Roosevelt administration. Marshall Berman was a reader of my dissertation and he told me that, when he came to that part, he threw it across the room in anger. He was pissed off because I hadn't recognized the progressive character of the Roosevelt administration and what they did. I was being too smart-ass New Left Marxist about saying it was already a defeated enterprise before it really was, and he was right about that.

JJW: Throughout your career you've had a sense of the provinces and how they articulate with the center, in modernism as well as the contemporary. One of the elements that defines the contemporary for you is particularly the transnational, and also the currents outside the mainstream.

TS: My model of the provincialism problem came out of the experience of being in the Sydney art world, but also the critiques that were being developed in the seventies in Wallerstein's world-systems theory and Samir Amin's center and periphery theory, which is about Africa, compared to Wallerstein's view from Europe. The provincialism problem essay opposes the situation for artists in cultural dependencies to those in so-called centers, but argues that they feed each other and in fact amount to a system. Since that time it's obvious that what has driven the visual arts, what's created the international circuit of biennials and has really made them work and operate, has been these transnational transitions. The energies from what used to be

the provinces or peripheries have turned the world of art practice to such an extent that they are now dominant.

They are in dialectical relation. They are still currents that came out of modernity and the relations that held during modernity, which was a period of colonization that has not finished, although it has certainly changed form. We don't have the classic European imperialist model nearly as dominant as it once was, but we have residuals of it, and we also have the huge movement of peoples from the ex-colonies into the centers of Europe and the United States for the past thirty years. The transformation in the art world parallels that, and often literally expresses that. Those artists aren't turning their backs on their own culture; they are going back to make stuff there, they are building infrastructure there, they are creating art works there, so it's a circuitry much more than one-way traffic. It's two-way, not equal by any means, but much more so than it had been. This is what I call iconogeographic turning of the world: the world is being turned not only by the spread of images of this transformation, but by literal trafficking of people and art works.

One consequence is, if you go to any of the international biennials (except for a few of the more reactionary ones), the majority of work will be from somewhere else in the world. You could say that the provincialism problem has been solved, if you were a total blind optimist like *Candide*. But the problem is everyone's problem now—it's out there, it's not something that can be dismissed from above.

Art produced in consciously postcolonial circumstances, if it's too overt about that, runs the risk of exoticizing its own condition rather than offering a critique at the same time. So there are demands on good practice in serious art coming from these conditions. I call it the "transnational transition" because it moves between nations, but it also puts the idea of nationality into a transitional state. Nations haven't gone away; globalization is not going to get rid of them. The question about the contemporaneity of difference is, will their transitionality increase? It probably will. Will it go on forever? Possibly; it will go on for a long while, and "the future," if you can actually think such a thing nowadays, will consist of transitions and probably not much else. The idea of the future, which in one form was a communist future and in another total capitalist happiness for everyone, are just not available anymore. We have disaster scenarios that replace them, or catastrophic kinds of planetary collapse.

JJW: I want to ask you one more question about Australia. You are obviously very conscious of Aboriginal art, and in your chapters in *Australian Painting* and your textbook, *Transformation in Australian Art*, you devote significant space to it. In a sense, it illustrates your idea of contemporaneity, since it's not just folk art but going on at the same time as other art, and illustrates how difference is a fundamental element of the field now.

TS: Folk art was what the Europeans understood contemporary Australian Aboriginal art to be, and that's why, for example, it wasn't allowed into the Cologne Art Fair right up until the 1990s. The word "folk" is a European construct for peasants, or crude versions of us, whereas indigenous people are the first people that were there. That's a profoundly different concept that makes you want to throw up, with the European condescension to indigenous art that you get in that term.

There is no more striking experience of difference than what I've had in the central Australian desert. I can't go into details because it's secret information, but I was given a glimpse of an Aboriginal elder's vision and understanding of what a particular desert place consisted of. We were standing on top of this mesa-type structure in the middle of the Tanami Desert—this was in the mid-nineties after my third visit to the region—and he was initiating me into his people as an elder, and to do that he was telling me a narrative of its creation, the originary stories of his culture. You could see across a hundred square miles, and at first I could see only three or four mesas, but by the time we finished, after two weeks, I could see thousands of stories, thousands of people moving through that landscape. This is an utterly different way of not just seeing the world but being in the world. In the deepest sense, it is not available to me, but I can try to imagine it and have connections with it. That's what actually constitutes the world, or planetarity: it's not just the coexistence of difference, it's the connectivity of difference, which is what we are moving towards.

For the indigenous people I encountered, modernity is just a blip; it is something popular at the moment and there will be something else later and they'll work their way through. You start to register the fact of absolutely fundamental human difference, not as a negative but a positive about being human and on the planet, particularly because we are probably going to get a lot of benefits from indigenous people in learning how to survive in times to come. The idea of the contemporaneity of differences, and moving forward at different speeds through time, wouldn't be possible for me to have got to without that experience.

JJW: Let me shift gears and ask you about art institutions, especially since you've written recently on curating. They seem a long way from the desert, although not necessarily. One thing that often strikes me when I go to museums is that they are the realm of massive money. And that affects how art is made. For instance, with large paintings like the one you mentioned by Still, they're dependent on and produced for very large spaces in museums or corporations. In your book on curating, you talk about philanthropy, which seems innocent on the surface, but contemporary art is thoroughly entwined with the distribution of wealth.

TS: That's true, particularly with contemporary art. You can actually trace a fairly precise history of the narratives of expensive works of art.

The first time that vast millions of dollars were paid for works of art, and a great deal of publicity was generated for them, was during the seventies and eighties when the Met and the National Gallery of Art competed for paintings, such as a Velázquez called *Portrait of Juan de Pereja* that Thomas Hoving bought for the Met. Another was *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*.

In other words, during the seventies museums turned from being supported by either private philanthropy or government to bringing in big audiences. One of their strategies was to have blockbuster exhibitions, and the other one was to buy very expensive works of art. You might think that would be counterproductive, but it actually isn't because it produces enormous publicity and lots of people come in to see one work of art. That's something that comes from the seventies and eighties in terms of the history of museums.

Since the eighties, collectors and secondary auction houses (that sell works not recently done) have come to dominate the art scene. Now we have a case where artists produce work for sale at auction houses, famously Damien Hirst in 2008 making 280 million dollars in one night—in fact, the night before the stock market collapsed in New York. The rumor is that most of the work was bought by one of his dealers to keep the market up, which is what happens most of the time anyway. And there have been new markets; indeed, transnational transition in some countries is led by the creation of markets for local masters. M.F. Husain, who is in effect exiled from India because of the attacks on him by Hindu extremists, is a national artist, the equivalent of Pollock or Rauschenberg. The market for his work went through the roof as well.

But, again, the market is ethically indifferent and will sell anything to circulate money, which will generate expenses and fees on their circulation, as the system has been monetized and financialized. Publicity is one of the ways in which this happens; what's being sold is not just the ability of these people to buy these works of art but the ability to be seen to buy them. They are buying the status of those who are the most aristocratic, refined, and tasteful people in the world.

JJW: Hence the annual issue of *Art News* when they list the hundred biggest collectors, with pictures of some of them.

TS: Exactly. That's the equivalent of the *Forbes* richest list. If you're on that list, you can leverage that to make a lot more money. The system is about leveraging reputation of artists and people who buy works of art. There's a spin-off benefit to the rest of us by philanthropy because a lot of these people, once they've made themselves known to their new colleagues and peers, want to deepen that and to make it last. The way to do that is through philanthropy, particularly if it lasts beyond your own lifetime.

JJW: To have your name on a building, for instance — although I have to confess, I like my name on books.

TS: Yes, we all want to outlast ourselves. But that will only work if it's done for a reason that's altruistic, that's not done to produce more money directly. The really important other to that market definition of contemporary art is the fact that 99.9% of the artists in the world, and the critics and the theorists and museum workers, do not work for that purpose. They do it because they are driven to do it and because of ways in which art brings new knowledge of the world into the world. It has always done so, but is now doing so with more variety, by more people, using more mediums, and producing more connectivity than it has ever done. So I have a certain optimism in the sheer fact of this production everywhere, at every level, in every country — often amateur and tentative and questioning and recreational, but also serious and critical, and sometimes market-driven and superficial. There is a hierarchy still there, but there are massive numbers interested in actual art production, and more people going to museums and art galleries.

Anyway, for all the monetized aspect, which is very strong in this country, it is much less so in anywhere else in the world. In Europe art is mainly state supported, and elsewhere it is individuals. The majority of actual art exhibiting formats or places are independent operations run by artists or volunteers, or people are paid very little to run contemporary art spaces, and almost every city will have four or five of those. Pittsburgh, for example, has Wood Street Gallery, the Mattress Factory, Center Gallery, the Circle Gallery, and stacks of small galleries. A few commercial galleries, but piles of galleries are not-for-profit. So what we have is a shifting basis for the production of art that works away from the individual artist in a studio who is supported by a commercial dealer who sells it to a state gallery or individual collector with the mediation of a critic or reviewer. That's modernity's art distributing system, which has worked very well. Artists in effect are small business people and they've got to bring in enough income to be able to afford the materials that they put together to produce works.

But what's shifting now also is the medium or the basis on which work is produced. A lot of work now is being produced by collective actions. For example, as part of the Carnegie International, a group of artists at work with the Carnegie Library in Braddock has revived a system so people could borrow art works as they would books. This group asked thirty or forty artists, including well-known international artists, to give works for this purpose. It's just a small thing, but it is a very neat of example of locally based collective work.

We've also got Conflict Kitchen here. The Conflict Kitchen was started by artists to sell food that comes from countries with which the United States is at war. It is just a gesture, and you may say, "Where is the art in that? Where is the art work?" It's in all the relationships that are created and made. Just buying lunch reminds you of the larger world that we're in. It's a kind

of art that doesn't picture that larger world but reminds you of the circuitry that is produced.

JJW: I'm surprised to hear you say that. Earlier you were talking about how you were against the "anything goes" view of art, and Conflict Kitchen seems to broach a broad sense of what art is, maybe producing an experience although not a work.

TS: "Anything goes" is a phrasing that declares anything is a work of art if I say it is. I would answer that it's not art if you're not an artist. If you are, it would be true but trivial because it's been done a million times since Duchamp. In and of itself, a medium guarantees nothing, and if you've given us nothing and only repeated your medium, it's trivial.

I think that Conflict Kitchen works as art because of the cleverness with which we can make a leap from an experience that is in the first instance visual, because it's got all this imagery of the particular country as you are standing there buying, and it's visual in the sense that you cannot but imagine some kind of narrative of how this food that you are about to eat has traveled from, say, Afghanistan to Schenley Plaza in Pittsburgh. Then it also makes you connect with the imagery that you've seen from the news about living in say Kabul. In that sense, it's an art action that brings into the imagination a global connectivity in the clash between a particular place and another particular place. That's the art in the work.

JJW: So it can happen from a certain kind of construction, not necessarily a painting or sculpture, and they are doing it with food.

TS: It's a bit more critical. In some ways, a painting of a bazaar in Kabul would be less effective because of the distance built into looking at paintings that have been done at some earlier time and fit into another kind of historical narrative. Photographs, possibly, if they are recent, will take us to the place, although we are still looking but not actually participating.

JJW: How is it different from, say, an Afghani restaurant?

TS: This is not a style of food that fits into the array of food from different countries, so it's not about multiculturalism, but has a critical goal.

JJW: You mean as artists they've almost designed it as an installation, so thereby one can think about this situation—and conveniently they actually serve food too?

TS: It's got some precedent because it goes back to Rirkrit Tiravanija, the artist from Thailand, who introduced the idea of conviviality, which he got from Ivan Illich, into art museums in the nineties. He turned the

museum inside-out. He actually started cooking food for people, and now that work has been bought by MoMA. It's a weird little disruption of the usual walking through the rooms; it just shifts the whole register of being in the museum. The gesture will fade eventually because it will become an option—"let's have Asian food and go to Conflict"—but to insist that it stays small-r revolutionary forever is an impossible requirement to place on art, or anything.

JJW: Let me ask you about curating. As you point out in your recent book about contemporary curating, the word "curating" has become so common that you might go into a restaurant and they'll say someone has curated the list of wines. Curators used to be invisible in museums, or behind the scenes, but now it's something that we are very aware of. Even artists can be their own curators, and we are aware that art works are not just objects neutrally placed but presented.

TS: In contemporary art, art making has become an activity that on one level is more concentrated and exclusivist. That's the first current of the contemporary. The second current is that it's being made by many more people around the world and being distributed more widely. The third current is that it's being made on many more platforms, including digital ones, and being distributed more laterally around the world between people, and often made not just by individuals but collectively out of the equivalent of crowdsourcing. Curating is occurring within all of those contexts and obviously takes different forms in each one. In the first current it is mainly still art-historical, changing the history of art or rediscovering it. In the second current, it's often to make visible to others living in particular regions of the world their own histories. For example, during the twentieth century throughout central Europe under various Communist regimes, there was a suppression of histories that are now being revised and brought back. Similarly, there is suppression in other parts of the world of artists who are political. Under normal European modernism, political art was considered bad—it was boring to engage with the world. That sort of work is now being brought back. So there is curating against the current of inherited histories in museums all over the world. That's one of the things curators do, and it's a very important thing to do.

In the third current, a lot of curating is done in concert with artists or artists make exhibitions or installations out of elements of previous exhibitions done by curators, so there is a lot of convergence going on between artistic practice and exhibitionary practice. In fact, the idea of an installation is the most common form of contemporary art, and it is a post-sculptural form, and post-cinema form, and post-video form, and post-performance art form. Installations have resonances with those other mediums but have become a new medium, and they have a quality that is different from all the other ones, especially sculpture. A sculpture lasts as long as the material does, whereas

an installation only lasts for as long as it's installed. An installation takes on the quality of a temporary exhibition, like a biennial. You can bring anything you like into a museum space — it usually has got to be a museum, it couldn't just be in your home, unless you turn it into a mini-museum for a certain amount of time and people visit it. To be an installation, you have got to have an institution that it is installed in, and then taken out from.

So, an installation is a temporary sculpture, or an extended film, or a collection of videos that go on for an unusual period of time. It makes everything that you bring into it intensely interesting for the time and in the place that you gathered it, but then they all disappear. Therefore, they are different in form from films, or videos, or sculptures, or paintings, or craftworks, even though they may consist of any one of those elements. Their temporary character makes them contemporary because they are with you for the time that you are there, whereas all the other forms are potentially there for longer or they are there irrespective of you being there. Installations are an intense presence, but one that is contingent and temporary.

JJW: If you were to curate something now, what would you be interested in curating?

TS: Oh god, I don't know.

JJW: But you did put together some exhibits in Australia.

TS: I curated about four exhibitions many years ago, but now I can't do it because writing about curating depends on me not curating. Maria Lind is a Swedish curator who came up with the idea that, as distinct from curating, we should commit to the curatorial. She's paralleling it to what Chantal Mouffe called the political. Mouffe argued that what we should commit to is not political activity, but the political, by which she meant the constant politicization of everything, as opposed to working within the system of political representation and political struggle and political ideologies. We should somehow move revolutionary energy away from those structures into a kind of permanent state of transformatory insurrection, which we can call the political.

In a sense, that's what people look for when they use the term "the contemporary." They want some constant state of contemporary transformation. Of course it's self-defeating. Agamben's definition of the contemporary, or what he calls contemporaneity, is a good one because to be contemporary means you have some distance from the present. He says that the person who is perfectly in tune with their times is precisely not contemporary because he has no distance from the time and cannot be critical of it. The limit to his idea is that it's only available to poets and theorists and people whose critical consciousness is constituent of contemporaneity. So, contemporaneity needs to be thought more broadly, as I've tried to do.

It's interesting that in the art world, Agamben's definition is adopted everywhere because it's convenient. It self-identifies every art world actor as someone who has a critique of it, even though they are inside it. That's a standard condition of modernist alienation that people have held for a long while. So, for me, it's a brilliant and beautifully written essay of what it is to be modern, and not contemporary.

But to answer your question of what I would curate, that's what I'm trying to do through that book and through a book I'm doing now, which collects interviews with a number of curators and museum directors. I'm curating distinctions between practices of exhibition-making by professional curators and by others, largely on the ground of critical reflexivity. Many are exhibitions in museums, but they don't have to be, because many activist curators do exhibitionary displays, for example at Occupy. Zuccotti Square was as much an installation as it was an occupation.