The word “modern” is valuable because semantically it suggests the progressive, original and challenging rather than the safe and academic which would naturally be included in the supine neutrality of the term “contemporary”.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

The New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has had the great collective project of modernity—the whole complex process behind modernism—as the core of its business. Early in the 2000s, MoMA underwent massive expansion. The museum’s architect Yoshio Taniguchi used the occasion of reconstruction to redeploy minimalist architecture in a formal language of parallel lines, large rectangular planes, and a continued rejection of ornament (excluding the art, a kind of “ornament” in its own right, that the museum is designed to exhibit). While minimalism was the museum’s established aesthetic mode, it was not obliged to reuse the style at this time. Here, I argue that the “new” museum perpetuated Alfred H. Barr, Jr’s founding curatorial notion of MoMA understood not as a mausoleum (the critique of museums laid down by the Italian Futurists) but as a laboratory of experiment and effects, even as this was apparently cancelled by the
non-experimental form of the new building. What we have here is not a postmodern critique of the modern but an extension of the original revolutions of modernity in its most élite, conspicuously commoditised version.

It makes sense to revisit the history of MoMA at this time, as yet more expansion projects are being announced that will define the next era for the museum (monsters and financial crashes notwithstanding)—that is, until the next expansion or redefinition, and so on. The constancy of announcements of expansions underscores the ethos below the microscope in this chapter. In modernity, art became provisional; more recently, architecture has followed suit.

MoMA’s original “object” was not an object as such, but a process, an attitude, a practice: the modern, which MoMA sought to define from the inside. The museum’s institutionalisation of “the contemporary”—an innovation unique to the latest reconstruction—points to the museum’s entry into a changed world. Why did the museum seek to redefine itself as contemporary at this time? Why had it not redefined itself in this way earlier? Why was this museum in particular so late to arrive? The answers to these questions are complex and require an extended examination of MoMA’s history up to the point of reconstruction, which was in process by the end of the millennium although it did not reopen its doors to the public until 2004 (meanwhile it relocated to a temporary headquarters in an old single-storey staple factory in Queens, arguably more in the vogue of “contemporary” than its Manhattan headquarters). There are multiple angles from which to look at the reconstruction—directorial, architectural, art-historical, curatorial—all of which are pressurised in various ways by the discourse of “the contemporary”, which had forged an unshakable place for itself in the artistic, intellectual, and public imaginations.

If we judge the reconstruction by how the collection is mobilised, we find in its deployment of the contemporary a zone without structure and direction, something that Hal Foster, writing in the London Review of Books, recognised, “the Contemporary Galleries come across as a prehistorical
holding pen, a space without a story” (2004: 25). If we judge
the reconstruction by the architecture, we find an undecon-
structed modernist, minimalist rendering, marked by two
absences: the irony of postmodernist architecture and the
spectacle of shape that has become virtually hegemonic in
museum practice since Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum
in Bilbao, Spain. The reasons for these absences are various.
The reconstructed MoMA reveals a modernism without a
project, an empty or hollowed out modernism, the motions of
modernism without its ethic of the future. For MoMA, as for
the contemporary and the enigma, the future is imagined as a
repetition of what already exists. In this sense, it is not strictly
a future at all. The discourse of the contemporary acknowl-
edges that there is no way to prepare for the future after all.
MoMA has been reshaped to deal with the new realities of a
directionless global capitalism that functions without a plan,
and indeed thrives on its rudderlessness. In this context,
MoMA provides no ground rules. Its use of “the contempo-
rary” indicates an empty openness to that which might arrive
from any direction and consist of almost any material or
shape.

**TORPEDO TO ENIGMA**

Museum space is an almost readymade category in which to
build an argument about contemporaneity. The cultural site
of the museum emerged in its modern form at the time of the
French Revolution and the radical transformation of the Lou-
vre. It has been understood as focused firmly on the past, as a
storage and retrieval system for collective consciousness. Yet,
museums have entertained a secret relation to their own pre-
sent—in other words, another function. They developed with-
in modernity, as Andreas Huyssen argued in Twilight Memo-
ries, into cultural constructions in the present designed to
compensate for the losses of tradition perpetually experienced
in rapidly modernising and increasingly future-oriented soci-
eties; the “dead eye of the storm of progress serving as catalyst
for the articulation of tradition and nation, heritage and can-
on” (Huyssen: 13). Modern societies do not have free or neu-
tral interests in their own pasts. The Louvre, for instance, was
a showcase for bourgeois revolution, as a monument to the
temporal disruption of the vast feudal regimes of Europe. The
museum, while a site of power and hegemony per se, did not
conspicuously seek to construct and act as a guiding force for
modern societies. Then, the traditional museum, even as a
“state apparatus” in the Marxist sense, was passive. It settled
for reflection; it did not have its own agenda, its own program.
MoMA introduced a key differentiation and innovation
from museums of the past in this regard. MoMA had a strong
sense of the heroic present that Baudelaire, and later Ezra
Pound, championed. The institution presented itself (espe-
cially when its purpose-built, Bauhaus-inspired building was
developed in 1939) with a clear linear vision of its place in
time as an agent of change within the present. MoMA, unlike
the museums of contemporary art today, had a central phi-
losophy. The founding of MoMA in 1929 was therefore partly
a reflection of the European avant-garde vision and crucially,
because of Alfred H. Barr, Jr’s critical vision, partly an exten-
sion of that avant-garde culture. MoMA was part of the whole
critical arsenal of modern culture. This is the museum’s twen-
tieth century legacy. In the twenty-first, we are witnesses of
another emergence: a reminting of the modern in the dis-
course of “the contemporary”. The revival of minimalist ar-
chitecture offers a seemingly neutral formalism. In art itself,
we see an obsessive and official urge to show the present mo-
ment, the cult of the “genius” artist, and unpleasant insistenc-
es on meaning. All this is occurring, however, without
modernism’s historical commitment to a future envisioned as
being different to our own present.
The strongest theoretical statements of historical modern-
ist aesthetic teleology were formulated at the Museum of
Modern Art. It introduced a radical new self-image of the
cultural institution of the museum. Barr’s metaphor from the
late 1920s, which he used to describe the rise and trajectory of
modern art, was a torpedo moving through time (Fig. 2). The
torpedo is an élite and powerful modernist icon, a celebration of technology and speed. Above all, the torpedo portrays programmability and direction, even when aimed at disintegration; modernism has long used the idea of destruction as a creative act.

Figure 2. Alfred Hamilton Barr, Jr., ‘Torpedo’ diagrams of the ideal permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art, as advanced in 1933 (top) and in 1941 (bottom), 1941. © 2014. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.
Barr’s theoretical vision for the museum was unlike any before. It was straight out of the European avant-garde with which he had become increasingly and personally acquainted; the museum was a manifesto. In the torpedo lay a temporal vision. MoMA, for all its openness to the new technologies (film) and styles (machine aesthetic, Bauhaus and international style), was primarily devoted to painting, sculpture, and the narrative of the militant break (historically, from centuries of Renaissance perspectivalism and the negation of art as representation). Or in other words, the torpedo privileged and celebrated the art and narrative of abstraction.

Barr’s technical timeline within the torpedo was exactly a hundred years: 1850-1950. Modern painting finds its beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in artists such as Corot, Daumier, and Courbet, then later in the rapid succession of Manet, Renoir, Degas, and the onset of impressionism. Its internal world picture is of the School of Paris giving way to the Americans, although Barr’s analysis does not go beyond the naïve “beginnings” of Homer, Dakins, and Ryder in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The propeller of the metaphor lies within the deep past of modernism; the first modern art is credited to Goya. Before the Spanish master lies only “European prototypes and sources” and “Non-European prototypes and sources”. (Think, for instance, of the “pre-Colombian art” celebrated by the Arensbergs in a “modernist” American context.) It is essentially a picture of Realism in a process of historical negation by abstraction. The “nose” of the torpedo is in the world of tomorrow, the next phase of which, for Barr at the time of its drawing, was the 1940s and 1950s; more suggestively, it was what William Gibson has since called the “capital F” Future, which waned in post-modern culture.

The metaphor of the torpedo, with its violent technology, speed, and capacity to destroy that which exists, lies in a tradition of militaristic imagery for modern art. This is evident in the notion of the “avant-garde” itself: a concept borrowed from the front-line of war. Barr wrote: “its nose the ever advancing present, its tail the ever receding past of fifty to a
hundred years ago” (Kantor: 366). The torpedo remains necessary to explain the “modern” mission of MoMA. The torpedo is useful today for demonstrating the lack of an ideology of, a belief in, and direction at MoMA today, which is hesitant. The contemporary has no equivalent metaphor of absolute direction.

In the late 1990s, MoMA made the decision to reconstruct itself—to contemporise. Between 2000 and 2004 it carried out massive reconstruction according to the redesign of the museum’s entire campus by Taniguchi.¹ It was mostly a building site when the Manhattan World Trade Center was attacked in September, 2001. MoMA conceived of its reconstruction around the binary of the terms modern and contemporary. All the consequential decisions were made at the high point of globalism and the “economic prism”, and thus became the most extensive rebuilding, renovation, and reminting project in its history. Globalism, following John Ralston Saul, is at the centre of the disconnection between the modern, which was always international but not exclusively market-driven, and “the contemporary”.

¹ It was the architect’s first commission outside of Japan where he was established as a designer of museums. Taniguchi worked on many museums in Japan, but most significant to MoMA’s redesign is the architect’s Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art in Muragame City and, especially, the exterior of the Gallery of Horyuji Treasures in Tokyo; the interior creates physically one of the darkest museum experiences in recent museum architecture, quite the opposite of MoMA. However, in the Gallery of Horyuji Treasures there can be witnessed analogous solutions to what the architect has achieved for MoMA. In contrast to the visual overload and physical density of both Tokyo and New York, Taniguchi uses minimalism to produce an effect of calm, a playful sense of the inside and outside of the building, and, above all, an interplay of solid and void which is illustrated particularly in the similarity of the Gallery’s façade and MoMA’s rearticulated museum garden (which also reboots Philip Johnson’s original layout from the 1950s): a huge emptied box that remarkably gives rectilinear shape to the void of the garden below.
MoMA is a prestigious site of “high culture”, an institution that won and enjoyed global pre-eminence owing in part to the significance of its collection, in part to its geographical location and metropolitan status, and in part to the uniqueness of its mission (which might be boiled down to Ezra Pound minus the fascism). It defined the idea of the modern; it made the modern prestigious. In the following, I analyse the shift from its dictatorship of modernist aesthetic value to “the contemporary” as phrase, slogan, and organisational concept, in recent years after the twin incredulities towards the modern and the postmodern. Above all, the focus on “the contemporary” indicates the need to rethink the current historical emergency. How has MoMA negotiated the world historical eclipse of the modern and the postmodern? Can it really break free from their problematics? If cultural institutions cannot build definition and direction, other, more authoritarian, more powerful figures will not hesitate to step in and impose their own interests. The inclusion of the term signifies MoMA as part of a complex and vast system over which it has no control, but over which it will try to exert definitional effort nonetheless (as we will see). The reconstruction of MoMA tells us that it remains an authoritarian institution, but it is hardly authoritative.

CONTROLLING INSTITUTIONS

MoMA’s influence cannot be underestimated in its promotion of the Western sense of “the modern” in twentieth century culture. It gave strong definition to modern art, and by extension, the idea of modernity. It has loomed large in the imaginations of multiple generations. It is not shaping up to have the same amount of influence in terms of the contemporary, which may have something to do with the shapeless hesitations of “the contemporary” attitude itself. There have been times in which “modern” meant contemporary and vice versa—for instance, in the deployment of the contemporary in the late 1920s and 1930s by the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, which can be viewed from the vantage of to-
day’s present as a key site of the intellectual origins of the Museum of Modern Art, preceding its opening by nine months.\(^2\) Other precursory, proto-institutional moments of modernist history remain the Vienna Secession of 1897, the New York “Armory Show” of 1913, and also the controversy over Duchamp’s provocative readymade Fountain in 1917. The basic move of the 2004 MoMA has been to deploy the contemporary next to, and in juxtaposition with (rather than being superimposed onto), self-certain, official Modernism. The effect is that the once-synonymous status of the terms modern and contemporary is rendered past. Looking at the instituting of the modern and the contemporary at MoMA also demands a reflection on MoMA’s difficult negotiation with the category of the postmodern, as well as, historically, the moments of emergence of the modern and the contemporary. These considerations will help lead us to a reading of the new architecture, which exemplifies the physical growth of the museum out of the confines of modernity and postmodernity, and into the brave new world of contemporaneity.

The aesthetic order of the modern came from within the authority of MoMA in New York. Its deep roots lie in the American cultural imaginary and its self-perception as a leader in the modern world, especially after the Second World War. The latent meanings of modern in this sense were “democracy”, the “free market” (capitalism), and the “melting pot” of immigration. The contemporary exerts its force from the outside. There is nothing particularly original about MoMA opening galleries organised around “the contemporary”. The MCAs preceded MoMA’s strong use of the categories. They spread and grew up around the globe—a part of the process of the historical desynonymisation of the terms modern and contemporary. Contemporary (as we saw in chapter two) has always indicated a certain discursive frustration with

the modern. If the aura of MoMA grew as a spectre or site of origin in the modern, then in the contemporary, it weakens. MoMA joins the reigning order rather than challenges it, in a sense reversing its historical (modernist) mission.

The contemporary announced a present that was no longer satisfactorily served by the term modern. Within the modern era, New York was the centre from which many of the great postwar definitions emerged, distilled into “movements” and slogans by MoMA. Within the contemporary, MoMA has become a museum among museums, a dinosaur perpetuating a history of modernism now so large, diverse, and fragmented as to be unmanageable. Its power of control had already waned; as part of the “modern project”, MoMA was unable to seize hold of and control the development of the most critical postmodernist art, which openly interrogated the very heart of modernism (captured in the journal *October*).

MoMA was not historically prepared for the postmodern moment. Indeed, the postmodern was an attack on MoMA. The museum struggled to negotiate the critical developments of the postmodern, the most radical of which sought to negate commodification and reification (and thus, the museum itself as an entity). When Lyotard argued for the “war on totality” in *The Postmodern Condition*, MoMA, while merely a museum, must be grasped as belonging to this category of totality. One need only witness the fact that artists such as Andy Warhol (Pop Art) and Donald Judd (Minimalism) were brought into the collection—into the story of late or postmodern art—as late as the 1990s, when their historical, and market, value had become undeniable. Warhol was not given a MoMA retrospective until after his death, something of which the artist was aware, stating “It will take my death for the Museum of Modern Art to recognise my work” (Bockris: 354). The high

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3 *October* was responsible for tracing the rise of postmodernism in both art and theoretical discourse. It is certainly a more complete “museum” for the period when it comes to the postmodern and to theory from the late 1970s to the 1990s than MoMA ever could be.
postmodern anti-institutional movements of the 1960s and 1970s—anti-totalistic postmodern art designed to negate the conservative museum culture—proved even more unfathomable to MoMA.

The desynonymisation of the terms modern and contemporary was latent within the earliest debates in Europe regarding the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. The quarrel between the moderns and the postmoderns followed. Now, we have seen a quarrel between the postmoderns and the contemporaries (hardly worthy of the term “quarrel”, for the postmodern seems to have faded without a fight). In “the contemporary” lies a de-intensification of the postmodern, accompanied by an increased sense of the directionless nature of history. The crucial difference is that the postmodern defined itself in terms of a project, whereas the contemporary does not. Foster, in the design context, called the contemporary “part of the greater revenge of capitalism on postmodernism” and a “routinisation of its transgressions” (2003: 25). In this ethos, MoMA was suddenly repositioned to make a comeback and to regain its authority. This was MoMA’s chance: a big mobilisation of capital, an extra-large expansion, and the reorganisation of the visitor’s gaze around the historical binary of Modernism (relocated to the upper levels of the museum, floors four and five) and the Contemporary Galleries (which were to be foregrounded anew—not out of the way, but the first thing one encounters upon entry into the main galleries).

The contemporary, as it is widely used and hailed both outside and inside MoMA, offers the eerie promise of a return to the modern and, crucially, a sidestepping of the ever-difficult category of the postmodern.4 One thinks especially of

4 It was Rosalind Krauss’ insight in ‘A Voyage on the North Sea’ that the installation art that had become an institutional commonplace increasingly since the 1970s represented the colonisation of former critique by power, by capitalism. So-called Installation Art, then, is part of the hegemonic gaze of the contemporary, a strategy for control of the “expanded field” of sculpture and performance.
the full-scale attack on the institution of the museum in the 1960s and 1970s, in the movements of fluxism, land art, process art, performance, happenings, situationism, conceptualism, and site-specificity. The contemporary arrives after the exhaustion of the postmodern, and after the “return” of painting in the 1980s (with Köln as the vanishing art market mediator) and the rise of official installation art (which now has its own purpose-built spaces, of which the Tate Modern’s industrial-gigantic Turbine Hall is a good example). MoMA’s deployment of the contemporary is more replication of historical deployments of the modern than anything else—the strongest expression of which was absence: namely, MoMA’s refusal to execute new architecture in any of the post-modern or neo-historical styles identified by Charles Jencks and Robert Venturi. It is easy to miss the fact that the discourse of the modern battled for, and won, its prestige. For the contemporary, MoMA’s situation was different, as the category in its new hegemonic mode was virtually readymade by the late 1990s. If the postmodern tolerated a renewed relation to the past as a simulacrum or supermarket of ornament (detested by Adolf Loos)—categories effectively banned under purist modernism—the contemporary has the positive feeling of re-centring on the here and now, however illusory that might be.

Previously at MoMA, “modern” had functioned; it does not today. In Barr’s time, the term had not yet been resignified into history, and presumably had not yet earned the unfortunate associations it renders consensually in the critical

5 MoMA’s addition of Cesar Pelli’s big residential tower in 1984, as well as being the first art museum to open its own shop in the 1960s, are responses to fiscal pressures and the threat to its existence, but are not really postmodern aesthetic expressions in the sense of “contaminated” versions of the modern; the tower is perhaps late modern or an expression of what Koolhaas called the “culture of congestion”. At any rate, they are evidence of the creeping market economy and the commodification of hitherto uncommodified realms of culture (such as the museum) associated with the postmodern, and, as such, fit Jameson’s paradigm of the “cultural logic of late capitalism”, but are not postmodern architectural statements.
imagination today. The features are listed by Jameson in his discourse on the “maxims of modernity” (2002: 1–13). These include the aura of authoritarianism that accompanies that which was modern: a certain (bourgeois) masculinity and a phallocentricity (in Hélène Cixous’ sense), the teleology of the aesthetic, the minimalism, its insistent difficulty (as described by Adorno), the “cult of the genius or seer”, as well as the Euro-centralism of much that was modern (the teleology of the West). MoMA managed to survive “late” or postwar modernism and the postmodernism of the 1970s and 1980s that sought to critically challenge the aforementioned negative categories, and has now repositioned itself as a place that wishes to create, promote, and (perhaps especially) control the politics and aesthetics of contemporaneity.

MoMA was extremely late to institute the contemporary by name. The term was not foregrounded until the 2004 reconstruction and, as noted above, was spatially located in the exact place of the old Modernist Galleries (in the same air). To say that MoMA was late to the contemporary is to admit a paradox. At the same time, MoMA has been concerned since its founding with the contemporary; each of its previous major architectural expansions (1939, 1953, 1964, and 1984) attest to this. In 1929, instead of “the contemporary”, MoMA deployed Modern, and the phrase on the sign hanging on 53rd street—“Art of our time”—meant exactly this. It is hailed as the museum that harnessed the cataclysm that was modernism (a post-facto term coined by Greenberg to cover the diverse range of progressive, forward-moving art before the Second World War, and probably to retro-justify his beloved abstract expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s) in art and culture. The modern indicated a culture of the present moment that looked with disgust towards the past; nostalgia was effectively banned. Victorian and neo-Victorian aesthetics were not modern, even if they once had been. MoMA tried, in an original and formulaic way (actually in a Hegelian way) to theorise and represent, painstakingly, the rise of modern art and modern culture from the 1880s in Europe onward. The
latter started with the School of Paris and continued all the way up to the construction of the modern in America and the New World.

MoMA, while ostensibly concerned with the contemporary, in 1929, was not contemporary—meaning “Modern”—when it opened. If one looks closely at the time, the deployment of the modern was in fact not synonymous with that of the contemporary, as is often assumed, insofar as contemporary was thought to mean “living” art. The museum is often cast in retrospect as having helped revolutionise our perception of museums in general. The museum refocused on the present, but it was in fact already entrenched in the past. It was already stuck in non-contemporaneity and, more to the point, on the pre-avant-garde modern (progressive, but not avant-garde). The list of artists in the museum’s inaugural loan exhibition proves this. Futurism and Dada, the most extreme proponents of modernist ideology, had already happened, but the museum’s opening vision was firmly placed in the nineteenth century.⁶ The artists were Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Seurat. Vincent Van Gogh died in 1890, Paul Gauguin in 1903, Paul Cézanne in 1906, and Georges Seurat in 1891. In other words, the inaugural museum show was already in a state of retrospectivity. “Modern” was already historical. This is further seen in the way the museum chose not to exhibit consequential modernist painting, such as Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism, or even French cubism,

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⁶ The fact that MoMA began conservatively is unsurprising given the public status of modern in the United States at the time, even after “the Armory Show”. In 1921, the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibited a show of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists that was greeted with outrage. In some cases, modern art was seen as an extension of Bolshevik philosophy, “applied to art”. According to John Updike, a four-page printed protest read: “The real cult of ‘Modernism’ began with a small group of neurotic Ego-maniacs in Paris who styled themselves “Satanists”—worshippers of Satan—the God of Ugliness” (2). Such protests stopped the museum from trying to further the cause of modern art in the 1920s, which helped to create the void that the founders of MoMA filled in 1929.
and certainly not totally revolutionary art of Dada and the readymade. These styles entered the museum decades later in works that looked furthest forward to our own post-abstract, post-painterly, and “post-medium” contemporaneity (Krauss 1999: 5–7). MoMA was in a challenging place, being both radical and conservative in its construction of modernity, occupying a site of ambiguity. The categories of the modern and the contemporary join up in the “machine art” exhibition, again in the “international style” exhibition (both of the 1930s), and once more in 1939 when MoMA chose to house itself in a Bauhaus homage of a building. (More on this below).

Up to the 1970s, MoMA oversaw the introduction of separate departments of photography, film, prints and drawings, architecture, and design, as well as its original devotion to the “high” arts of painting and sculpture. In recent decades, MoMA has ostensibly become contemporary, yet it continues to perpetuate the modern on many levels. For instance, it does this formally through its continuation of medium separation and through the further separation of departments. MoMA was the first museum to institute multidepartmentalism, but seems now to be the very last to accept the deconstruction of departments and mediums. The resistance to alter the essentially modernist departmental structuring of knowledge is perhaps the first sign of the non-contemporaneity of Taniguchi’s MoMA (in Ernst Bloch’s sense, meaning simultaneously present but non-synchronous). Its modernist infrastructure is the ultimate relic from a bygone era. It had, and still does have, departments that hone areas that are divided by medium. These are artificial, arbitrary divisions, premised on a Greenbergian notion of modernism as the coming to self-consciousness of mediums rather than Krauss’ notion of the “post-medium condition” of the contemporary, which is characterised by “the international fashion of installation and intermedia work, in which art essentially finds itself complicit with a globalisation of the image in the service of capital” (Krauss 1999: 56).
At a time in which emulation of MoMA’s historic mission to collect and display in a disciplined fashion the most advanced art of the time has increased dramatically—in America, Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia and elsewhere—the institution has had to find new ways to compete, often in the face of daring wealthy projects by new museum auteurs. In New York City alone, MoMA has, for much of the last century, had the competition of the Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art (both founded in the 1930s) and, perhaps most threateningly, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (with which it once had a relationship in the form of selling off works as they became old). More recent developments include the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Centre in Long Island City, Queens, which was co-opted by MoMA as a “contemporary branch” of itself, possibly as a way to attempt to control such a free agent. The emergence of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, founded in 1977, which reopened in downtown Manhattan in 2007 in a purpose-built museum building, presents a further demonstration of the triumph of the term “contemporary”—of its default status—and adds another aspect of pressure on MoMA. The New Museum’s inaugural downtown exhibition, **Unmonumental**, emphasised the querying and critical, anti-heroic nature of the contemporary. All of these contextual forces, in the form of other and newer, or younger, museums, put the old MoMA in a strange situation; has it become too canonical (at a time in which canons have been widely discredited as imperialist fictions), too overtly conservative, and most of all, too historical? Has it become, as critics have suggested, the “Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art”, and therefore obsolete? The category of “the contemporary” is itself subject to time and change, and it is by no means certain how long the category will remain meaningful. It seems inconceivable now, but it may eventually become a sign of the past (negated by the post-contemporary, given a weak afterlife as retro). By the time MoMA reconfigured its collection, the postmodern, as a category, had already waned and tired; indeed, it is unlikely the term was seriously considered as the slogan for foregrounding current art (even since
The concepts of the modern and the contemporary merged in modernity and have now been desynonymised institutionally in contemporaneity. To its credit, MoMA is a site that has actively sought to incite a discourse on the contemporary. It is also a site that, whether desirable or not, must eventually give the contemporary definition and begin to say what the contemporary is—to shape the contours of how we think of contemporaneity and in turn to shape our thinking of epochs. MoMA’s reconstruction is in continuity with its original project of providing large-scale historico-temporal pictures. MoMA does this from the vantage of its own authorial viewpoint (which has become historical). That this is an essentially arbitrary exercise does not reduce its power, meaning, or influence. It is in this sense that the museum’s license (any museum) to seize control of how time is collectively imagined and how it is managed publicly (democratically, visible to all or any) becomes reified in cultural space, architecture, and narrative.

Rebuilding was, as always, speculative. In a brief review of the redevelopment, William J. Mitchell saw the key to

7 Matei Calinescu, in The Five Faces of Modernity, gives an excellent account of the desynonymisation of “the moderns and the contemporaries”: “We are unable to fix a date, but it seems reasonable to assume that ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ were not felt to be significantly different before the twentieth century, when the movement that we call modernism became fully self-conscious” (87). I support Calinescu’s argument, but take it a step further by articulating the development of the desynonymisation of the postmodern and the contemporary, which was not a move open to the theorist when he was writing in the mid- to late 1970s. For Calinescu, the content of the contemporary was that of the postmodern (a category he kept away from until he added an extra chapter, “On Postmodernism”, to the second edition of his book in the mid-1980s).
Taniguchi’s form as a contrast between signal and noise. He recalled that “art is signal” and “context is noise” within the regime of modernist display (172), and argued that the Taniguchi building was designed to maximise the signal-to-noise ratio. The resulting galleries arrived “like iPods—sleek, upmarket machines for experiencing art, white boxes that conceal a lot beneath the surface and focus all your attention on what’s displayed within a rectangular frame and what’s coming in through your earpiece” (172). The aim was to re-new, re-envision, and remint the museum’s identity, its collection, and boost prestige at an uncertain moment in its evolution. In a time in which new museums are built and old ones modified and remodified every year, MoMA was faced with extinction unless it took action. The spectacle of new architecture and a focus on the contemporary were Taniguchi’s basic armoury, including a new atrium so giant as to almost herald the return of nineteenth century salon-style art.

It is with the waning of the modern at MoMA and its refusal to institute the postmodern in mind that we look over Taniguchi’s MoMA redesign, which was conceptualised in the mid-1990s at the height of globalism, and developed in the early 2000s. Taniguchi made his innovation clear in his “architect’s statement”. These kinds of statements are often little more than PR exercises but can be revealing because of the architects’ strong uses of rhetoric. It is here that the postmodern and the contemporary begin to become desynonymised for MoMA. This had everything to do with MoMA’s choice of architect. (As we will see later, the Koolhaas proposal, MoMA, Inc, would have made MoMA a fully self-conscious corporate and postmodern entity.) Taniguchi made his intentions clear immediately with respect to galleries and public spaces, which he considers to be the “core elements” in a museum:

A variety of gallery spaces appropriate to MoMA’s collection of twentieth-century masterworks as well as new galleries for the yet-unknown works of contemporary art is the first requirement for an expanded museum. (Elderfield 1998: 242)
The provision of space for “the contemporary” is, for Taniguchi, an ontological demand. The contemporary is a commitment in the contemporary to what will be contemporary. The appeal of Taniguchi’s proposal to those with the power to choose MoMA’s new architect lay to a great extent in the fact that Taniguchi wanted MoMA to tell its story backwards, as it were, so that instead of starting with the modern and narrating “forwards” to the contemporary, the exhibit should start with the contemporary, with the newest and the latest, and only then begin to reveal how the culture of art arrived at this point in history. Taniguchi is credited therefore with urging the museum to demonstrate its commitment to contemporary art architecturally—which is to say, experientially—by placing it up front.

Taniguchi’s usage also reveals a focus on the future, an openness to those works “as-yet-unknown”: presumably meaning not-yet created works of art, possibly also indicating undiscovered works from the expanded globalist field. It is a Utopian conception in the strict sense of Ernst Bloch, meaning openness to that which has “not-yet” occurred (Bloch’s term), an openness to that which we are not physically placed to possess as knowledge (which is to say the radical effacement of our own material present and ourselves). In his statement, Taniguchi reveres the ideal of the introduction of a difference—a present that is other to our own. This said, however, the architect’s use of the contemporary denies the idea that one foot might be lodged in the world of tomorrow. For him, it may not be “progress”, but expansion lies with the contemporary. If MoMA is impotent today it is not because it has failed to deploy contemporaneity (which is what Smith argued: “Has the Museum met the challenges of showing contemporary art? … no way” [2005: 3]), but because it has failed to do something else. In 1997, Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture did propose something else. Taniguchi, and Lowry as well, perceived contemporaneity, like globalism, as inevitable. In acting on their perception of the inevitable they have brought the merely possible into be-
ing. The foregrounding of the contemporary admits a globalist scale, but when we turn to the exhibited art works, we see that it has sided, mostly, with the Americans and the British (in the 2004-5 configuration): Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark, Jeff Koons, Rachel Whiteread, Jeff Wall (in fact, a Canadian), and Gary Hill (to name only the most celebrated). The big story of the modern and the contemporary, for MoMA, remains that of a historical shift from the School of Paris to American postwar art.

We know that the discourse of contemporaneity is loaded with arbitrary dates of all kinds. The museum in its official literature has tried to clear up any historical questions about when the modern gave way to the contemporary by saying it all occurred in “approximately 1970” (Lowry: 34). What we have here is the deployment of a starting date: the myth of a profound beginning. It is, above all, a generational one—the generation of 1968, which was arguably the most radical of the postwar generations. MoMA has instituted the historical and imaginative limit of the generation of 1968 and the 1970s. But it is not today’s limit. (Interestingly, this is also the year date used by the Victoria and Albert Museum in its “Postmodernism” show of 2011 (covering 1970-1990). MoMA, then, only erases the postmodern as a specific critique by structuring the beginnings of “the contemporary” back to 1970.)

Lowry’s comparisons are bombastic, alluding to The British Museum and the Metropolitan. “The British Museum, for example, founded in 1753 … is still today the embodiment of the Enlightenment belief in the universality of human experience” (Lowry 2005: 10). Characteristically, Lowry presents and repeats the undeconstructed idea of “Enlightenment”, just as he does modern and contemporary, without registering its latent, yet core project for European or American imperialism, which one finds on the dialectical underside of these once attractive (an aspect attributed due to being seemingly safe and egalitarian) concepts. Lowry casts MoMA’s project in continuity with the grand narrative of museums of imperialist definition: “The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a living tes-
tament to the attempt to present an encyclopaedic overview of art history to a nascent American audience” (Lowry 2005: 10). MoMA, he affirms, marks a difference:

As for the Museum of Modern Art, the desire to provide a detailed but clearly intelligible history of modern art structures almost everything it does. But this desire is tempered by the reality—long recognised by the Museum—that it can never achieve this goal in any enduring way, since modern art is still unfolding and its history is still being written. (Lowry 2005: 10)

This claim is designed to reposition MoMA to develop the contemporary. It is a very open statement that seeks to legitimise investment in still incomplete aesthetic modernity, and thus in contemporaneity. At the same time, the museum knows its authority; through display, the museum has the power to authorise artists, works, concepts, narratives, to actively promote these phenomena into history, to create the necessary “buzz”, and above all, to transform or reconstruct through these processes art into capital. The aura of the museum, the museum’s architecture, and its history, all contribute to the suspension of the fact that the contemporary in the museum is as much a part of the general institution of contemporary art, which is a market of luxury goods. The museum, in this sense, is part of what Adorno and Horkheimer called the “culture industries” (Adorno: 131) where “distinction” (Pierre Bourdieu) is available for purchase. It is the museum’s aim (perhaps even responsibility) to manufacture contemporaneity, to shelve and display it as well as imagine it, and above all, to try to control it through reification.

Lowry returns to Barr’s old notion of MoMA as a laboratory of continual experiment. For Lowry, the contemporary is equal to telling the story of modern art, and “contemporary” is grasped as part of the paradigm of the high modern, as opposed to Foster’s more troubling, and more serious, paradigm-of-no-paradigm. Lowry argues for “continuity”, effec-
tively papering over the challenges of the postmodern towards the end of the twentieth century. He wants the contemporary to be something desirable but uncontroversial, and not too political. This is a difficult aim. It is a timid position for a museum that is so well placed and resourced to create the aesthetic ontology of the present. (This reading should be understood via post-structuralism in which museums are thought to create our very idea of reality rather than passively reflect an unproblematic, fixed outside, historical, or contemporary world.)

In naming the contemporary, MoMA seeks to create a set of limits or controls for the term; that is, to prescribe what it may be and what it may not be. It is a governing apparatus, a gatekeeper. It is, then, a far cry from pretending to suspend authority. The author, MoMA as auteur, is here in full force. It also cannot be isolated from the attempt to marshal new objects in a practice that is essentially one of value adding. What the museum does is inseparable from the creation of capital; art is capital, past and present. The argument about the circulation of art in the service of capital and art as capital, within the bank-like structures of contemporary museums (the Guggenheim in Berlin was literally housed inside the Deutsche Bank), is developed by both Stallabrass in Art Incorporated and Paul Werner in a highly personal text (it reflects Werner’s time, a lifetime no less, spent working as a guard on the floor of the New York Guggenheim), Museum, Inc. Both texts are essentially Marxist (Adornian) critiques of the de-differentiation of art and capital in “the contemporary”.

The question of reconstruction involves the issue of creating periods of time. This is an inevitable issue for MoMA or any museum that wishes to represent movements of history. We looked at Lowry’s demarcation. The late Kirk Varnedoe, former curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, argued for “the contemporary” to be read back into the modern as continuation rather than profound, earth shifting change. In the introduction to his 2001 book Modern Contemporary, Varnedoe puts contemporaneity’s beginning at 1980. For the
purposes of that publication, Varnedoe opted to exclude work from the 1960s and 1970s in order to focus on what he called the museum’s “contemporary acquisitions”, which the public had had few opportunities to view, the “least known part of the Museum’s collection”, meaning art in the “period after 1980” (Varnedoe: 11). With reference to Barr’s torpedo, Varnedoe argues that had the torpedo ideology been followed strictly, in which once-contemporary works were to be sold off to the Metropolitan when they showed signs of age (in other words when they became “classics”—Barr’s scope was around fifty years), the earliest works in MoMA today would be from the 1950s. (Today they would be from the 1960s). The 1950s was the moment in which the museum decided to retain its collection of late nineteenth-century post-impressionist paintings, which had been keenly eyed by the Metropolitan. From the 1950s onward, Barr’s torpedo becomes forever pinned to the 1880s as its starting point (Varnedoe: 12). For Varnedoe, “the revolutions that originally produced modern art, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have not been concluded or superseded” (12). “Thus contemporary art today”, he writes, “can be understood as the ongoing extension and revision of those founding innovations and debates” (12). The latent implication in these statements is that the postmodern has waned; at the postmodern’s headstrong moment, such a position—the ongoing extension of modernism—would have been difficult to declare. Within the paradigm of “the contemporary”, the modern is again available as a cultural resource.

The narrative breaks between the modern, the postmodern, and the contemporary are revised continuation. Contemporary art is folded back into modern art itself, which is a big and incomplete story. Varnedoe summons modern art as the ideology of contemporary art, as if contemporary art could not generate its own ideology (or as if it were not postmodern), but instead must rely on the industrial past. Recalling Jameson, we can read this as a part of the cultural “regressions of the current age”: namely, the “reminting of the
modern, its repackaging, its production in great quantities for renewed sales in the intellectual marketplace” (Jameson 2002: 7). At Taniguchi and Lowry’s reconstructed MoMA, we find the modern repackaged, and the contemporary packaged to function in unproblematic continuity with modernism. Modernism once again becomes big business if it can function to add value to the contemporary and inscribe its presence through history. But MoMA’s own past (meaning the collection of modern itself), outside of the “real” historical process, must not be mistakenly understood as static, because the process of acquisition and collection proceeds into the present day. Obviously enough, this is also true of past decades. Varnedoe states:

[T]he institution began conservatively, and got more “progressive” as it aged. In the mid-1930s the Museum of Modern Art looked more like a museum of Kolbe, Maillol, and Pascin; it became the museum of Picasso, Matisse, Malevich, and Duchamp only gradually—often by key purchases made with the benefit of considerable hindsight. The purchase of Picasso’s 1907 Les Demoiselles d’Avignon in 1937 is one example, the acquisition of key Abstract Expressionist works in the 1970s another; and several key works of the late 1950s and 1960s—by artists such as Rauschenberg, Warhol, and Judd—were only brought into the collection in the 1990s. (Varnedoe: 13)

The lateness of the acquisitions seems astounding. The museum has deployed the contemporary in its display of art “since 1970”, its initial attempt to give definition to contemporaneity, but also in the new building itself. The strongest sign therefore of contemporaneity—apart from the term—is the architecture and its effect to re-invigorate an aging museum for a new population of art consumers. In this sense, the reconstruction is a strategy of survival, a fight against obsolescence, and ultimately the creation of new subjects of art history—indeed, of History itself. Jameson’s capitalised version of History, based on the Lacanian Real, positioned history as
inaccessible to us except through the interpretation of texts; history had become textual. The USD858 million reconstruction project, then, comes into the realm of the Nietzschean “will to power”—a healthy and competitive attempt to enter the museum market of official Contemporary Art (with capitals), bolstered by its Modern collection, which remains unsurpassed. Lowry came to the museum in 1995, its sixth director, and revealed his interest in carrying the museum onward to public spectacle, which he has succeeded in doing in a contradictory way. Under his reign, Taniguchi was deployed to execute an inconspicuous building, going against the grain set up by Thomas Krens and Frank Gehry in Bilbao, which brought the singular spectacle of the museum building—what Venturi and Scott-Brown called a “monumental duck”—into a renewed era of celebration.

**BIGNESS**

The decision to reorganise the museum around the binary of modern and contemporary is evident in the actual finished design of the museum; walkable space (the physical separation of Modernism and Contemporary Galleries) is the most manifest expression, followed by which artists, artworks, and aesthetic groupings are found in those spaces. The museum used the terms “Modernist Galleries” and “Contemporary Galleries” and, to reinforce the separation, located them on different floors, thereby remanifesting and embodying the distinction in actual, designed space. The expansion signifies this distinction on many levels. The contemporary constitutes its own episteme ("1970 to the present"). The contemporary exceeds the modern (two floors, 1880-1940 and 1940-1970). The contemporary potentially includes the postmodern but is not limited to it ("1970-present"). The museum is untroubled in the deployment of the term, used everywhere in the wider field of the institutions to signify the art of the present. (It does not challenge the term. It conforms to it.) The museum is not aiming to differentiate itself from the horde of MCAs.
The museum is experiencing the same limit as the now-global MCAs. The museum is less a genuine attempt to represent the past than it is a conspicuous display of élite objects, many of which were paradoxically created with critical intentions but have now been colonised, superficially, by the commodity system, spectacle, and the bottom line of record numbers of museum visitors.8

A key aspect of Lowry’s accomplishment at the museum has been in expanding the museum’s audience and the scale of the building, to accommodate the newly minted mass of art consumers. Foster has suggested that as museum contents get uploaded into digital archives (an extension of André Malraux’s concept of the *musée imaginaire* or “museum without walls”) and are consequently more available than in previous eras, the experience of the museum building itself takes on a heightened significance. The museum must offer something that visitors will not get elsewhere. The museum building must become a spectacle, both as a singular experience in physical space and “as an image to be circulated in the media in the service of brand equity and cultural capital” (Foster 2003: 82). The museum was, Lowry writes, “born of a fundamental conviction that modern art (that is, the art of our time) is as exciting and important as the art of the past, and that the pleasures and lessons of engagement with it should be as large as possible” (Lowry 2005: 13). It almost sounds as if Lowry had been reading Koolhaas’ manifesto on “Bigness” and taking it literally; make the audience bigger, the building bigger, the returns bigger. This is the story of the reconstruction of MoMA, which basically equalled an altogether new building—almost doubled in size—to register its commitment to “the contemporary”, all part of a real or imagined connection to the revolutions of a hundred or so years ago.

The museum’s new atrium, at 110 feet, exemplifies the ideology of Bigness. This extends throughout most of the second floor galleries, which are double height and are the ones

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8 The tourist population which went down in the post-9/11 depression has long since gone up again.
designed to accommodate the contemporary. Foster noted this expansion in his review of the museum: “the Contemporary Galleries … are large enough to contain King Kong in the next remake” (2004: 24). The museum was planned and constructed on a narrative of contemporary art as something that was getting larger all the time. Richard Serra was seen as the paradigm and the precedent, or anticipation, of the future. Serra’s cor-ten steel sculptures are often described with the epithet “architectural” because they are large “walk-in” works of minimalism; they demand a bodily exercise from their viewer, as the shifting perspectives of the works are only permitted by the viewer’s own movement and experience. For MoMA, architecture became the site for imagining the future. If we read the space of the completed building we must conclude that the curators, director and architect, believed that the future of the contemporary was on an inevitable course of ever larger works. This was a perception that broke significantly with Barr’s original vision of the museum as being organised around apartment-sized rooms; such rooms were radical, for Barr, because they presupposed a bourgeois art that was affordable, spontaneous, and accessible to general ownership, in rejection of the overlarge salon paintings of the nineteenth-century which were elitist by comparison. The new atrium signifies a turn away from the old apartment-sized rooms, which are retained on the fourth and fifth floors in the Modernist Galleries. This confidence in the future Bigness of art was a perception not limited to those at MoMA. Its excitement was also that of Frank Gehry/Thomas Krens’ venture in Bilbao, the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, Mass MoCA (Krens again), and DIA: Beacon in New York State.

The path by which the museum arrived at the contemporary, but did not arrive at the postmodern—terminologically, at the most public level—is not difficult to trace. The contemporary was suddenly used in the Taniguchi remake, whereas the postmodern has never been officially deployed in the foreground at the museum. What we see is that “the contemporary” is not the value-free zone that it wants to be, always
trying to be one step ahead of the oppression called history. However, neither is it a straightforward carrying-on of modern or postmodern under the guise of a new term exploited for its relatively association-free quality (as opposed to the modern and postmodern, which have ideologically heavy associations). Certainly, the immense dilation in the sphere of museums of contemporary art at the end of the century seems to fall into that critical perspective of the postmodern that understands the culture as one of the flattening out of the modern, as Jameson insisted (1991: 306), whereby the once élite culture of the moderns is suddenly available—democratised, or to use Bertolt Brecht’s term, “plebeianised”. Inevitably, this entails a thinning out of its critical substance; indeed, commercialisation makes distribution possible in the first place. In the contemporary, we see an instituted critical art, but a critical attitude without commitment to a metanarrative, teleology, or a future as anything different from that which already exists. The narrative of the time is one of the replacement of hierarchy with accumulation and composition with addition. To quote Koolhaas, playfully modifying Mies van der Rohe (“Less is more”) for the age of super-capitalism, the slogan of MoMA today must indefatigably be, “More and more, more is more” (2004a: 163). Those in charge of the project did not go so far as to rename the museum, which would have been suicide given its brand and recognition value, but the decision to include and internally foreground the term “contemporary” is symptomatic of the broader urban ethos in which the establishment now finds itself, which is global and digital. Let us now look at the corporate and architectural context of Taniguchi/Lowry’s MoMA.

**MODERNISM’S CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS**

The boom in museums and institutes of “the contemporary” is paralleled by the Guggenheim Museum’s emergence as a global brand in the 1990s and its remarkable transformation into a franchise under director Thomas Krens. (His years as director were 1988-2008). The role that architecture has
played within this process is astounding. Although MoMA did not go down the path of Krens’ to turn itself, like the Guggenheim, into a franchise (it is, however, certainly a “brand”), the super-capitalist era for MoMA has seen the museum strike deals with large corporations. For instance, JP Morgan Chase Bank, Ford Motors, Banana Republic, and Target have recently supported MoMA. Finance capital and the oil, motor, and clothing industries can be read not as separate entities, but as corporate parts of the museum itself, parts of the museum’s overall latent (invisible) content and integration into American culture.

The Guggenheim Museum’s expansion illustrates the most visible turn to corporate culture within museums, and might be read as part of American culture’s long Cold War triumph. The Guggenheim has seen an age of its multiplication, adjusting itself to life in the global economy. Michael Brenson has argued that the phenomenon is a part of America’s expansive, ideological confidence in a world reduced to the imagination of capitalism (Brenon 2002: 5). Much has been written already on its proliferation, notably Brenson’s pamphlet, The Guggenheim, Corporate Pluralism, and the Future of the Corporate Museum and John Loughery’s essay “The Future of Museums: The Guggenheim, MoMA, and the Tate Modern”. These usefully draw connections between each of the museums’ new business functions. Both accept the exceptional talent and vision of Krens but are critiques of a museum culture that, in Loughery’s words, has become “more concerned with real estate than art” (631). Branches of the Guggenheim museum can now be found in Berlin, Venice, and, most famously, in Bilbao, Spain. In 2001, an ambitious branch designed by Koolhaas opened in Las Vegas in the Venetian (an oversized hotel-casino complex) but did not last and closed in 2003. A Guggenheim-Hermitage gallery, not as ambitious as the Guggenheim, also opened in the Venetian Hotel, which continues today. At the end of the 1990s, a proposed Guggenheim Museum was planned for New York’s East River (designed by Gehry), an impressive and gigantic Bilbao-looking docked sea
creature from the depths of the ocean (the depths of the unconscious), but construction was called off after the events of September 11, 2001.

Four more Guggenheims have been proposed, which only serves to strengthen the case for the intoxication of the institution with globalism: one for Guadalajara, Mexico; one for Bucharest, Romania; Zaha Hadid has won the competition to design a Guggenheim-Hermitage in Vilnius, Lithuania; and a Helsinki Guggenheim competition has been a recent focus for the architectural spectacle. Add to this already complex picture the Guggenheim under construction in Abu Dhabi. Designed by Gehry, it is slated to be, as everything in the pre-money crash UAE was to be, the largest Guggenheim Museum in the world, and will be located next door to the new Louvre “satellite” museum (the first Louvre satellite/franchise). The large and the extra-large are, from Starbucks Coffee and indoor ski-slope to shopping mall and Hotel Atrium, Dubai and Abu Dhabi’s inaugural “style” (or, arguably, a substitute for style).

The recent era of the distribution of “the contemporary” furnishes us with a history of plundering the world beyond MoMA and New York. In other words, not unlike the original Frank Lloyd Wright Guggenheim, MoMA was once a special, one of its kind museum: an avant-garde cultural apparatus. MoMA today goes on, but it does so in the context of a mass of museums that has mimicked that historical museum’s effort. The foundation of similar museums in its long twentieth-century wake served to enhance MoMA’s aura. Michael Kimmelman, writing in the New York Times, called it the “corporate headquarters of modernism” (2004: 35). This diagnosis of the museum as corporate is a way of signifying the museum’s impotence, of pointing to its non-antagonistic, now defused modernist nature. MoMA represents a modernism without its Utopian agenda: an emptied out, non-teleological modernism. John Updike, in his New Yorker review, gestured towards the same when he noted, “It has the enchantment of a bank after hours” (2004: 1). MoMA can be said to have inaugurated a phenomenon, but is no longer at the helm of that phenome-
non. The Guggenheim can more accurately be said to be at the helm of the exploitation by museums of globalism and the belief that wider and wider distribution is inevitable—as far as capitalism can reach.

MoMA had grown up as a breakthrough twentieth-century institution, as a true centre of culture, founded by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan, at a time in which “the modern” was still a building concept, not an established cultural phenomenon. Since then, however, the place for contemporary art museums has come to seem virtually limitless the world over; existing in the old rich countries, but also those recently opened to big capital (in Eastern Europe as well as parts of Asia, and now the Middle East). If the so-called “Bilbao-effect” has created anything, it has created desire where there was none before—a massive historical expansion in desire. It is a desire for contemporaneity; although, increasingly, the Bilbao-effect has become the Bilbao-syndrome, wherein a frenzy of singular-sculptural or technological buildings are constructed, each city assuming that the investment will inevitably be regenerative. Within globalism there is a notion—an ideology—that one only need “build it and they [the masses] will come”. What we witness in the most extreme cases of the Bilbao-syndrome is a short-term, event-oriented architecture, the creation of a temporary global centre, like a blockbuster film that must recover its investment within the first week. A good deal of the work in this sort of contemporary architecture lies in marketing, publicity, hype, and image development.

Contrary to this picture of the lavish development of “the contemporary”, the construction of the concept of the contemporary—its gaining of momentum and building of confidence—has in another, different capacity gone on outside of the New York MoMA (and high finance projects such as the Guggenheim), often at small, independent, occasionally short-lived and usually marginal museums, galleries, and artist-run initiatives (ARIs). These smaller projects have not had the pressure of a constant expansion in audience size, and have in
consequence tended to be more daring and experimental.

**Paradoxical Minimalism**

Hal Foster writes of the remake, “abstraction still rules, but it is not the pictorial-spiritual variety of the *White on White* of Malevich—it is architectural-financial” (2004: 25). Modernist, for Foster, has been reduced to mean “Minimal”, and implies a dematerialisation associated rightly with a reversal of what these terms used to mean. Minimal once meant the exposure of technique and material, the foregrounding of function, and modernist meant the following through of functions in the elaboration of forms (according to the slogan “form follows function”). In the deployment of Taniguchi, for Foster, illusion is back. Taniguchi is reported to have said to the trustees: “Raise a lot of money for me, I’ll give you good architecture. Raise even more money, I’ll make the architecture disappear” (Foster 2004). This statement was circulated and endlessly repeated in the media as the explanatory position of Taniguchi on his redesign: a disappearing act.

Foster’s argument reminds us too that MoMA’s history goes beyond that of the museum, its trustees, its curators, and the collection, into the realm of the past and History itself. History, for Foster, as for any Marxist, is ultimately one great collective force, driven by contradiction. MoMA’s past hints at enmeshment to the twentieth century’s conflicts, tensions, liberations, wars, mass deaths, repression, overthrows, and despair. Foster writes:

MoMA still offers little sense of the great events of the 20th century, or of the entanglements of Modernism with Fascism, totalitarianism, Fordism, mass culture and capitalist spectacle. Perhaps the first task of such a museum is formalist—to highlight the intrinsic properties of each work and the internal development of each art—but that needn’t be the only task. Like some others, I had hoped (even expected) some space to be used to evoke more context: why not a presentation that points to cultural prob-
lematics and historical conjunctures, and brings other kinds of objects, images and documents into play ... As it is, an old pedagogy is weakened and a new one has not yet emerged. (2004: 24)

It is possible that Mario Perniola’s notion of an “Egyptian pedagogy” succeeds the modernist pedagogy of which Foster speaks. Such pedagogy has arguably been deployed in the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania, which combines artefacts from the ancient and the contemporary together as “contemporaries” within that installation; a mummy in close proximity to a Kandinsky, and nearby, a Damien Hirst spin painting. The combination of old and new seems to offer a dialectical displacement to the stalemate of homogenous contemporaneity or strict linear progression in hegemonic art museum culture, but could as easily be grasped as an all-in, uncritically inclusive contemporaneity.

Given the right “hermeneutic bomb” (Smith 2001: 5), the discussion could turn toward repressed cultural problematics cited by Foster. But MoMA functions to give all of what was subversive about historical modernism an air of respectability. The fascist element, which is everywhere in the writings of many first-wave modernists (Marinetti obviously, but also Pound, Eliot, Lewis et al), can get lost in the sentimental effect of the museum context.9 Awe in the face of the objects of art

9 Paul Virilio makes the connections clear in his *Art and Fear*. He cites Richard Hulsenbeck, a leading German Dadaist, speaking to a Berlin audience in 1918: “We were for the war. Dada today is still for war. Life should hurt. There is not enough cruelty” (29). He cites Filippo Marinetti’s slogan for Italian futurism around 1909: “War is the world’s only hygiene” (29), which leads, as Virilio rightly pointed out, “directly, though thirty years later ... to the shower blocks of Auschwitz-Birkenau” (29–30). Several more fascist or proto-fascist sympathies are brought up and cited by Virilio. According to Hulsenbeck: “*Dadaism demands ... The international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical communism*” (1998: 256)
replaces the confrontation of who we are and where we have come from, and what the twentieth century may have been about. This is a basic problem of the “laboratory conditions” of the white box display, as a form—the hegemonic modernist exhibition mode. Foster argues against the sterilizing tendency of MoMA, which is a technique carried over from high modern thought and also from the practices of modern science (hence Pound’s metaphor of laboratory conditions [1960: 23]). Taniguchi and Lowry were under no obligation to choose continuity over rupture. Foster would have preferred to see an intervention rather than an endorsement of the establishment, a change in direction. He is critical of any tendency to smooth out rupture in the deployment of the twentieth century:

Between the fifth and fourth floors the P&S presentation breaks at 1940, as do most courses in 20th-century art; this break tacitly accepts the hiatus produced by Fascism, World War Two and the Holocaust—repression, exile and death—and the brochure for the fourth floor does cite Adorno on the near impossibility of lyric poetry after Auschwitz. Yet, again, you wouldn’t know these events had occurred, and in this regard too the new MoMA is in keeping with the old. Within its affirmative story is a historical silence that might be fundamental to postwar reconstruction, in which (to put it crudely) the recovery of Modernism in the form of ‘the Triumph of American Painting’ is offered up as cultural compensation for the devastation of Europe. (Foster 2004: 24)

The feeling of the obscure flattening out of History expressed by Foster is only exacerbated by Taniguchi’s refusal to break out of the paradigm of the modernist white box. Foster admits that the opening exhibit—“the hang”—was not permanent; it has since been reconfigured several times—a hallmark of the flexible, arbitrary nature of “the contemporary”.10

10 For Foster, the hang was seemingly too random, with peers (in
As MoMA shows, “the contemporary” is a site of power in itself. This does not mean that the contemporary is not critical, but that its critique is readily housed within the centre of the spectacle: the museums—the exact place that used to be the object of attack for the most radical of the moderns and the postmoderns. For MoMA, the reconstruction was a chance to create its own space for the contemporary and to give identity to non-identity. Smith, writing in Australia’s Art Monthly, criticised the entire layout of the museum for sidling up against the leading commercial architecture of our time. For him, Taniguchi’s redesign turns out to be, without really trying to hide the fact, a themed mall or entertainment centre, at least in basic concept. The massive atrium, with its 110 foot high ceiling is what led Smith to this association:

The main floor is nailed down at its centre by Barnett Newman’s Broken Obelisk 1963-69 … Although this sculpture is one of the few works in the collection that could survive in such a space, it establishes immediately a double message: Modern Art is iconoclastic—see how we endorse the artist’s attack on classicism—but don’t you love how he does it—such élan, such risky solidity, such authority. Here we are. And there you are. Passing each other, comfortably, en route to the next art excitement … this kind of messaging gets too close to a themed fountain in a mall or an entertainment centre. (2005: 4–5)

The very size of the reconstructed MoMA has more in common with that other massive interior space of the modern age, namely the shopping mall, than it does the traditional museum; certainly, it shares the necessary technological pre-importance as well as age) separated between the modern and the contemporary with no rationale. This is a product of the physical separation of the galleries into ultimately arbitrary, or generationally contingent, eras. For example, Robert Smithson and Bruce Nauman are in modern galleries, whereas Richard Serra and Gordon Matta-Clark are in the contemporary.
conditions—air conditioning (which Rem Koolhaas once said “launched the endless building” (2004a: 162)) and the escalator, with its enormous consequences for building space. These factors are not new to the Taniguchi version of the building (they were part of the very aesthetic in Cesar Pelli’s 1984 incarnation) but they do help to intensify, and render possible, the experience of Bigness that Taniguchi has helped bring into being for MoMA in the age of contemporaneity.

The atrium, Smith suggests, delivers its audience to what is typical of most postmodern foyers and multiplexes: a “mixture of disorientation and directedness” (2005: 4–5). It is perhaps not unlike the postmodern hotel (for Jameson, in one of his science-fictional moments), the Westin Bonaventure in L.A., which represents, for him, a mutation in space that has not yet found its equivalent mutation in the human subject (1991: 44). A “mutation” of this order may be occurring in relation to fine art at the new MoMA, in which a mutation in art exhibition space has not yet found its equivalent in contemporary art itself. Or, a more convincing argument would be that the atrium of Taniguchi’s MoMA offers us an alarming disjunction between the scale of modern and modernist art and its built environment. This is a space designed to anticipate that which is yet to come, that which has not yet arrived (harking back to Taniguchi’s own statement and Bloch’s Utopianism). Jameson writes of the Westin Bonaventure: “The newer architecture therefore … stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions” (1991: 39). On the other hand, it is entirely possible that the atrium, and huge contemporary galleries, is simply the institutional-spatial expression of the establishment’s full endorsement of a particular, late, and very large form of sculptural practice, the closest of which might be the large sculptures of Richard Serra.

The size of the contemporary galleries is therefore suggestive of another disjunction between the modern and the contemporary. Modernism’s basic unit was the canvas suited to modern urban life and city mobility, with its manageable size
and suitability for the modern apartment. Art’s destination was not institutional; it was the private home. (The original of MoMA’s galleries, right up until Pelli’s redesign, were like ghost apartments.) Today, the museum challenges artists with the provision of space itself; can the artist create a work that will transcend this space—that is, not be swallowed by it whole? Is Koolhaasian Bigness not the default of the contemporary exhibition space? MoMA’s atrium has been readied for the next phase of spectacle, the next part in the story of art’s ability to attract crowds and also compete with the other culture industries, such as cinema, or the theme park itself; a market the museum entered with the introduction of its $20 (USD) entrance fee, which in 2004 made the museum the most expensive in the US. The museum has become the destination for contemporary art (or, in any case, it sees itself that way). Likewise, audiences have become more subject to commodification than before, the mark of which is perhaps the bar code (Universal Product Code) found on the back of every museum ticket scanned on entry into the museum; the information it rapidly provides the retailer potentially alters the whole planning, distribution, and quantity of goods or artworks on display. The more recent introduction of iPod Touch software and geotagging in museums offers another level of the digitalization/commodification of the museum-goer (such as at Tasmania’s MONA), with unknown horizons.

Smith provides a phenomenology of walking through the space and analyzing the narrative of art’s great transformations. Contemporary Art is his main area of concern (capitalised, to indicate its institutional approval), the challenges of which he reasonably believes MoMA refuses to live up to. Smith argues that “Contemporary Art lite” (2005: 8) is the dominant tone at the museum. He uses the term in homage to Stallabrass’ “High Art Lite”, which is used to describe the phenomenon of young British artists, or YBAs, in the 1990s. Stallabrass suggested using “high art lite” in preference to YBA and its cognates, “Brit art” and “new British art”, because the latter are too confining for a tendency that he un-
derstands as not limited to Britain, but is potentially global. He writes in *High Art Lite*: “I hope that it captures the idea ... an art that looks like but is not quite art, that acts as a substi-
tute for art” (Stallabrass 1999: 2). MoMA effectively works the
same way, its contemporary galleries provide an art that looks
like an avant-garde, but is in fact mostly pre- or pseudo-
contemporary.\(^{11}\)

Smith and Foster both critique the over-reliance given to
Minimalism at the new MoMA. In Smith’s argument, the
inaugural installation functioned to stall and distort contem-
porary developments beyond Minimalism. MoMA’s prejudic-
es were revealed in the construction “Untitled (Contempo-
rary)”, which was the title used in MoMA’s brochures and on
its wall inside. Smith’s point was that “the contemporary” was
deployed literally as parenthetical in relation to Minimalism;
the contemporary was as offered as a kind of *afterthought*.
This evinces the museum’s failure to go beyond late modern-

\(^{11}\) The emergence of the YBAs was a major event informing the ide-
logical formation of mainstream museum art in the twenty-first
century that MoMA does not acknowledge. The YBA phenomenon
was controversial for numerous reasons, not least of which was the
role advertising mogul Charles Saatchi played in instituting what
was essentially his own collection, and his own taste for “bad taste”
(when Saatchi’s exhibition *Sensation* finally came to New York,
Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was particularly offended by Chris Ofili’s
elephant dung paintings), and especially of using branding and mar-
keting techniques; for instance, the auction house Christie’s was a
sponsor to the show, which reduces the show to an explicit attempt
to drive up value in the works. But, then again, MoMA has always
underprivileged British art in its collecting. Still, it seemed like sheer
rejection of current British art when *Sensation* was not held at
MoMA, but instead at the Brooklyn Museum. The *Sensation*
exhibition is indicative of the situation of art at the end of the century,
especially if we are willing to develop a kinship between it and the
notorious “Armoury show” of 1913. Not only did the show cause
protest on opening as well as on closing, but also the museum fa-
mously felt it wise to include a Health Warning for visitors to the
show: “the contents of this exhibition may cause shock, vomiting,
confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety”.
ism. Finally, Smith charged MoMA with not knowing, nor
developing the mechanisms (growing new organs) to know,
how to deal with internet art (also digital art, tech art, etc.),
which has been discussed elsewhere by Stallabrass; beyond
that is an original iPod included in a cabinet on the Design
level. There is a Media Room but its collection is limited to
film and video. MoMA may never register the “conditions of
contemporaneity” and the values of the art produced within
its paradigm—that is, not stylistically Modern but genuinely
new and emergent, the novum. MoMA has more recently
purchased a number of video games and the appropriate
hardware to play them; this might be a hesitant step towards
“the contemporary”. But in fine art MoMA has remained tied
to the Modern European past and its fulfillment in the Amer-
ican tradition, that is, to celebrating the now deep ancestry of
one only (virtually national) aspect of contemporaneity. 12

12 MoMA remains tied to the past in another sense—that is, in its
failure to acknowledge the wealth of women artists who have con-
tributed to the story of modern and, especially, Contemporary Art.
Jerry Saltz, then art critic of the Village Voice, complained rightly of
the low-representation of women modern and contemporary artists
in the new MoMA. This complaint continues the one made by rally-
ing artists, critics and passionate visitors when the Cesar Pelli build-
ing was completed and MoMA reopened in 1984. A pamphlet from
the Museum Archives reads: “Museum of Modern Art Opens: But
NOT to women artists”. Their demands were as follows:
• MoMA policy should reflect what is really happening in con-
temporary art and not simply what some dealers want to sell.
• Women artists have been in the forefront of the art move-
ments since the 70s and 80s. We demand adequate represen-
tation for our work.
• We demand that MoMA:
  1) Exhibit women’s work from the permanent collec-
tion.
  2) Feature women’s work in loan exhibitions.
  3) Establish a policy for acquiring women’s work.
According to the pamphlet: “Of 165 artists included in MoMA’s in-
augural exhibit for its new exhibition hall, only 14 are women artists.
The museum has been locked in displaying its own “spectacle value”, as noted by Foster (2003: 81). The museum is reduced to reproducing itself as a list of chart toppers or greatest hits, which forfeits criticality for popularity and ease of consumption. This perspective ties into Smith’s critique of the museum becoming a theme park. Jerry Saltz once made the point: “you can’t develop what Oscar Wilde called the ‘critical spirit’ if you’re mainly seeing masterpieces” (2005b).

MoMA still has much to teach. What it used to teach—the metanarrative of the torpedo—is what many postmodernists tried to escape, only to find one fine day all their critiques and complaints in a room nearby, absorbed by the additive logic of museums and bourgeois history generally. The modernist thinker Robert Scholes, in his work on the “paradoxy of modernism”, summed up nicely the three key aspects of MoMA’s thought:

1. Modernism equals Abstraction—“is essentially abstract”.
2. Modernism is mainly Parisian, with Continental offshoots and American successors.
3. Figuration is a retrograde movement, going against the progressive tide that was flowing toward Abstract Impressionism. [sic] (2006: 93)

The deployment of “the contemporary” renders these elements as past, because the Hegelian inevitability-effect is lost in the present. Yet, the pedagogical value of MoMA still exists no matter how “corporatised” and “spectacular” it may have become in the minds of its early twenty-first century critics and its complicit architect and director. This position must be defended. The museum has always been a business first and foremost, a company that is explicitly in the business of running a museum of modern art. This is obvious. It is an institution of modernity—which is to say, of monopoly capitalism.

This exhibition is entitled ‘An Exhibition Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture.”"
But unlike standard capitalist companies, it occupies an unusual, ultimately defensible, position in society and culture: it is both of modernity and in critical response to the world historical phenomenon of modernity. It tries to tell us that modernity did happen, which is significant in itself, to borrow Huyssen’s phrase, in a “culture of amnesia”. The reminder that our current way of life, indeed our whole socio-economic system, is tentative, provisional, and contingent, remains the radical aspect of MoMA.

**Pluralism Reigns**

What is especially interesting in the museum’s use of architecture, within its history of constructing, expanding and reconstructing, is that at these junctions the museum is given its own moment for expression as opposed to the arguably more passive and consumptive practice of collecting and displaying. At each expansion, the building equals the institution’s “most representative artifact, not something it had collected, but something it had created, the most potent signifier of its Utopian aspirations” (Wallach 1992: 208). The original MoMA building was designed by the architects Philip S. Goodwin and Edward D. Stone. It was homage to Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus in Germany: clean lines and hard edges, a machine aesthetic that set up a conscious juxtaposition between itself and the surrounding nineteenth-century New York brownstones from the “backward” Victorian past. MoMA inverted its aesthetic environment to offer a future of “rationality, efficiency, and functionality” (Wallach: 208). MoMA was in what Wallach called its Utopian stage, which is the image of the museum within full and progressive modernity, before the querying of the “great collective project”, before deconstruction, before the reign of plurality. The Taniguchi reconstruction is arguably the opposite of the Utopian; it is representative of a wholly complacent attitude towards that which exists. Taniguchi does not show us a way out.

In the discipline of architecture, MoMA has had a tenden-
cy within history to inaugurate and promote a style. It has given style definition through a process of discovery, celebration, and exhibition. Taniguchi registered another layer to this tendency that indicates the museum in a kind of loop of self-influence. It actively produces contemporaneity. Taniguchi writes:

MoMA has in the past used the design of its built form as an opportunity to regenerate itself and to express what is current in the arena of modernism. As an integral part of the Museum’s history, this record of regeneration should not be destroyed, but should be preserved and celebrated in the juxtaposition of past and present, the new or experimental contrasted to the known or established. (qtd. in Elderfield 1998: 242)

This is not a discourse on modernity. Taniguchi’s terms register a respect for context, the past, and the already known as opposed to the new, the shocking, the revolutionary. Taniguchi opted for the preservation of historical facades from various earlier expansions and the reconstruction of Philip Johnson’s Museum Garden: the same garden that Richard Serra recommended be the first thing “scrapped” in any redesign. Taniguchi’s vision tended towards a relatively conservative continuity, the display or reframing of the “tradition of the new” rather than its concrete enactment. In deploying Taniguchi, the museum has opted for restoration over revolution. But no one today is going to be convinced by the full project of restoring the modern, which is an impossible task. What we are left with, then, is the shell of the modern: its façade, a hollowed out modernism, a modern that lacks a relationship to the future, one that sees the future as one of undiscontinued contemporaneity, which is by definition wholly distinct from the modernist future.

The history of MoMA’s own major architectural exhibitions proves instructive. The Goodwin and Stone building (MoMA’s first purpose-built structure) was executed in the “international” or Bauhaus style in 1939, which saw the mu-
seum materially (that is, spatially and architecturally) merge and become part of the Modern Movement architecture. Like abstraction in painting, the Modern Movement was seen as an irreversible, inevitable element of progress within democratic, secular, industrial societies which the United States aspired to at the time, and which Europe expressed, even more strikingly and disturbingly, in the “modernism” of its various fascisms. Architecture, in other words, was caught up in the intoxicating, consensual hallucination of the vision of linear forward development to which Barr’s image of the torpedo gave the most succinct aesthetic articulation. In 1932, Philip Johnson, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and Barr travelled in and surveyed “advanced” Europe. (Someone should make a film about that trip.) Shortly after, they held their show Modern Architecture: International Exhibition that showcased Modern Movement architectural concepts, drawings, scale models, designs, and ephemera. It was a summation of advanced work in architecture in the 1920s. The names of the architects in the show, the so-called “heroes”, from Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe to Gropius and Jacobus Oud, testify to the overall aesthetic allegiance of MoMA: avant-garde, in the classic sense meaning future-oriented, hailing singular abstraction, and strictly following dictums such as “less is more”. The show had great ambition; it was to result in the isolation of a new style that would, in a way comparable to International Gothic or Romanesque in their day, “take over the discipline of art” (Johnson 1988: 7).

MoMA’s architecture, then, broke away from the royal hierarchies of aristocratic Europe, the palatial paradises built before the French Revolution. It was not a style appropriate to the Grecian or Roman nostalgia favoured by the Victorian bourgeoisie. Modern Movement architecture was supposed to shock the local bourgeoisie when it arrived in town, with its austere lack of ornament (which historically signified class, taste, and refinement), its brief against homeliness, and above all, its arrogant disrespect for context. “The Modern”—as the museum was affectionately called—instead offered a set of
principles, techniques, even demands, all based on the technologies and newer materials of glass, steel, and reinforced concrete. The *Modern Architecture* show and the Goodwin and Stone building taken together formed a manifesto agitating for a different future architecturally, but also socially.

Taniguchi’s redesign of the museum reveals a different kind of institution: one that has shifted position, but not radically. The expansion indicates the institution’s deepened neo-conservatism. Unlike the international style, which was hailed as the inevitable architecture to come, Taniguchi deployed minimalism as a stylistic choice out of the supermarket of architectural styles that were historically and ideologically open to him in the late 1990s. There is no sense of grand narrative present in Taniguchi’s reasons. If anything, the deployment of minimalism reveals a return of the most conservative tradition: conserving the past for its own sake. In the words of Terence Riley, the curator of architecture at MoMA: “Taniguchi’s design for the Museum of Modern Art must be seen as a response to the needs of a particular institution rather than a disembodied manifesto for museums everywhere” (Davidson 2005: 101). This attitude is not modernist; it is also not simply a case of postmodernism. Taniguchi’s building neither epitomises modernism’s ideals, wrapped into a singular statement of aesthetic authoritarianism, nor is it a critique of modernism that tries to demonstrate or mark modernism’s critical failures.

The theorist and critic Cynthia Davidson compared Taniguchi’s Japanese museum designs to the new MoMA, saying that the style was “eerily reminiscent of the new MoMA itself … similarly free of critical architectural ideas and similarly resistant to criticism” (2005: 101). Davidson noted something other critics have omitted: the new architecture’s conceptual and aesthetic relevance to the *Light Construction* exhibition, held in 1995, curated by Terence Riley (who was chief of architecture at MoMA at the time of Taniguchi’s selection). Davidson argues that Riley’s use of the word “manifesto” speaks to the institution’s continued inter-
est in the purchase of influence, or what is better called its ongoing authoritarianism. Davidson writes:

Because Riley’s statement comes at a time when the surfaces of “light construction” are seeking to claim superiority in a debate with form, his comment cannot be taken lightly. Seven years ago, when Taniguchi was declared winner of the MoMA design competition, the museum rejected the more dynamic and more experimental forms proposed by Herzog and de Meuron and Bernard Tschumi. In choosing Taniguchi, MoMA seemed to choose a side, if not a winner, in the form debate. (2005: 101–102)

Philip Johnson queried the possibility of a period style under late capitalism in his article for MoMA exhibition on Deconstructivist Architecture (curated by Johnson himself and Mark Wigley in 1988). Johnson’s position is summed up in the phrase “pluralism reigns” (Johnson: 8). Claims to the universal or global were shunned and hidden at all costs. Johnson wrote:

[H]owever delicious it would be to declare again a new style, that is not the case today. Deconstructivist architecture is not a new style. We arrogate to its development none of the messianic fervor of the modern movement, none of the exclusivity of that catholic and Calvinist cause. Deconstructivist architecture represents no movement; it is not a creed. It has no ‘three rules’ of compliance. It is not even ‘seven architects.’ (8)

If pluralism is all that is possible today, then Riley and MoMA must be particularly forceful if they want to render a style, which is effectively what they have done. But they have not undone the preconditions stated by Johnson. MoMA seeks to control an obsolete discourse in the form of its own self-image. They have produced a contemporary architecture in the form of a weak, undeconstructed, or hollowed out mod-
ernist minimalism. It checks all the necessary aesthetic boxes but remains empty at the core. It has no heralding sense of the future to come. It is not a beacon of light in the darkness. It has none of modernism’s ethic of the future. If the museum admits contemporaneity in adding contemporary galleries to its design, it has not followed through architecturally.

Johnson came near to announcing a paradoxical “anti-movement movement” in the act of denouncing the very possibilities of Movement today, which implies a high level of certainty about where we are headed historically. “Movement” is not part of “the contemporary”, where here it has been banished to the modern, archaic, or nostalgic, like analogue technology. The museum perpetuates itself and, like some political parties, it may only fully exist within its own imagination. MoMA has power and authority; MoMA does contribute to the very creation of the coming paradigm. Its authorial signature is transferred to the architects and enhances their possibility for success. The seven architects in Johnson and Wigley’s MoMA exhibition—showcasing Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi—went on to become big stars—the so-called “starchitects”—in the 1990s and 2000s. This was no accident. These architects were united, as John Rajchman has argued, but not through an idea of “deconstruction” (they were not interested in Jacques Derrida), but in a shared anti-postmodernist attitude—one that refuted quotationalist and historicist techniques—which expressed itself through the retrieval of modernist aesthetic tactics, which could then be re-branded as “contemporary” (Rajchman 2003). A curious paradox emerges; the decision to use Taniguchi’s design meant a departure from everything these seven architects were trying to do. Taniguchi can be said to be historicist because of his deployment of a version of the Bauhaus, however boutique a vision. Of the seven architects, Koolhaas, Eisenman, and Tschumi were in MoMA’s charette, and Tschumi, along with Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron—later to become known for the Tate Modern, London—were the finalists.
Let us turn to the Koolhaas entry, because more than the other designs his proposal concentrated an effort to radically redirect the institution down a different historical path. Unlike the more complacent Taniguchi, Koolhaas did not offer the comfort of continuity. Rather, the OMA’s proposal exhibited a concrete enactment of the “tradition of the new” (to use Harold Rosenberg’s phrase), as opposed to a mere frame for the new. In 1997, Koolhaas commented on the state of the museum:

I look at MoMA for the first time as an architect and I’m shocked. Shocked at the difference—I had never really “seen” MoMA, only looked at its contents (or its machinery). The old part of MoMA is shabby; the new part of MoMA [Cesar Pelli’s] is tacky. While ingenious, the architectural quality of the 80’s extension is dubious: its identity is blurred and compromised, its galleries have no particular qualities, the basement seems conceived as a corporate purgatory. (2004b: 195)

My fundamental interpretation is that the redesign, reconstruction, and expansion is indicative not of a museum whose achievement keeps building, but of a museum in the throes of a singular crisis. It is with this thought that we may turn to the museum that could have been. Koolhaas did even make it into MoMA committee’s final selection. MoMA can be charged with having used its own safe terms, privileging a reified version of modernism, namely “international style” minimalism, and a whole vocabulary of architecture promoted virtually for

13 The OMA’s book, produced as a proposal to the Museum, M(oMA) Charette: How to Make the Most of the Museum Boom (1997), which totals 400-pages, is currently unpublished. Muschamp noted: “As much a philosophical critique of the museum as a plan for its physical enlargement, the book deserves wider circulation” (Muschamp 1997). Really it ought to be published. Some of the book’s pages are reproduced in the OMA volume Content (Taschen 2004), but at a scale difficult to read without a magnifying glass; it is not adequate.
the occasion. When the architects involved in generating ideas for the new architecture offered up alternatives, MoMA seems to have looked the other way, preferring that which represented an aesthetic continuation with the old rather than a break into the new. The Taniguchi building is contemporary in the superficial sense but complacent in its perpetuation of a once-revolutionary, now hegemonic, style. From Koolhaas’ architect’s statement:

Theoretically, MoMA is about newness. Newness is ambiguous. It cannot last; it cannot have a tradition ... The splendor and uniqueness of MoMA’s history complicates its relationship with the present. The expectation of continuity penalizes what is “other”, what does not “fit”, or the “merely” contemporary. Beyond its power to intimidate, to set standards, to consecrate, an entire domain of exploration, experimentation has become problematic: its investment in a master narrative and the abundant evidence to support “the line” make certain new shows seem like mere tokenism or simply impossible. What can you challenge in a temple ... In this project, we have interpreted the extension as a single operation that maintains what is good, undoes what is dysfunctional, creates new potentials, and leaves open what is undecidable ... The creation of a single display building—a new MoMA—implies that it can be fully equipped to generate unique conditions for each segment of the collections and any of the exhibitions. It will have to accommodate drastically different scales .... Because .... the new building will contain the entire Museum program, it will have the advantages of bigness. (MoMA Archives, MoMA, New York, NY)

Koolhaas’s redesign proposal offers to save the museum only by destroying it first, by “dislodging the present positions”, which was the slogan the OMA team worked under for this project (Fig. 3). It is a design premised not on restoration, not on returning to a mythical modernist or Bauhaus set of
clean lines, but an embrace of the museum’s multiple functions, only one of which is the display of art.

Then-architecture critic for The New York Times, Herbert Muschump, noted that the museum has many functions “other than aesthetic contemplation. It sells watches. It throws parties. It courts the media. It makes deals. These functions … could be architecturally expressed” (Muschump 1996). Rising out of Johnson’s 1964 wing, Koolhaas positions a seven-storey tower called “MoMA, Inc”, which is conceived as holding all the administrative offices, a flatly corporate monument to the big business of contemporary art and the contemporary management of modern art. Koolhaas wanted to bring the museum’s current Lowry-paradigm into explicit relation to the body of the museum. It is a critical proposal, in this sense, in trying, as if following the Russian Formalist concept, to “lay bare the conditions of production”.

Taniguchi did not produce any alienation effects. Kool-
haas was opposed to the idea of making the architecture “disappear”, as Taniguchi winningly proposed. The OMA’s was a proposal, an experiment, for making the museum show its workings as a part of the globalist machine of production and consumption. Koolhaas was under no illusions that art and culture are manufactured relations and perceptions, not simply objects for display. It signifies an opposition to the new bourgeois or hegemonic “international style”. The architect was not interested in deploying architecture to conceal the fact that museums give grace and “soul” to money, power, and violence. To signal his irony, he proposed chandeliers to hang in the main atrium. This final touch is the true opposite of the theoretical and minimalist underpinnings of the Bauhaus tradition, which Koolhaas wanted to finally break the museum away from. Had this proposal been accepted, the foundations might have been laid for genuine debate about the nature of museums, the legacies of modernism and architecture in late commodity capitalism. Instead, in contrast to Koolhaas, the museum opted for safe continuity, silencing contemporary contradictions through homage to the past, to nostalgia.

Taniguchi’s massive atrium space is homage to a future that may already have been cancelled, a Utopian space far too big for anything the museum currently owns. It is a space that imagines the future as Bigness, an idea that comes out of postwar Minimalism, in which works could not be perceived in their totality and only grasped through duration and in the movement of one’s body through space—such as the large architectural and sculptural works of Serra—works which are given central placement in the Guggenheim, Bilbao and at Dia: Beacon in New York. In 2007, however, Serra was given his first retrospective at MoMA (or anywhere)—a show that would have been unthinkable in the pre-Taniguchi MoMA. The museum and Serra are in contemporaneity with one another. Taniguchi’s MoMA and Serra are coeval expressions of the limit that MoMA has experienced within the last two decades.
One finds a parallel to this limit in other works of sculpture in this period, such as staple Jeff Koons steel balloon objects or Louise Bourgeois spiders, which are repeatedly installed outside the entrances to the new museums (such as the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, and the Tate Modern, to name a few), or pasted into architectural renderings. These artworks have by now long since functioned to present architecture and architects as politically inoffensive, announcing that you have stepped into the smooth safety of globalised consumer space.

The museum in its reconstruction has become not so much a museum as a palace, the thing that the very institution of the museum negated historically (in France, after the 1789 revolution). Its campus exceeds that of the immediate and accessible object-filled spaces for the visitor and overflows into the many hundreds of rooms and residential apartments within Pelli’s tower on top of the museum and further with an additional tower designed by Jean Nouvel. The introduction of “the contemporary” signals that something has changed. This change signifies a shift in meaning—a defeat, a victory, or entry into enigma. It is the entry of contemporaneity into the museum: a difficult, incomplete, and unmapped condition.

14 Jean Nouvel’s 75-story tower (1,050-foot) will rise up against MoMA and into the sky above it dwarfing Pelli’s 1984 tower. The international developer Hines has proposed a mixed facility, with culture and commerce melding high above street level: a hotel, luxury apartments, and three floors for use by the museum, which may act as an extension to the modern and contemporary galleries. It has been conceived of as mutually beneficial for the business of the tower and museum alike; MoMA gets another 40,000 square feet of exhibition space and Hines gains philanthropic prestige—two types of contemporary capital. New York Times critic of architecture, Nicholai Ouroussoff, raised a question: “How did a profit-driven developer become more adventurous architecturally than MoMA, which has tended to make cautious choices in recent years?” (Ouroussoff 2007).
The task of the museum is to map the aesthetic response to the condition of the contemporary. But it goes beyond admitting a new style, adding another innovation or another generation to the collection, or hailing a hitherto unappreciated medium. “The contemporary” represents the arrival of the continuous historical critique of ourselves, in Foucauldian terms—of who we are. This category is the perpetual attempt to answer the question set up by Kant in “What is Enlightenment?”: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?

The deployment of “the contemporary” therefore represents a final institutional reconfiguring, if belatedly. It is best understood as the emergence into the conditions that arrive when societies become critical of modernity, but still seem to lack a viable alternative to modernity. In this time (unlike in postmodernism, which still held an essential attitude, however critical, towards modernism), neither continental Europe nor North America are the necessary central co-ordinates of the most consequential artistic production. That the museum is enamoured still of Euro- and American-centricity is partly because of historical inheritance, but that is not an excuse for a lack of risk in which, or whose, contemporaneity the museum decides to exhibit.

In addition, or as a consequence of these changes, the role of this museum has undergone a change in the early twenty-first century. Its unquestioned authority has waned (despite the success of “MoMA” as a brand, one that in the Museum Design Store on 53rd Street can be attached to any piece of design imaginable). This retraction of power finds a parallel loss of power in the city of New York itself, which was the city of modernity par excellence.

The contemporary is not a neutral zone. It is not what Roland Barthes called a “zero degree” or what Alfred H. Barr thought was “supine neutrality”. The contemporary is not a value-free zone precisely because of the cultural work of valuation and appraisal performed by ideological apparatuses such as MoMA. To riff on Jameson’s insight, as “modernism” came to be held as the aesthetic and intellectual response to
an incomplete modernisation, so too can Contemporary Art now be reconceived (its task, that is) as the aesthetic response to incomplete contemporaneity.

MoMA’s atrium and the large Contemporary Galleries signify the new centrality of 3D: sculpture, installation, and object are privileged. We are not confronted with a proliferation of walls for hanging flat pictures, but gigantic spaces in which to place or suspend things. To scan the Modernist Galleries today for the predecessor to our paradigm-of-no-paradigm is to arrive not at Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, which still had gravitas in the 1984 Pelli redesign of the museum, but at Duchamp’s *readymades* and his large glass works. Dada is the financial-architectural Unconscious of the Taniguchi redesign.

MoMA has admitted contemporaneity and the contemporary—meaning Bigness and the historical legacy of Dada—into its very shape, size, and being. But the museum is not meeting this challenge. It may be a problem within the ontology and conception of art itself today—a reasoning towards which Arthur Danto would probably be sympathetic. Art may not be able to perform its function with the subject of today, who may have mutated in another direction—maybe towards the archive or the screen.

The new museums (and MoMA is no exception here) are deployed and redeployed to economic ends. Globalism, as the ideology of globalisation, is commerce-driven development with the World Trade Organisation (founded in 1995) at its centre.15 Luxuriously architectural museums of the contemporary are deployed as signs of the public success of new countries and of cities being swept up into the world picture of simultaneous asynchronicity. For John Ralston Saul, the historic originality of globalism lay in its acceptance of commerce or “the reconceptualisation of civilisation through economics” (115) as the key shaping force for human events; the

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15 The WTO became a collective cultural symbol of the excesses of the system by 1999, most notably in the Seattle protests.
past, Saul argued, had relied on politics and armies (16). The high visibility of politics and armies is what we begin to witness once more when globalism enters into shutdown and collapse; the museums, as in 2002 (especially in the US), empty out and lay off staff, and sometimes even reduce lighting, due to shrinking tourist numbers.

The point that must be stressed is that the condition of “the contemporary” as distinct from the modern and the postmodern, albeit with signs of inheritance from both of those paradigms, is not just an idea that critics and theorists bring to the museum and apply coldly from the outside. On the contrary, it comes from above; it is an idea signalled by the new museum itself, by its own hot act of reconstruction. Since MoMA’s new building demonstrates the inclusion of official Contemporary Art in the collection, the contemporary has become a part of its standing as much as a part of its reading of modernity; “the contemporary” signifies the long historical decline of modernity’s confidence, conceptual and Hegelian relevance. One hopes that the revelation of the uses of the discourse at this museum may be illuminating for those who wish to undermine the activities of what has been justly called by Michael Kimmelman the “corporate headquarters of modernism” (35).

The big reconstruction is an attempt by the museum to “territorialise” the contemporary, but it is a necessarily incomplete territorialisation. MoMA in its new form is a museum readied for contemporaneity, poised for it, which, at this particular institution, may indeed be waiting for an arrival that may never come.