themes of contemporary art

visually art after 1980

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1-1 Cai Guo-Qiang | Inopportune: Stage One, 2004


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In our travels and visits to exhibitions of contemporary art over the past several years, we've encountered many unusual and challenging works of art. Here is a sampling:

- *Inopportune: Stage One* (2004) [1-1] by Cai Guo-Qiang, an installation showing nine identical white cars suspended in midair and positioned to create the impression of successive stages of a car flipping over in an explosion from a car bombing, while long tubes radiating colored light burst out in all directions from the windows (seen in the mid-career survey of the artist's work shown at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2008).
- *Your Blind Movement* (2010) by Olafur Eliasson filled a sequence of rooms with thick, swirling neon-colored fog, immersing and disorienting visitors, who lost all bearings (seen in the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin).
- *Urban Light* (2008) by Chris Burden, consisting of 202 restored cast iron vintage street lamps arranged like a small grove of trees in a public plaza facing Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles; the installation emits a luminous glow in the evening (seen in front of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).
- *The Eighth Day* (2001) [color plates 20 and 21], a "transgenic" artwork by Eduardo Kac, brought together living, bioengineered, glow-in-the-dark mice, plants, and fish and a biological robot ("biobot") in an environment housed under a clear four-foot-diameter Plexiglas dome (seen at the Institute for Studies in the Arts, Arizona State University, Tempe).
- An impressively large painted triptych by Li Tian Yuan (2001), based on a satellite image, shows progressively closer views of the artist and his infant son on the Great Wall of China (included in an international exhibition of art dealing with the interface of art and science at the National Museum, Beijing, China).
- A re-creation of Gino de Dominicis's controversial 1972 *Second Solution of Immortality: The Universe Is Immobile*, staged by the Wrong Gallery, situated a woman with Down syndrome in a nearly empty gallery, where she sat staring at a simple arrangement of symbolic objects (seen at the 2006 Frieze art fair in London,
where the stillness of the performance piece stood in stark contrast to the frenetic sensory overload elsewhere at the fair). 2

As these examples hint, the world of contemporary art is rich, diverse, and unpredictable. Although painting, photography, sculpture, drawing, and the crafts still attract a large number of practitioners, these familiar forms of art no longer subsume the field. Film, video, audio, installation, performance, texts, and computers are common media today, and artists are often fluent in several media. Artists freely mix media, or they may practice a medium with a long lineage in an unconventional way, such as making paintings that look like pixilated computer images or drawing with unconventional materials such as chocolate syrup.

Contemporary art is in flux. Old hierarchies and categories are fracturing; new technologies are offering different ways of conceptualizing, producing, and showing visual art; established art forms are under scrutiny and revision; an awareness of heritages from around the world is fostering cross-fertilizations; and everyday culture is providing both inspiration for art and competing visual stimulation. The diversity and rapid transformations are intriguing but can be daunting for those who want to understand contemporary art and actively participate in discussions about what is happening.

Along with the dynamic nature of contemporary art, content matters. Looking back at the history of modern art, it is debatable whether the idea of “art for art’s sake” truly took over the thinking of modernist theorists and artists. But certainly there were periods in the twentieth century, especially just after World War II, when critics (famously the American Clement Greenberg, who died in 1994) and some influential avant-garde artists advocated formalism, an emphasis on form rather than content when creating and interpreting art. Those invested in formalism were and are concerned mainly with investigating the properties of specific media and techniques, as well as the general language of traditional aesthetics (the role of color or composition, for instance). But formalism is inadequate for interpreting art that expresses the inner visions of artists or art that refers to the world beyond art. When pop art appeared in the 1960s, with its references to cartoons, consumer products, and other elements of shared culture, the limitations of formalism became evident, and a broader range of theories surfaced, including postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism, as we discuss later in this chapter.

Throughout the period we discuss—1980 to the present—artists have engaged deeply with meaningful content. Artists active after 1980 are motivated by a range of purposes and ideas beyond a desire to express personal emotions and visions or to display a mastery of media and techniques. Political events, social issues and relations, science, technology, mass media, popular culture, literature, the built environment, the flow of capital, the flow of ideas, and other forces and developments are propelling artists and providing content for their artworks.

Overview of History and Art History | 1980–2011

The past three decades have been eventful in virtually every area of human activity, including politics, medicine, science, technology, culture, and art. In the 1980s, fax machines and compact disc players entered widespread use, the first laptop computers were introduced, and early cellular telephones became available. Also in the 1980s, for
the first time in the United States, a woman was appointed to the Supreme Court, a woman traveled in space, and a woman headed a major party ticket as a candidate for vice president. The Berlin Wall was dismantled and Germany reunified in 1989, presaging the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.

In the 1990s numerous controversies raged over threats of global warming and genetic engineering of plants and animals, and a sheep was successfully cloned in 1997. Also in the 1990s a brutal civil war led to the breakup of Yugoslavia into several independent republics, ethnic massacres devastated the African state of Rwanda, and nationalist conflicts broke out in the new states of Georgia and Azerbaijan in the former Soviet Union. Early in the 1990s apartheid officially ended in South Africa. By the mid-1990s, the Internet system linked millions of users. In 1995, the Federal Building in Oklahoma City was destroyed by American terrorists.

The 2000s so far have been extremely violent. In September 2001 the World Trade Center in New York was destroyed and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., attacked by Islamist terrorists. The United States—led invasion of Afghanistan commenced later that fall, and in 2003, the United States led an invasion of Iraq that toppled the government of Saddam Hussein. Civil unrest and even open warfare have plagued many regions, including the Darfur region of Sudan, Jewish and Palestinian settlements in the Middle East, and Chechnya, on the border of Russia. A wave of protests and uprisings in the Arab world began in late 2010 (including in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen). Food shortages and famines, infectious diseases such as bird flu, rising costs of oil, and increasing evidence of climate change offer a bleak outlook to people worldwide, especially in the poorest nations. Meanwhile new economic powerhouses, including China and India, are exerting influence on the global economy. Technological changes continue to have a social impact, including new medical and scientific discoveries, new forms of instant communication such as text messaging and tweeting, electronic books, and other growing capabilities and influence of computer and communications technologies.

The demographics of various parts of the world have changed dramatically since 1980. Just in the United States, “the U.S. experienced a profound demographic shift in the 1980s, with an influx of over 7 million immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. By 1990, 25 per cent of Americans (population 247 million) claimed African, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American ancestry.” Every year, across the globe, the uprooting of vast numbers of people occurs in response to wars, famines, ethnic violence, and economic pressures and opportunities. Alterations in national boundaries and distributions of power are commonplace. According to studies, “Since 1960, more than half of the world’s 195 countries have been born—or reborn.”

The art world itself underwent major changes during the period covered in this text. Major art centers lost some of their dominance as art activities became more decentralized. The changed artistic landscape led to a significant cross-fertilization of ideas among locations across the globe. Although New York City remained a primary destination on the contemporary art world map, other urban centers—including London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Shanghai, Dubai, Mumbai, Istanbul, Berlin, São Paulo, and Johannesburg—ratcheted up their support and presentation of new art to such a degree that anyone who expected to remain knowledgeable informed felt pressure to research current activities in these locations.
The art scene exploded after 1980, with a marked increase in artists, dealers, collectors, publications, and exhibition spaces. The formation of new institutions, as well as new or revamped facilities at existing institutions, expanded the number, size, and quality of locations where the latest in visual art could be seen by a growing public, including tourists seeking entertainment. Of these projects, several are notable not only for offering intriguing possibilities for the exhibition of art but also because the architectural structures assert themselves as works of art in their own right. Topping the list in terms of publicity were the Guggenheim Museum’s new branch in Bilbao, Spain (1997), designed by architect Frank Gehry, and the spectacular transformation of an enormous power station along the Thames River in London into Tate Modern (2000). Other notable new venues include MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), which offers a vast 100,000 square feet of exhibition space in a converted nineteenth-century factory building in North Adams, Massachusetts, and the more modestly scaled but boldly designed Wexner Center (1989) on the campus of Ohio State University in Columbus, a project by Peter Eisenman.

The fortunes and misfortunes of contemporary artists take shape, to a large degree, within the sphere of the commercial galleries that present new art. Reputations are built by the support of prominent gallery dealers and the approval of the critics, curators, and collectors who carefully monitor and judge the quality of the art featured in highly publicized exhibitions. During the era, there were frequent shifts in the zones of concentrated art activity (such as the reduction of galleries located in New York’s SoHo area and the dramatic influx of galleries into the historic meatpacking district known as Chelsea by the mid-1990s), as well as numerous gallery openings and closings, which reflected fluctuations in national economies. The rise of neo-expressionism in the early 1980s, for instance, was tied to a boom in the U.S. stock market, whereas an economic recession later in the decade was responsible in part for retrenchment and attention to more modestly scaled artistic projects. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the art market boomed again, and grandiose projects were under way once more, until another, even larger recession started in 2008. All of this, of course, is not without precedent. General forces at work in society, including politics, demographics, and economics, have always influenced the history of art.

In addition to an enormous range of activities, including exhibitions, performances, film and video screenings, and lectures, presented by public institutions within facilities devoted to contemporary art, the contemporary period witnessed a surge of public art—visual arts activities in public settings, such as city streets, plazas, parks, airports, and commercial facilities, as well as in more transitory locations such as billboards and magazine pages. A spectacular recent example of public art, Charles Ray’s Boy with Frog (2009), is an eight-foot-tall sculpture installed on the tip of an island at the southern entrance of the Grand Canal in Venice [1-2]. Designed for that prominent site, the sculpture displays the artist’s characteristic combination of conceptualism and humor. The dazzling white finish of the fiberglass sculpture refers to the long tradition of marble sculpture in Italy; the white color of the sculpture also makes the figures look ghostly, otherworldly. The larger-than-life boy, who is on the cusp between adolescence and manhood, dangles a goliath frog. His pose suggests he has just fished the frog out of the nearby water and now is pausing to consider its form and its fate. Viewing the sculpture, we wonder whether our lives bear a closer resemblance to the
1-2 Charles Ray | Boy With Frog, 2009
Cast stainless steel and acrylic polyurethane, 96 x 29 1/2 x 41 1/4 inches; 244 x 75 x 105 cm
© Charles Ray, Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York
frog’s or to the boy’s. Or is it that we resemble neither? They remain there unchanging, while we pass by momentarily, only to vanish into thin air.

Public dollars funded many public art activities (although not Ray’s sculpture), a fact that turned out to be something of a double-edged sword. The support of contemporary art with government dollars was a crucial means of enlarging the funds available to artists and institutions; in the United States and Britain such support was often a percentage of the amount budgeted for new government-funded public construction projects. The use of public dollars increased attention to contemporary public art (taxpayers were interested in knowing how their money was being spent), but the increased attention also resulted in more controversy whenever a vocal core trumpeted their outrage over a specific project. Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1981–84), located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.; Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc (1981), installed in a public plaza near a government office building in Manhattan; and Mark Quinn’s Alison Lapper Pregnant (2005), a monumental sculpture of the nude, pregnant body of disabled artist Lapper (born with no arms and shortened legs), displayed on the fourth plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square, are examples of public art projects that galvanized public opinion, both pro and con. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial ultimately was embraced even by its original opponents. A more conservative outlook prevailed for Tilted Arc: Serra’s work was removed in 1989 after a lengthy legal battle. Quinn’s sculpture was always intended to be temporary (the fourth plinth is used for an ongoing series of contemporary sculptures) and was on view there for only eighteen months.

In the United States, art by feminists, artists perceived to be unpatriotic or sacrilegious, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) artists were particular targets of public uproar, fueling the so-called culture wars that erupted in the late 1980s and 1990s over public funding and freedom of expression. Highly publicized controversies accompanied a traveling exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe in the early 1990s that included some photos showing homosexual activities. Piss Christ (1987) by Andres Serrano, a photographic image of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine, was deemed blasphemous by some religious spokespersons. The offer in 1990 by feminist artist Judy Chicago to donate her monumental collaborative creation The Dinner Party (1979) to the University of the District of Columbia was blocked by conservative members of Congress who called the work pornographic because some interpreted the imagery as representing female genitalia.6 The exhibition Sensation, showing works by young British artists, caused a furor and media frenzy when it opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, with much of the attention centering on Chris Ofili’s painting The Holy Virgin Mary, which featured a black Madonna decorated with resin-covered lumps of elephant dung. Also under pressure from Congress, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) eliminated fellowships to individual artists in 1995.

Political considerations influenced some contemporary artists to engage in institutional critiques. Such critiques took aim both at art institutions—with artists attempting to reveal how museums, commercial galleries, and other organizations control how art is produced, displayed, and marketed—and at institutions within the wider society; for example, feminists critiqued the social structures and hierarchies that limit female potential. Politically motivated art projects were particularly prevalent in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s.
Activist art addressed social realities heard and seen in the news and experienced directly by the artists involved. Art about AIDS provides a key example. AIDS began its destructive growth in the early 1980s, when the disease was first recognized and named. In the 1980s, before treatments had been developed and refined, an AIDS diagnosis was like a death sentence. "Life was lived with that bell tolling all the time," recalls writer Stephen Koch.7 The association of AIDS with homosexual men at that time brought forth a wave of virulent homophobia. In response to the crisis and to massive losses from AIDS within the arts community, numerous artists, including David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring, and the art collective known as Gran Fury, put their art in the service of AIDS activism. Other arenas that provided serious political content for contemporary art included feminist politics and issues of race, homelessness, corporate capitalism, consumerism, and militarism.

In the past decade there has been something of a stalling of artistic political activism. Although survivors of the culture wars and occasional younger artists still court controversy (sometimes for shock value more than for ideological reasons), many more artists want to engage the public rather than challenge social and political institutions and practices. A notable trend is the supersizing of art, found in the production of spectacular, often highly crafted and technically complex works that require teams of assistants, specialist consultants, and big budgets to realize. For example, Cai's Inopportune: Stage One [1-1] was made with the help of consultants and assistants. The interest in monumentality has been pronounced in several distinctive venues now known for commissioning huge temporary installations, including the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London, the Park Avenue Armory in New York, and the Grand Palais in Paris (with the Monumenta series), among others.

The history of contemporary art is not entirely a story of young artists bursting onto the scene with new ideas. Although many previously unknown artists emerged after 1980, the presence and influence of older artists was important as well. For example, Joseph Beuys died in 1986, Andy Warhol in 1987, Louise Nevelson in 1988, Roy Lichtenstein in 1997, Agnes Martin in 2004, Allan Kaprow and Nam June Paik in 2006, Robert Rauschenberg in 2008, and Louise Bourgeois in 2010. Most of these were making vital work up until their deaths, so that even an art movement such as pop art, which we normally associate with the 1960s, was evolving within the ongoing production of the oeuvres of Warhol and Lichtenstein. A retrospective exhibition of work by Bourgeois toured internationally in 2008–09, when the influential artist was ninetysix years old and still active.

Themes of Contemporary Art is not a chronological survey. The history of art over the past thirty years is fantastically rich and involves many diverse stories, motivations, influences, ideas, and approaches. Attempting to map recent art into a tight chronological structure of movements or even of collections of major artists would be premature and, in fact, would misrepresent the contemporary period. Whereas the art world before 1980 is distant enough that we can perceive some sequence of trends (really multiple intersecting and interacting trends), more recent art practices are much more pluralistic and amorphous in character. Many of the artists we discuss are in mid-career and still defining their practices. As artist Haim Steinbach said (remembering the 1980s, although his statement applies to the entire contemporary period), "I see [the period] as an archipelago, in which different things were going on,
on different islands. They were going on concurrently but not always moving in the same direction.”8

Traditions Survive, New Trends Arrive

If we cannot place contemporary art into neat compartments or a series of movements, we can still make a few broad observations about developments and tendencies in art since 1980.

*Painting didn’t die* in contemporary art, despite predictions to the contrary made in the 1970s. Indeed, painting enjoyed something of a rebirth in the United States in the early 1980s, during the heyday of neo-expressionism, “an international movement dominated by oversized canvases and emotional gestures, and by a bustling commercial market.”9 Young Americans making bold, gestural paintings, including Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Eric Fischl, were celebrated and compared to dramatic painters who had emerged in Europe in the 1970s, such as the German neo-expressionist Anselm Kiefer. Although it was enormously popular, neo-expressionism had its detractors, who saw the artists as opportunists who simulated emotion in order to appeal to the market. By 1990, the neo-expressionist momentum had died down, but in its wake painting continued to attract critical attention, although with some rising and falling in its influence (especially when examined on a regional basis) and changes in the concerns of its practitioners. Neo Rauch, who was born in 1960 in Leipzig, East Germany, has gained great notoriety in the twenty-first century as an oil painter who continues the grand tradition of large-scale history painting. Rauch’s ambiguous narratives, layered imagery, and appropriated styles conjure up a range of historical influences and references, from surrealism to Soviet-era social realism to the satires of Russian Sots Art to the neo-expressionism of the generation just before him.1 [1-3]. Additionally, like many acclaimed painters working currently, Rauch’s paintings critique the art of painting, cleverly manipulating painting’s language of representation.

Like other traditional media, such as drawing and sculpture, the practice of painting saw its boundaries stretched and took on new life in the contemporary period. What defines a painting? Can we still recognize one when we see one? Thousands upon thousands of paintings are created each year in the familiar portable, rectangular, paint-on-canvas format. But exciting work has pushed painting into areas in which it embraces unconventional materials and often overlaps with sculpture and installation art. For example, Fred Tomaselli makes “paintings” that are collages of plants, pills (over-the-counter and prescription), insect wings, and catalog clippings [color plate 22]. Kara Walker cuts silhouettes from paper to make large-scale murals [5-13]. Guillermo Kuitca and Fabian Marcaccio, two artists from Argentina, exemplify the push to open the venerable queen of the arts up to new possibilities that embrace the third dimension. Kuitca has painted maps on full-size mattresses, while Marcaccio trusses his paintings at odd angles between the walls and floor. Brazilian Adriana Varejão assembles wall-based reliefs using tiles, oil, and foam [5-11].

*Photography became a player.* Even as brushy neo-expressionist painting garnered headlines, the 1980s saw a rising tide of photo-based art. Artists had used photography as a medium from its officially announced invention in 1839, but it was in the 1980s that photography really escaped its secondary status and “moved to the very centre of
avant-garde art practices..., rivalling painting and sculpture in size, spectacular effects, market appreciation, and critical importance." Large-scale color printing of photographs became feasible for the first time in the early 1980s, propelling the interest of museums and collectors. Photography also exerted a noticeable influence on other forms of art, particularly some genres of painting, which sometimes seemed to be playing catch-up in striving to create a convincing illusion of the way the world "really" (i.e., photographically) looks.

Photography also expanded its own boundaries as artists gave free rein to experimentation, adopting new technologies such as the computer and hybridizing with other forms of art, including installation and performance. More and more photographers turned to elaborate fabrications, constructing staged scenes that they then photographed or manipulating and altering camera images after shooting. The widespread leap into digital photography in the twenty-first century facilitated and accelerated the manipulation of photographs, with computer programs such as Photoshop replacing the hands-on darkroom procedures needed to alter analog negatives. An example of photography’s use as a tool for fabricating convincing portrayals of imaginary realms is Japanese photographer Yashio Itagaki’s concoction *Tourists on the Moon* #2 (1998) [1-4].
Sculpture as an art form widely expanded its sphere of influence, and the range of content and forms within the genre expanded as well. In the 1970s, during the reign of Minimalism, pared-down abstract sculpture predominated. Such Minimalist sculpture emphasized simplified abstract volumes (what some critics referred to as “primary structures”). In the 1980s, and extending into the present, sculptors dramatically broadened the forms, techniques, and materials they selected. In addition to creating sculptures from traditional materials, such as bronze, marble, and wood, artists made sculptures from a wide array of materials as well as found objects. For example, American sculptor Petah Coyne has incorporated a wide array of both traditional and nontraditional materials into her distinctive suspended sculptures, including ribbons, tree branches, shackles, hat pins, taxidermy animals, and chicken wire fencing. To create Untitled #695 (Ghost /First Communion) [1-5], Coyne combined an antique chain hoist, forged links and hooks, rope, wire, shaved hair, chicken and tomato wire fencing, cable, cable nuts, acrylic polymer emulsion, acrylic paint, black sand, and shackles. British sculptor Tony Cragg became known in the 1980s for his wall-mounted, multipart figurative sculptures created by arranging found plastic objects (e.g., packaging materials, throwaway plates, and plastic containers), often all of the same color, into pictographic patterns. Furthermore, while sculptors continued to carve, cast, and construct discrete, unique objects, others expanded their practice so that sculpture overlapped with other art forms. Artists such as Robert Gober [9-8] in the United States and Dinos and Jake Chapman [5-3] in England produced works that incorporated multiple sculptural objects within their multimedia installations.

The ready-made became the remix. Early in the twentieth century Dada artist Marcel Duchamp famously exhibited unaltered found objects such as a urinal and a snow shovel as what he called ready-mades, or found sculptures. Numerous artists
Petah Coyne | *Untitled #695 (Ghost/First Communion)*, 1991

Mixed media

86 x 77 x 62 inches (217.6 x 194.8 x 156.9 cm)
since have experimented with found objects and images, including other Dada artists, the surrealists, the so-called junk sculptors of the 1950s, pop artists, and a range of artists interested in techniques of assemblage or the conceptual implications of the ready-made. Performance artists likewise have mixed everyday movements, sounds, props, and behaviors with more conventionally theatrical elements.

In the 1980s, in line with then up-to-the-minute theories of postmodernism, visual artists adopted appropriating as an approach to using ready-made objects and images. Appropriation artists comb both art history and vernacular culture for found objects, styles, images, subjects, and compositions and recombine details borrowed here and there into eclectic visual pastiches. Schlock and kitsch borrowings are readily combined with details from high art, architecture, and design.\(^1\)

American Jeff Koons references the slick refinement and packaging of mass-produced consumer products in the creation of his art. Koons’s gleaming Rabbit (1986) \(^{[1-6]}\) is an appropriation of a novelty Mylar balloon, which the artist had cast in polished stainless steel. Koons knowingly fuses, and confuses, commercial glitz with the polished forms of earlier modern art and the everyday subjects of pop art sculptures. Like many of his other sculptures in which the artist appropriates actual consumer objects (e.g., kitsch statuary, toys) and remakes them in a new medium as highly crafted luxury objects for wealthy collectors, Koons’s Rabbit appears to warmly embrace our consumer lifestyle while at the same time coolly appraising the shallowness of a civilization devoid of deeper meaning.

In the twenty-first century new terminology has begun to emerge to capture expanded practices and ideas around the concept of the ready-made. Borrowed from hip-hop culture and the world of music, the terms sampling and remixing are sometimes substituted for the older terms appropriation and collage. The use of such terms recognizes that found object practices now encompass the new media and data networks of the digital age, which give artists instant access to an endless supply of images, sounds, and data, as well as the tools to recombine and reconfigure them at will. What this all means for the future of artistic production and the value of old and new media is open to debate.

Sound infiltrates the visual arts. Referring to art practices that take listening and hearing as the main focus, sound art has become an increasingly important genre within the visual arts. Susan Philipsz won England’s 2010 Turner Prize for her sound installation Lowlands (which played overlapping recordings of the artist singing three different versions of an ancient Scottish lament), the first time a work of sound art won this important prize. Although Lowlands has no visual component, other works of sound art often take a hybrid form that combines visual and aural components. There are many overlaps and interconnections with experimental music. Sound art can involve any theme, although we give the genre special attention in chapter 7, “Language.”\(^12\)

New media attract artists. Video (and audio) technology attracted experimenters within the field of art, notably Nam June Paik, as soon as it became available in the 1960s. During the 1990s, video became a prominent medium, in part because its time-based character supports a renewed interest in telling stories in art and exploring narrative structures. Also in the 1990s, numerous artists adopted digital technologies as small, powerful computers became affordable and software programs facilitated sophisticated graphic manipulations. Artists used digital tools both in the service of traditional media, designing the structure for a sculpture on a computer, for instance,
Jeff Koons | Rabbit, 1986

Stainless steel
41 x 19 x 12 inches

CREDIT: The artist
and as a new formal and conceptual arena in itself. With the widespread use of DVD recording technology in the early 2000s, artists—and the gallery system that derives its profits from the sale of artworks—gained an important means of controlling the sale of video and computer artworks in limited editions to collectors. Of course, DVDs are easily copied, and in spite of copyright protection, bootleg versions of artists’ original recordings are now traded and downloaded on the Internet and viewed on sites such as YouTube.

Meanwhile, fast-paced developments in digital video production and editing, holography, light art, and interactive computer sites have spawned new arenas for artistic exploration. These new media have also spilled over into the practice of other media; for example, new media are often incorporated into installation and performance art events.13

Virtual reality blurs boundaries. The blurring of the boundaries of fact and fabrication is epitomized by the development of virtual reality as a field of investigation. The term virtuality refers to “an image or space that is not real but appears to be. In our own time, these include cyberspace, the Internet, the telephone, television and virtual reality.”14 Virtual reality proper generally refers to a simulated, computer-generated environment. A viewer wears special goggles and earphones and interacts with the environment by moving his or her head or manipulating controls. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the promise of virtual reality outstripped the actual achievement, but since then advances in software and technology have made forays into virtual reality more satisfying for viewer and artist/designer alike. Work in virtual reality has been conducted mainly in the realm of computer gaming, but visual artists are beginning to experiment with visual reality in ways that are expanding the boundaries of contemporary art.

New technologies produce new paradigms. Today, digital technologies have the potential to alter images dramatically. Paradigms of the nature and structure of perception and conception are shifting. Particularly in the last half of the period this book covers, the availability of personal computers and the increasing sophistication and ease of using computer graphics programs are bringing about “a transformation in the nature of visuality probably more profound than the break that separates mediaeval imagery from Renaissance perspective,” in the words of art historian Jonathan Crary.15 We are experiencing an epochal shift from an analog world, a world of everyday perception, to a digital world rendered in binary code.

The computer stores vast quantities of detailed information digitized into a binary code. It enables an image of any subject to be manipulated, duplicated, transformed, and transmitted to a degree that is unprecedented in human history. Digital images of subjects both real and imaginary can look so convincing that the distinction between the actual and the made-up is almost impossible to detect. At the same time, unlike early viewers of photographs, today’s audiences know that images are manipulated and manufactured all the time; they allow themselves to suspend disbelief in order to enjoy the illusion of reality. As a culture embracing and immersed in new media, we appear on the verge of a general willingness to suspend disbelief in the paradigm of a singular reality.

In addition to enabling rapid, radical manipulation of imagery, the computer now makes possible the almost instantaneous dissemination of images and data of all kinds. Since the mid-1990s, the growth of the Internet and World Wide Web has allowed users
to transmit and receive images and other information within virtual space instantly all over the world. The meteoric rise in the use of digital technologies that connect wide numbers of users in networks of social media is affecting the art world. Blog websites, including Twitter, link the audience for art and enable unprecedented numbers of people to interact and function as populist art critics sounding off on any and all topics. Moreover, the digitalization of information is a powerful force in speeding up the sharing of artist-generated projects in all media, as well as the appropriation by computer-savvy artists of information streams from other arenas of culture. In our role as viewers we no longer are dependent on being in a specific place. We can plug into the Web or into our computer’s memory anywhere we have access. Acknowledging this trend, the Whitney Museum included Internet art for the first time in its Biennial Exhibition in 2000.16

Vast quantities of images and data are flowing from every source imaginable—science, art, advertising, news, entertainment, governments, and, increasingly, ordinary citizens (using personal digital cameras, cell phone cameras, scanners, and webcams). Enormous digital databases are replacing physical archives (the latter ranging from libraries to family photo albums). The creative exploration and manipulation of digital databases as virtual structures is now central to the practice of an increasing number of new media artists. Their practice can resemble that of a virtual architect—reconfiguring an existing built structure (the database) in order to accentuate or reveal new properties and ideas.

In addition to the accelerated exchange of information and images, another significant quality of global visual culture is the uniformity of imagery that is disseminated by the mass media. Through this process, many people share an identical storehouse of mediated experiences. Such high uniformity of memory never occurred prior to the invention of the Internet, television, radio, cinema, and photography. With each new technological breakthrough, the capacity of pop culture to overwhelm the sphere of private experience expands. Today’s mass media information culture is channeled into formats that tend to homogenize the presentation of information. Contemporary artists, however, have found ways to counteract this phenomenon. For example, David Byrne, widely known as a musician, utilizes Microsoft’s PowerPoint software to produce imaginative illustrations and animation that are a far cry from the staid sameness of most PowerPoint presentations seen in the business or academic world.17

Although the languages of digital media are in their infancy, they are bound to have a radical impact on visual art as the twenty-first century continues to unfold. Artists who are concentrating on this area are pioneers in helping us to confront what it means to live in a world of accelerated information flow from multiple channels and to find ourselves entranced by manufactured virtual worlds. Meanwhile, many of the most interesting critical theories of the twenty-first century—evolving from the emerging disciplines of new media and visual culture studies—take on the expanding varieties and sites of artistic practices as key areas of analysis. Already the paradigm that advancing technologies produce a heightening of homogenization is challenged: when there were only three primary television networks in the United States, the commonality of television viewing among the population increased. Now, with the exponential increase in television networks, as well as the rise of alternative
media, there is less likelihood that any of us is tuned in to the same programming as our neighbors.

A Spectrum of Voices Emerges

In the United States in the period from the late 1960s to the start of the 1980s, the rebellions and successes of the women’s movement and the civil rights movement influenced art by opening up the stage to more voices. These newly visible participants brought new ideas to the field, as well as expanding ideas about means, media, and techniques for expressing those ideas. Since 1980 the highly visible activism of LGBT artists has added more voices to the mix. Although they have yet to achieve full equality in terms of income, influence, prestige, and recognition, women and minority artists in the West have become empowered and have had a major impact on who makes art, what art is about, and how art is viewed and interpreted. Artists of color, women artists, and LGBT artists have been at the heart of discussions about contemporary art in the 1980s, 1990s, and today. The collective imagination of what is possible in art has opened up to acknowledge diversity.

Over the past thirty years, artists have become more conscious of diversity internationally as well as in their midst. For example, beginning about 1980 the U.S. art world once again turned its attention to artistic developments in Europe. Subsequently, as a result of shifts in national borders, regimes, and political and economic structures, artists from all over the world have become widely known in Western Europe and North America, often because they have emigrated, contributing to their visibility.

Artists and audiences outside the West likewise are paying attention to developments both within and far beyond their borders. New collectors and art dealers are emerging all over the world, pulling the focus from Europe and the United States as the centers of gravity. From 1980 onward, with increasing complications, artists in Africa, South America, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific are gaining visibility on a world stage. At the same time, national and regional issues are complicated by global connections: diasporas connecting local communities with kin communities elsewhere in the world, shared inheritance of language or religious identity across borders, networks forged by mass media and new communications technologies, and the broader geopolitics of national and international politics and conflicts. We live in an internationalized world, in which people with different cultural knowledge are meeting, mixing, and negotiating histories, definitions, and boundaries. Artists use visual means to convey positions or paradoxes about where cultures draw boundary lines and what belongs on one side or the other.

To cite just one example of a complicated path followed by a contemporary artist: Cai Guo-Qiang was born in Quanzhou City, China, in 1957 and grew up during the Cultural Revolution. He studied stage design in Shanghai before moving to Japan in 1986. In 1995 he relocated again to New York City. His art production includes large-scale drawings, installations, and performance events and has involved gunpowder, fireworks, Chinese herbal medicines, computers, and vending machines, among many other materials and means. Cai’s elaborate installation Cultural Melting Bath, which has been installed in various locations, including the Queens Museum in New York in 1997 [1-7], provides a symbol of the therapeutic cultural mixing Cai hopes that his
1.7 Cai Guo-Qiang | Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century, 1997

First realized August 1997 at Queens Museum of Art, New York.
18 Taihu rocks, hot tub with hydrotherapy jets, bathwater infused with herbs, banyan tree root, translucent fabric, and live birds. Dimensions variable.

Various venues. Collection du Musée d’art contemporain de Lyon.
Installation view at Queens Museum of Art, 1997

CREDIT: Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy of Cai Studio
art fosters. The installation includes a Chinese rock garden, banyan tree roots, and a Western-style hot tub infused with Chinese medicinal herbs, in which a multicultural array of museum visitors are invited to bathe together. A controversial artist in China for many years, today Cai travels frequently back to China to work, and he served as art director of visual and special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. His mid-career survey, which included his dramatic installation *Inopportune: Stage One* [1-1], toured internationally and was at the National Art Museum of China during the Olympics.

**Globalization**

Awareness of international developments in art has made the art world more dynamic and complex. But internationalism is not an unequivocal good, particularly when art production comes under market pressure from international institutions and corporations that support the production and display of contemporary art. Increasingly, the world is becoming linked by a global economy, a development that is affecting the production and reception of art. Consumer capitalism, especially the approach developed most aggressively in the United States, made huge strides during the contemporary period in extending its reach to global markets. The collapse of the communist system in the former Soviet Union and the economic rise of countries of the Pacific Rim, especially China with its steps toward a more capitalist-style economy, have opened up portions of the world that had been significantly insulated from capitalist business practices. Meanwhile, multinational corporations and supranational economic institutions such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization (WTO) are engaged in activities that sometimes support and sometimes are in conflict with national interests. Systems of power now make up a globalized network that is not centered in any one country.

The emergence of a linked global society (linked both technologically and economically) has not resulted in international unity and worldwide equality; indeed, it is highly questionable whether any institution operating on a global scale can possibly represent the political, cultural, or aesthetic interests of the diverse individuals in all countries. According to Stuart Hall, “you see massive disparities of access, of visibility, huge yawning gaps between who can and can’t be represented in any effective way.”\(^\text{18}\)

The global economy has affected the entertainment and culture markets. International art fairs and biennial and triennial international contemporary art survey exhibitions have proliferated and are held in numerous cities on every continent (at least eighty-five locations by 2005), to the point at which they are nearly impossible to keep up with.\(^\text{19}\) Geographic mobility has become important, and artists, gallery dealers, critics, and collectors who have the resources to participate in international events increase their visibility and influence. The directors and curators who select artists and orchestrate the international events have remarkable status and power.

In addition to globalized markets, the emergence of new telecommunications technologies, specifically the continued spread of television throughout the world and the rapid development of the computer and the Internet for both personal and business use, has significantly promoted globalization. At the same time, not every person everywhere has access to computers and the Internet, and new technologies reinforce privilege and power for those who are well connected to the flow of information.
Besides issues of access and visibility, another issue is the potential for homogenization of culture. One could argue that globalization is dehumanizing people and leveling out differences because it is bringing the same consumer products, images, and information to everyone all over the world. In terms of art, critic Julia A. Fenton asks, “Has the explosion of international art expositions around the world, and the mobility of artists from all cultures (either through the high art market or the internet) served to erase the particular in favor of the general—in style, content and theory? Do formal considerations again become primary when we have obliterated cultural boundaries and posited a new universality?” Critics observe, for instance, that expensive but repetitive video and multimedia installations are ubiquitous in international surveys because they are eye-catching while also portable and reproducible.

At the same time, many artists continue to produce art whose materials, techniques, subjects, and forms appear to relate to local histories and identities. Such expressions of cultural difference often are genuine and can serve as a form of resistance to globalization by disrupting standardization. However, some of this kind of art is a simulation of cultural difference, promoted by international capitalism because it is marketable. Fredric Jameson, an important Marxist theorist, has pointed out the many contradictions in globalization, such as the argument about whether globalization economic forces prefer to market cultural sameness or difference. Jameson further points out the irony that nationalism, once seen as driving European colonialism, is today espoused as a model by formerly colonized people who want to resist forces of globalization. Gilane Tawadros states, “The idea of nation continues to grip our collective imagination, equally in the art gallery as on the football pitch. Nationality remains an important vehicle for expressing a shared identity, whether real or imagined.”

**Theory Flexes Its Muscles**

The relationship of current art to theory can be a source of consternation, especially for those who are relative newcomers to the field. Artists—and students studying studio art—often wonder, Why do I need to know about theory? Can’t I just make my art, and doesn’t it mean what is visibly there, without the need for explanation? Viewers of art likewise may subscribe to the belief that theory is not necessary for appreciation—as in the oft repeated assertion, “I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like.”

Theoretical frameworks may prove vexing to the uninitiated, but numerous artists and critics active since 1980 have been heavily invested in theory and critical analysis. In the wake of Conceptual art, art became increasingly theoretical and idea-driven and began to sprout difficult and obscure branches. The direct embrace of theory seemed to crest midway through this period; by the early 1990s influential art graduate schools in Europe and the United States were advocating the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and teaching analytical and interpretative skills. Discussing Master of Fine Arts degree programs in the United States, writer and curator Bennett Simpson maintained, “Employing conceptual, post-minimal, video and performance artists from the sixties and seventies, schools such as CalArts, UCLA, Art Center, Yale and the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Programme tended to privilege intellectual and critical study over the more traditional training in manual skills like drawing, figure paint-
ing and sculpture. 'Knowledge work' became detached from its antecedent, technical work.23 (Although today technical skill and refined production values have become priorities again for many of the best known artists’ creations, often these are made by assistants working for the artist or his or her institutional sponsor.)

What is theory and what is its function? Although delving deeply into art theory can seem daunting, becoming acquainted with basic theoretical concepts is valuable for anyone who strives to learn about the world of contemporary art. In fact, a key purpose of theory is to assist in learning about art. Feminist art historian Hilary Robinson defines the term theory as “a set of ideas and knowledge that can be used in analysis.” Robinson’s definition combines two central factors. First, Robinson emphasizes that a theory is (or is on the way to becoming) a coherent, cohesive, and systematic arrangement of thoughts. Second, a theory in art has a function: a theory is a formulation of related ideas “that can be used in analysis.”

In our view, art theory is a conscious, deliberate thoughtfulness about art; theory offers an interconnected set of assumptions, hypotheses, and predictions about possible meanings, purposes, and judgments of art. Theory provides an intellectual lens through which we interrogate the practice of art; theory activates a mode of thinking about art, providing us with a purposeful set of questions that frames our engagement.

Complicating matters, the 1970s and 1980s saw the dramatic rise in prominence of various writings on culture and other fields of intellectual discourse, such as film and literary studies, linguistics, and history, and in turn the discussion and deployment of a broad spectrum of these writings in the analysis of contemporary visual art. Fundamental issues about the meaning and purpose of art were explored and debated. Should art be politically motivated and directed? Is art always political, even when the artist doesn’t believe he or she does this purposely? A theoretical manifestation of this stance may claim that art is most effective when it challenges conventional ways of thinking in order to effect social change. Is an aesthetics that focuses centrally on beauty too restrictive? Momentum built, and some strands of theory gained power and excitement as intellectual energy concentrated, especially around the work that was anchored in the theoretical writings of key twentieth-century French intellectuals and noteworthy precursors from both Europe and the United States (such as Walter Benjamin, a German intellectual who made notable contributions in a wide range of fields, including philosophy and literature).

Concepts from a range of theoretical perspectives, including postmodernism, semiotics, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism, to name several of the most influential, were applied with increasing frequency in the analysis of contemporary art and, in turn, helped shape the creation and reception of art produced since 1980. The theoretical critique of the period examined many arenas of visual culture, including the structure and biases of art history; the politics and practices of museums, galleries, and festivals; the nature and operation of art-market economics and how reputations are built; the visual means through which mass media influence ideas and taste; and the representation in visual media of all kinds of identities revolving around gender, race, sexuality, age, religion, and nationality. We discuss theories in more depth as they become relevant in different thematic chapters. In the present volume, we focus primarily on theories that gained prominence and power during the contemporary period. Here we provide just a brief overview.
Postmodernism became a catch-all term. The term postmodernism cropped up in art criticism in the 1970s but became more commonly used in the 1980s. Writers and thinkers engaged with postmodernism include Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, Charles Jencks, and Umberto Eco. The term is vague and open ended, initially implying an opposition to some of the tenets of modernism, including modernists’ confidence in social and technological progress, faith that history unfolds in a rational, linear direction, and belief in individual self-determination. Postmodernists are skeptical about progress, tend to be anti-elitist (for example, embracing kitsch as readily as the art of museums), think that the forms of culture are hybrid, eclectic, and heterogeneous rather than pure and easily defined and contained, and believe that individuals are inevitably molded by culture. (Prior to postmodernism, various artists, including the Dadaists and many Surrealists, also were interested in kitsch.) Postmodernists believe we are all prisoners, to some degree, of identities constructed for us by artistic and popular media, among other cultural influences. Moreover, the contemporary world is becoming increasingly more artificial because secondhand images filtered through television, film, and other media now substitute for direct experiences and exert a powerful influence on how we perceive and understand the world. In addition, more and more mediated images and experiences are manufactured illusions with no basis in tangible reality—simulacra, to use Baudrillard’s term. Baudrillard, according to art historian John Rajchman, “took the words ‘simulation’ and ‘simulacrum’ to describe the ‘Beaubourg effect’—no longer able to distinguish model from copy, we had lost any sense of reality, leaving us only with ‘irony,’ hyperrealism, kitsch, quotation, appropriation.”

There is no single style associated with postmodernism; instead, any and all styles and visual vocabularies are valid, and pluralism rules. However, appropriation became a frequent strategy used by postmodernists. Most postmodern appropriationists mine the distant and recent past with little historical consciousness of what visual representations meant in their own past context. Postmodernists often quote from the past and vernacular culture with an attitude of irony or even parody.

Many artists use appropriation uncritically, simply adopting the approach as a contemporary artistic fashion. But some artists attend to the conceptual implications of the ready-made, using found objects and appropriated styles and images as a means to raise philosophical questions about whether it is possible for artists to be original or express authentic feelings and beliefs. Such artists include German Gerhard Richter, the former Russian team Komar and Melamid, and American Cindy Sherman. The most politically motivated appropriationists, including American Sherrie Levine, also challenge as elitist the modernist identification and celebration of a handful of supposedly innovative artists. By appropriating, such artists imply that originality does not matter.

Although influential in the 1980s and 1990s, today the term postmodernism has become a generalized catchall term for so many different trends and ideas that the term has lost nuance and functionality. Moreover, many people disavow the term as dualistic and as keeping Western aesthetics in the center by implying a dialectical relationship with modernism for all countertrends.

Art is understood as a kind of language. Influenced by the ideas of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, both active in the late nineteenth century, complex permutations of semiotics (the science of signs) were applied to the visual arts in the late twentieth century. Whereas
linguists analyze the structure of (verbal) language, semioticians open up virtually any field of human activity as a potential subject for an analysis of the signs that function within that field. Clothing styles, rules of etiquette, codes of conduct for men and for women—all of these and countless other realms of experience can be analyzed in terms of semiotics. Scholars of visual culture have been especially eager to adopt and adapt semiotics to their field.

As scholars (and artists) surmised, all of the arts also function on the basis of the conventional use of signs, and so semiotics is a powerful tool for the analysis of the practice of art. Art topics such as styles of representation, the rules of linear perspective, and the metalanguage of various media (painting, for instance, signals “tradition” in a way that video does not) are ripe for analysis through the magnifying glass of semiotics. For example, Cal Lane has developed a process of cutting industrial metal with a welding torch to create lace patterns in automobile fenders, garden shovels [1-8], Dumpsters, and other found objects. In terms of semiotics, lace making is understood as a feminine textile practice used for domestic purposes, whereas metal cutting signals a traditionally masculine skill used to make tools and machines. Lane, who is female, creates semiotic dissonance by mixing the two.

Theories associated with poststructuralism are closely identified with postmodernism and semiotics. What poststructuralism added to the mix was the concept that the underlying structure of a language or any other symbolic system is not fixed and permanent. With individual variations, these poststructuralist thinkers argued that any symbolic system or cultural artifact (for example, a language, a work of literature, a painting, a social system)—what they called a text—can be shown to have internal contradictions and hidden ideologies. Through this perspective, the culture we live in, like any culture, can be seen as a forest of signs; the meaning of these signs around us shift, sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes in dramatic turns, as competing ideologies negotiate and at times struggle mightily, always reaching for the upper hand. Whoever gets to determine what images and signs represent, what images and signs are made, and what images and signs are seen controls in no small measure the ongoing production, meaning, and maintenance of culture.

Poststructuralists use a strategy developed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida known as deconstruction to analyze visual and verbal texts. Deconstruction looks at a text or symbolic system in terms of the underlying worldview that gave rise to it, exposing contradictions and hidden biases in order to challenge the validity of the worldview as well as the text. Derrida also argued that the meanings of texts are unstable because different readers (or viewers, in the case of visual texts) bring their own worldviews to their reading and looking, which skew interpretation. No text has any single, correct interpretation; meanings change with the reader, the time, and the context.

According to postmodernists and poststructuralists, truth and reality are not as truthful and real as they may seem; in fact, there are many truths and many realities. All truths and realities are relative and contingent, constructed by culture, dependent on context, and subject to negotiation and change; none is inherent in the natural order of things. Moreover, today the contradictions are more apparent because the cultural landscape is filled with texts that express competing worldviews, simultaneously available and bleeding over into one another’s domains because of the rapid
flow of information from numerous sources constantly bombarding us. These texts interact and compete with one another (creating a condition of intertextuality, to use the term favored by Derrida and Roland Barthes, another influential French theorist). Poststructuralist thinkers believe that the onslaught of information in our media-saturated society has made it impossible for any single worldview to dominate. Instead, boundaries and divisions between categories of all kinds are eroding. In particular, the dualities, or binary pairs, so common in Western thinking and culture no longer are convincing as polar opposites. Male and female, gay and straight, white and black, public and private, painting and sculpture, high art and low art—distinctions between
these and other categories dissolve in a postmodern world and the elements merge into hybrids.

_Feminism and postcolonialism offer bolder, broader perspectives._ The perspectives of feminism and postcolonialism have profoundly affected contemporary visual culture. Feminists and postcolonialists challenge artists, art historians, critics, and audiences to consider politics and social issues. Feminists look at experience from the perspective of gender and are particularly concerned with ensuring that women have the same rights and opportunities as men. Feminist theoretical critiques analyze hierarchical structures that contribute to male dominance, what feminists call _patriarchy_; that is, the cultural beliefs, rules, and structures that reinforce and sustain masculine values and male power. A key area of feminist analysis in the visual arts is the _gaze_, a term used to refer to how categories of people are stereotyped in visual representations by gender, race, sexuality, and other factors.

Postcolonialists are interested in cultural interactions of all kinds (in politics, economics, religion, the arts, philosophy, mass media, and so on) among peoples of different nations, regions, and communities. Postcolonialists examine how peoples' histories and identities demonstrate the economic, political, social, and psychological legacy in particular locations of colonialism, which oppressed indigenous peoples and resulted in _hybridity_ and _syncretism_, or a mingling of peoples and cultures. They also analyze migrations and displacements of peoples (diasporas and nomadism, to use two of the current terms) and highlight the diversity of cultures that coexist in contemporary communities. Postcolonialists' attention to the visual cultures of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific has helped foster the internationalization of the contemporary art world.

Many different theories have influenced feminism and postcolonialism, and ideas and positions are constantly mutating. The perspectives are usually multidisciplinary, drawing from literature, history, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines. Since 1980 critics and artists have used deconstructive strategies to analyze, or "decode," how power functions to limit the achievements and potential of women and postcolonial people around the world. Feminists and postcolonialists have applied other theories as well, including Marxism and psychoanalysis, and have contributed theories of their own. Postcolonialists have promoted the use of theoretical models that attempt to understand the visual arts of various cultures on their own terms rather than in comparison with art traditions in Europe and the United States.

Theories just discussed, as well as others not discussed, such as Marxist and psychoanalytic theories, permeate the production, reception, and interpretation of contemporary art. But the explicit embrace of theory has not been constant over the past three decades, and its influence is often diffuse and unacknowledged rather than systematic. For example, there has been a widespread cultural backlash against feminism; as a result, younger women artists are often reluctant to call themselves feminists, even when their art and ideas support feminist tenets.

Artists' attention to theory seemed to wane after 1990, and the debates of the previous decade over modernism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism died down. According to curator Toby Kamps, in "an ideologically uncertain moment, artistic strategies of the 1980s—appropriation, critiques of commodification, deconstruction—seemed empty or calculating. Instead, artists took up accessibility, communication,
humor, and play. As a style, Postmodernism, positing stylistic eclecticism, social criticism, and end-of-history irony, appeared bankrupt; as an attitude, however, it was the definitive zeitgeist. The art of the 1990s, with its interest in complexity, multivalency, and ambiguity, mirrored an uncertain, transitional period.\textsuperscript{30}

Although in general over the past fifteen years artists seem less committed to strong political positions and not as well versed in academic theories, this does not mean that art has lacked meaningful content. To the contrary, a preoccupation with deep moral and ethical questions and resonant themes, such as political agency, spirituality, beauty, violence, sexuality, transience, extinction, memory, and healing, is a powerful current in the most recent art. The real world is treacherous and volatile. According to Richard Cork, the question posed by Joseph Beuys's 1985 work \textit{The End of the Twentieth Century} still resonates: "Is [our era] about to terminate prematurely in a nuclear apocalypse, or will it be succeeded by an era which asserts a less destructive set of values?"\textsuperscript{31} Or as Homi K. Bhabha wrote: "The '80s inaugurated a dream of difference which is now being haunted by horror and doubt: abhorrence of the 'deterriorialized flows' of global terror networks; doubts about the feasibility of global politics with the increase in 'homeland' security and international surveillance; doubts about preemptive strikes; doubts about war; doubts about our rights and responsibilities for the world and ourselves. What happened to the dream?"\textsuperscript{32}

We end this section with an extended example in which we unpack some of the complexities of how actual artists have engaged with theory in their creative practice. Our example addresses contemporary artists who knowingly engage with the language of abstract art in a semiotic manner.

Abstraction is intimately associated with the high modernism of the twentieth century in Western art, which is often targeted and devalued in contemporary theory. The "heroic" generation of post–World War II American abstract painters, including abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, believed fervently in art as self-expression and maintained that artists should work intuitively as much as possible, relying on the subconscious to stimulate vital, uncensored gestures and marks. They believed that every artist has a unique, "authentic" touch, as identifiable as a person's handwriting, which will emerge if the artist creates in a free process. They also believed that receptive viewers have a visceral response to the resulting paintings, echoing the passion of their creator. In contrast, many in our current age are skeptical that genuine self-expression is possible and argue that our "individual" expressions and responses are really just reflections of cultural conditioning. Maybe at one time a painter could make a fluid gesture that was sincerely free, but today's painters must be self-consciously aware that a gestural style is supposed to be a sign of freedom, and thus they can no longer make gestures in a spontaneous, unself-conscious manner.

Artists today who engage with abstraction in a semiotic way might adopt characteristics of the abstract expressionists or Minimalists precisely because they know those devices have become conventions that a knowledgeable audience recognizes. One artist might make obviously contrived gestures to subvert the notion of painting as spontaneous expression; another artist might choose a grid or another convention of geometric abstraction to critique an earlier generation's dreams of social utopia and "encode" a warning about ideological rigidity. For example, American painter Peter Halley has used rectangular motifs reminiscent of Piet Mondrian and other painters
of geometric abstraction to design images that hint at diagrams for a network of passages, perhaps in a prison ward or underground bunker. American Rachel Lachowitz’s lipstick-coated copies of Minimalist sculptures mock the supposed “masculine” objectivity and logic encoded in those impersonal, hard-edged structures. Lachowitz’s choice of lipstick as an art material signals, in semiotic terms, a conscious application of feminist theory into the arena of art world politics. Her choice is additionally inflected with humor and irony, a sign that, in the end, she realizes her action will probably have little consequence.

Is abstract art a worn-out style from the past? Even in the face of skepticism, some contemporary artists choose to work abstractly with heartfelt commitment rather than irony. Those who argue that art is valuable when it provides a focus for perception and contemplation often prefer abstraction. The reductions of abstraction yield a strong contrast to the visual overload of mass-media images. And without recognizable images or narrative to occupy their thoughts, viewers are not distracted from the immediate sensory experience of looking. Today’s artists who are sincere about abstraction are not necessarily returning to the abstract expressionists’ notion of abstraction as self-expression. As painter Laurie Fendrich writes, abstraction “is also about ideas—the complex struggle between order and chaos, for example, or how the flux of the organic world modifies the rigor of geometry.” Abstract painting can serve as an antidote to our hyper-mediated society.

Social Experience as Art
Critical theory is constantly undergoing transformation and negotiation, particularly as novel forms of art take the stage. In the twenty-first century, one of the areas of theory that has gained traction concerns art that invites participation by viewers, particularly social interactions. According to scholar Claire Bishop, the term work of art may not even be appropriate for these kinds of activities. Bishop says that participatory art projects are “less likely to be ‘works’ than social events, publications, workshops or performances. The intersubjective space created through these projects becomes the focus—and medium—of artistic investigation.”

Many critics and curators use the term relational aesthetics for the analysis of art focused on interhuman relations, adopting the expression advocated by influential French critic Nicolas Bourriaud in the mid-1990s. Bourriaud, according to Nadja Rottner, applied the term to a particular group of artists “and what he considers their novel approach to a socially-conscious art of participation: an art that takes as its content the human relations elicited by the artwork.” Relational art’s boundaries expand to include the lived, sensory experiences of viewers interacting with other people and perhaps with the artist in a shared social situation. The ability to promote the social situation is much more important than any tangible objects or images an artist might create or employ. Rottner explains, “For Bourriaud, the relational artist is a social engineer, who establishes ‘situations’ to be used, rather than objects to be contemplated....Intersubjectivity and conviviality are Bourriaud’s two key concepts. He argues that we should not judge the physical manifestation of a relational work aesthetically, but only its ‘formation’ of intersubjective interchange between people (that is, the work’s social effects are more important than its appearance).”
Other critics, including Bishop, have critiqued aspects of Bourriaud’s formulation because he does not envision a political dimension to relational art. These critics advocate participatory art that engages in institutional critique and aims to improve society. Meaning is elaborated collectively rather than by means of individual responses. Forerunners of this point of view include Marxist-influenced critics earlier in the twentieth century, such as Walter Benjamin, as well as Guy Debord, a key figure in the Situationist International in the late 1950s and 1960s, who called for the construction of participatory situations ultimately to construct a classless society beyond the bonds of religion and capitalism.

Cai’s *Cultural Melting Bath* [1-7], discussed earlier, provides one example of relational art. The conviviality among the bathers sharing the tub is the central aspect of the art, rather than the tub itself as a physical, sculptural entity. A more intense version of interhuman exchange occurred in Serbian Marina Abramović’s *The Artist Is Present* (2010) [color plate 1], performed by the artist in the central atrium of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) every day the museum was open for two and a half months. (A retrospective exhibition with the same title was on view elsewhere in the museum.) The artist sat under bright lights for hours at a time, facing one visitor after another seated across a long table, her steady gaze unwavering. Abramović was committed to her sustained presence as a form of physical endurance, while each visitor was free to decide how long or short a duration to sit opposite the artist. The social exchange between artist and viewer involved what critic Jörg Heiser calls “delegated action.” According to Heiser, in this form of exchange the artist gives up control over meaning. He explains, “This term [‘delegated action’] makes clear that besides a relationship being established, there is also sharing or total relinquishing of responsibility for actions, handing over partial control either to the participants or to the process itself.”

In some instances of relational art, the artist is not involved as an active participant in the social encounter. British-German artist Tino Seghal engineers encounters in art exhibition spaces that are an extreme version of this type. For instance, in a project that gained much attention at the Guggenheim Museum in 2010, Seghal offered *The Progress*, delegating responsibility for encounters to “interpreters” (as Seghal calls them) who engaged museum visitors in conversation while walking up the museum’s famous spiral ramp. (There were no images or objects on display, and the artist was not present.) In succession, a young child, adolescent, adult, and elderly person would engage the visitor in a discussion of the idea of progress. Seghal does not permit official documentation of his works; the only residue is located in the memory of the interpreters and visitors and in art criticism.

Our brief foray into the terrain of relational aesthetics is intended to suggest that it is valuable for anyone who wants to engage deeply and richly in contemporary art to gain an increasing fluency in the theories that are currently prominent in the work of influential artists, scholars, and critics. Even the beginning art student and viewer of art should bear in mind that all theory stems from the thinking of engaged people. It is not a privileged activity open only to a small band of the initiated. Your own theoretical musing about the purposes, values, and meaningfulness of works of art can develop cogency. There is a close connection between theories and values, but they are not the same. If someone writes that art is always political (that all artistic production is
implicitly or explicitly ideological), then a theoretical idea is being advanced. If someone writes that art should be political, then a criterion of evaluation is being advanced. Testing your ideas in the context of actual works of art, as well as in dialogue with others who are equally engaged in thinking and looking at art, can provide you with a rich framework for helping to shape your view of art that you have known for a long time, as well as art you are meeting for the first time. Our words of advice are to remain flexible as you continue encountering new forms of thought—and that, ultimately, is what both works of art and theories are: forms of thought.

Art Meets Contemporary Culture

One of the leitmotifs of art over the past hundred years has been the blurring of distinctions between the realm of art and other categories of culture. In the contemporary period, the dissolution of boundaries between art and life has continued in a number of directions. There continues to be cross-fertilization between high and low art. The use of found objects and the ready-made, along with appropriation and remixing of images and styles, remain significant directions, frequently involving borrowings from consumer and popular culture. For example, the creative use of comic book and cartoon imagery and styles has become a thriving subculture of visual culture as a whole.

Popular culture, including television, films, rock music, and video games, has a powerful influence on artists. At the same time, art more and more appears to be in competition with the bold graphics, seductive objects, and lively stories of commerce and entertainment. Some artists adapt by making art that has become more like entertainment, adopting strategies of display and production from popular culture, installing multimedia spectacles in exhibition sites, crossing over into the domains of film, music, and fashion, and serving professionally as consultants and even entrepreneurs in commercial enterprises such as restaurants and magazines. Criticizing the trend, photographer Jeff Wall said, “I think a new kind of art has emerged since the ’70s, a kind that is easier to appreciate, more like entertainment, more attached to media attitudes…. It’s much closer to entertainment and depends on production value and on spectacle in a way that serious art never did before.”

Distinctions between art and the larger visual culture are dissolving and even disappearing. Artists bring non-art experiences into the sphere of art; they also introduce art into the larger visual culture. Artists mingle their works with other products of visual culture by choosing not to limit their display opportunities to art venues only. Artists, according to curator Benjamin Weil, “have been exploring approaches akin to an ambient strategy, focusing on ways to insert their projects within the chaos of an overmediated public sphere. Billboards, usually designed to advertise commercial products, have been used by artists such as the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres to ‘sell’ ideas. Marquees of abandoned theaters are ideal surfaces for the placement of inconspicuous messages; stickers, posters, and other forms of street culture become compelling instruments in the hands of artists.”

The pervasiveness of new information and communication technologies, which have been embraced enthusiastically by people around the world, is a powerful influence on the production of contemporary art in countries from Korea to Brazil. Not
only do we live in a new world of greatly expanded information, but also the structure of information has changed dramatically. The decentralized Internet of Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter is vastly different from the world of physical libraries, handwritten diaries, and printed books, newspapers, and encyclopedias. The Internet is bringing us closer to the concept of a universal library/marketplace where one can search for scholarly articles, news, recipes, past acquaintances, maps, weather reports, medical information, pornography, consumer products, and trivia or watch video on almost any subject imaginable, in formats from movies to television programs to live footage from webcams that ordinary people have installed in their "private" living spaces. The creation of knowledge is social because anyone can add to the flow of information. For instance, Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia begun in 2001, had nineteen million articles written collaboratively by volunteers around the world by 2011.

The term rhizome was used conceptually by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to describe nonhierarchical knowledge networks that allow for multiple entry and exit points.\(^4^2\) They borrowed the term from the botanical rhizome, a category that includes ginger, some species of iris and ferns, and similar plants that send out horizontal stems and shoots from their nodes. Deleuze and Guattari used the term to characterize research and thought that is interconnected but has no beginning and end, has no set pathways through the system, resists rigid organization and dominating ideas, and has the capacity to link together heterogeneous elements. Cartography, which allows you to enter a map from any point rather than follow a set path, is a long-standing example of a rhizomatic system. Rhizome theory has gained currency in cultural discourse because so many of today’s systems of representing and interpreting knowledge are fluid, nonhierarchical, nonlinear, and decentered. Computer-based information technology, notably the World Wide Web, is a prime case of a rhizomatic model of knowledge. Any bit of information exists within an enormous network; anyone can enter the information stream anywhere and move among multiple pathways by links, creating a synthesis of potentially unlike elements; anyone can search, duplicate, manipulate, add to, or transmit information.

British artist Keith Tyson’s monumental artwork *Large Field Array*\(^4^3\) (2006–2007) is rhizomatic in structure and conception. The sculpture comprises three hundred modular units, most formed from polystyrene into approximately two-foot cubes; the cubes are arranged into a grid occupying both the floor and walls of a gallery when installed. Each highly crafted unit is unique and references something recognizable from the natural world, science, popular culture, consumer products, art history, or a range of other sources. Individual sculptures include an airborne skateboarder, fungi, stacked cans of beer, a volcano, a model of the Hoover dam, a man spanking a boy with a belt, a square patch of cornfield, a rainbow over a jackpot, and an elaborate house of cards, as well as appropriations from other artists, including Claes Oldenburg, Jake and Dinos Chapman, and Yves Klein. A visitor can move through the cubes on the floor via multiple pathways of his or her own choosing: forward, sideways, diagonally. Although Tyson fosters certain associations through his choices for juxtapositions of individual sculptures, ultimately each visitor is responsible for imagining his or her own visual, psychological, and philosophical connections and meanings among the
disparate units. A kind of three-dimensional analog version of an online encyclopedia, Large Field Array proposes that everything can be linked without the control or singularity of a hierarchical structure. Tyson said that Large Field Array is a celebration of our transition from an industrial to an information age. “[We] embrace complexity as a positive force. We can trust the rhizome to look after itself.... The system will take care of itself. And I think we are more capable—this generation is more capable—of trusting the dynamic, than any other generation before us.”

New rhizomatic artworks such as Tyson’s emphasize abrupt juxtapositions, linking, fragmentation, and multiplicity. They require new forms of visual literacy, asking their audiences to cross borders between genres and subjects and to make a leap of faith that connections exist even though the web of knowledge is too large and complex for anyone to master. Tyson’s artwork, assembling three hundred sculptures into one cohesive installation, embodies a reconnoitering of reality from the diverse perspectives represented (including pop culture, science, religion, history, politics, and
sexuality). Tyson’s Large Field Array implies that no one field of knowledge can provide all the information or answers or frame the most probing questions.

In a similar spirit, Themes of Contemporary Art is a reconnoitering mission through the past thirty years of art. We end by reasserting this chapter’s initial premise: content matters, even if the meanings are open-ended. It is with this fundamental idea in mind that we turn to an examination of contemporary artworks that embody eight resonating and interlinked themes: identity, the body, time, memory, place, language, science, and spirituality.

Notes

1. We discuss this installation in a profile on Eduardo Kac after chapter 8, “Science.” For additional information, see Eduardo Kac’s website at www.ekac.org or the published book about the project, The Eighth Day: The Transgenic Art of Eduardo Kac (Tempe: Institute for Studies in the Arts, Arizona State University, 2003).

2. Co-curators for the Wrong Gallery exhibition were curator Massimiliano Gioni and artist Maurizio Cattelan.


5. We discuss an ongoing series of large-scale installations in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in a profile after chapter 6, “Place.” In its first decade, the Tate Modern exceeded original projections for the number of visitors, and a new extension building is planned to open in 2012.

6. In 2002, The Dinner Party was acquired by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where it now is on permanent view in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.


11. Artists working with appropriation in the 1980s and after include Sigmar Polke in Germany, Jeff Koons, Mike Bidlo, and Louise Lawler in the United States, Carlo Maria Mariani in Italy, and Wang Guangyi in China.

12. There were precursors of sound art dating back to the early twentieth century, including some of the Italian Futurists. More recent pioneers include Pauline Oliveros, Vito Acconci, Terry Fox, and Keith Sonnier. These and other artists were represented in the 1983 exhibition Sound/Art at the Sculpture Center in New York City, which featured the first documented use of the term sound art in the United States.

13. Some active practitioners within the expanding field of new media include Rebecca Horn, Jon Kessler, Alan Rath, Lauric Anderson, Margot Lovejoy, Pipilotti Rist, Mariko Mori, Jeffrey Shaw, Ben Rubin, and Michal Rovner.


16. In the age of mechanical reproduction, such processes as photolithography allowed newspapers and magazines to duplicate and disseminate images. The electronic age, however, is different in degree as well as in kind from preceding eras, as imagery is now sent around the world at the speed of light.


26. Influential theorists of poststructuralism include the French intellectuals Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan.

27. See chapter 7, “Language,” for further discussion of poststructuralism.

28. The many feminist thinkers who have influenced the visual arts include Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Craig Owens, Laura Mulvey, Lucy Lippard, and Griselda Pollock. Thinkers associated with postcolonialism include Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, Rasheed Araeen, Paul Gilroy, and Olu Ogibe. Intellectuals involved with both feminism and postcolonialism include bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Ella Habiba Shohat.


37. For example, see Grant Kester’s formulation of what he terms dialogical aesthetics in Grant H. Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

39. Other examples of relational art include projects by Carsten Höller and Andrea Zittel; Zittel’s work is analyzed in the Profile following chapter 6, “Place.”


43. The title of Tyson’s artwork, *Large Field Array*, makes reference to the Very Large Array (VLA), an astronomy observatory located in a barren stretch of the New Mexico landscape. VLA’s power as a scientific research instrument—an outlook on the cosmos—stems from the holistic gathering of information from the twenty-seven large independent radio antennae (each arm is thirteen miles in length) that are arranged in an enormous Y-shape configuration.