

What is Contemporary Art? Tate Modern, Sydney Style, and Art to Come

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In attempting some answers to the question ‘What is contemporary art?’ in this lecture, I seek to respond to the responsibilities implied in the title of the chair that I hold as Director of the Power Institute. I wish to honour both its founding benefactor, artist and philanthropist John Joseph Wardell Power, as well as the field of artistic practice to which he was committed, as am I. How I approach the question will, I hope, also reflect my commitments to the broader artistic field named in the title conferred on me by the Faculty of Arts when I was awarded a personal chair. It will seem natural, then—as well, of course, as being culturally entirely predictable—to tackle the question of the contemporary by setting it within the frameworks of modernity. It is a curious fact that the word ‘contemporary’ has come to replace the words ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ as a descriptor of the consequential art of our time. It is equally curious that the

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meaning of this word is at once obvious and opaque.

I am going to give three quite distinct but connected answers to the question asked in my title. The first is the most obvious: Contemporary Art is the institutionalised network through which the art of today presents itself to itself and to its interested audiences all over the world. It is an intense, expansionist, proliferating global subculture, with its own values and discourse, communicative networks, heroes, heroines and renegades, professional organisations, events, meetings and monuments, markets and museums, its own distinctive structures of stasis and change.

Contemporary Art galleries, biennials, art fairs, magazines, television programs and websites, along with whole ranges of associated products, are burgeoning in both old and new economies. They have carved out a constantly changing, but probably permanent, niche in the ongoing structures of the visual arts, and in the broader cultural industries, of most countries. As well, they are a significant, growing presence in the international economy, being closely connected with high culture industries such as fashion, with mass cultural industries such as those of tourism, and, to a lesser but still important degree, with specific sectors of reform and change such as those of education, media and politics. I will canvass these elements and also question them, especially their limits.

The second answer is, to me, more fundamental; the kind of answer a philosopher might give. It is difficult to explicate, although easy to state in a definition-like form: contemporary art is that art infused with the multiple modes of contemporaneity, with the open-ended energies of art to come. Note that I have dropped the capital letters: I am identifying here the driving spirit of the contemporary, not its overt, institutional, well-shaped forms. I will show that a certain spirit of contemporaneity is present in the most significant art of our time, and that only some of it is to be found—along with much art that is not made in this spirit—in the institutions of Contemporary Art.

The third answer is even more particular, with resonance mainly within contemporary art practice and theory. It is about the

internalities of style: the answer, therefore, of an art historian. It requires that I introduce special meaning to a number of terms, meanings that will become clear as we proceed and as I give examples of current and recent art. It goes like this. In order to give compelling communicative form to the spirit of contemporaneity, artists these days must, I believe, work through a particular set of representational problems. They cannot overlook the fact that they make art within cultures of modernity and postmodernity that are predominantly visual, that are driven by image, spectacle, attraction and celebrity, on a scale far beyond that with which their predecessors had to deal. Furthermore, they are embroiled willy-nilly in the fact that these cultures are shaped and reshaped by a constant warring between the visceral urgencies of *innervation*, on the one hand, and the debilitating drift towards *enervation*, on the other. In their efforts to find figure within form, to win it from formlessness, artists cannot avoid using practices of surfacing and screening which, along with the rise and rise of the photogenic, are the great aesthetic and technical legacies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Artists who turn their back on this constellation of problems and possibilities cease to be contemporary artists.

As you can tell, this third answer is not easy either. Yet it takes us into the laboratories of art, to the inner spaces where art is made these days, alongside the artists who are working themselves to extremes for us. This is why I asked Artspace, Sydney, for permission to show during this lecture a netcam of artist Mike Parr presenting his performance *Water from the mouth*. Mike has been locked into a room at Artspace, not far from here, for 156 hours and 45 minutes. He will take only water and see only his wife and doctor. He has [1 May 2001] 132 hours and 15 minutes of self-imposed isolation to go. The question about commitment such as this is not 'Is it contemporary art?' It is, rather, 'Why does work such as this matter?'

John McDonald, self-appointed Mr Voice of Everybody, has no doubt that it matters not a whit. 'It's all dreadfully old hat—it's been done in the '60s and '70s', he is reported to have said (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April, p.5). Long-term noisy critic

of contemporary artists such as Parr for being fashion-driven and changeable, he now damns him for being old-fashioned and repetitive. He fails to see that Parr has been enacting and questioning the limits of human experience through such tests of psychic and physical endurance for decades, indeed since the 1960s. His commitment to doing so far exceeds that of any other Australian artist, and is scarcely matched internationally. Coming late to political correctness, McDonald goes on to denigrate the artist for creating a 'ghastly' parody of the horrors endured by people in captivity, something to which Parr has been drawing attention for years.

McDonald has it totally upside down again. Far from being the preserve of elites intent on satisfying each other and deluding the people, Contemporary Art is a world-wide popular success, as is shown by millions voting with their feet to pursue their fascination with what these strange, but evidently committed, artists are doing. During the first ten hours of Parr's performance, the Artspace website experienced 220,000 hits. This puts to shame television programs such as *Survival* and *Big Brother*. Perhaps the people are wiser than their purported mouthpieces know.

In this lecture I will explore the implications of the three ideas about contemporaneity in art that I have just outlined. I will conclude with some remarks about how these ideas bear on the current situation of the Power Institute, the Museum of Contemporary Art and other contemporary art support structures. Let me begin, however, with the theme just introduced: the implications of the popularity of Contemporary Art.

Art and Power

The words 'power' and 'art' rarely occur in the same sentence. Yet they did so recently, when the Tate Modern opened in May of last year. This was partly because the gallery is located in what was the Bankside Power House. Indeed, Channel 4 made a television series about the project, and produced a book to commemorate the event entitled *Power into Art*. Maybe this was what British performance artists Gilbert & George had in mind

when they announced, gleefully, during the opening celebrations, that the Tate Modern demonstrated that 'Art is Power!' Knowing them, however, I am sure that they were pointing to the massive conjunctions of private and public patronage that lay behind the raising of £134 million to convert the building, and to the political manoeuvring that would be required to maintain it from here on in. Given their Thatcherite political outlook, perhaps they were permitting themselves the frisson of contemplating (abstractly, of course) the casualties that such a focussing of public wealth will occasion. Being erudite avant-gardists, they would have been punning on the famous slogan of Joseph Beuys 'Kapital=Kunst' (to be found, not so incidentally, scrawled by him on a preserved blackboard in the Beuys room inside the museum; it is echoed in Imants Tillers' fund-raising mural in the foyer of the MCA; and is parodied by America's answer to Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, in his photoposter *Artforum*, 1988-89).

In some ways, Britain has come rather late to the institutionalisation of contemporary art—compared, at least, to Europe, where, on average, two new museums of modern or contemporary art have been built each year for the past fifteen years. In the United States, new or expanded public galleries of modern and contemporary art have been a regular occurrence every few years, including, during the past decade, in such major cities as Chicago and San Francisco. Sydney has had the Power Gallery since 1968 and the Museum of Contemporary Art for ten years now.

Until the opening of Tate Modern, those Londoners interested in contemporary art would regularly visit the Institute of Contemporary Art, the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park, and a host of smaller, scattered venues around London and the provinces. The 'yBa', or Young British Artists, phenomenon was sustained and displayed by private capital, notably that of the Saatchi brothers, advertising moguls closely associated with the Conservative Party during its years of ascendancy. The later 1980s and early 1990s was a time when, in the words of critic Adrian Lewis, 'Art aspired to the condition of advertising'. Unfortunately, a lot of highly celebrated art achieved this goal. It fell subject to the glitzy superficialities of media hook, the empty noise of

advertising repetition, the attenuated vacuity of the hyper-real—in other words, it succumbed to the disco drift into enervation that I stated earlier was one of the two great forces shaping visual imagery in our times. Examples from the later 1980s include Damien Hirst's various split sheep in formaldehyde sculptures. Locally, Dale Frank preceded these British shockers by a few years with his 'bad paintings'. As with Koons, contemporary art surrenders its critical impulse and becomes itself just another hot item in the shop window of current visual culture.

It certainly helped Contemporary Art to become hip. Attendance at Tate Modern began at a level double that anticipated, and has grown tens of thousands per day, approaching Metropolitan Museum of Art numbers: specifically, 2.7 million visitors in the first five months, 118 per cent over target (the *Times*, 6 November, 2000), 5.25 million in its first year of operation (the *Art Newspaper*, no. 115, June 2001). When I visited late last year, crowds were from Europe, Asia and the Americas, and ranged in age from early twenties to late sixties, mostly but not overwhelmingly female. This demographic is true of museums of modern art everywhere. It has now spread to those with an emphasis on the contemporary.

What were the crowds surging to see? A display that began, on each of its four floors, with rooms in which important works by the Modern Masters quickly gave way, often in the same room, to works by artists who have come into prominence in recent years: Monet waterlilies eclipsed by a Richard Long floor piece and mudwall, Matisse's wonderful sequence of *Jeanette's* backs facing off in gentle struggle with young black British artist Marlene Dumas's watercolours, meditating, in a way possible only after feminism, on the exigencies of being in a woman's body. In the main machine hall space visitors queued for over an hour to climb and descend the three thirty meter high towers making up Louise Bourgeois's *Untitled* exploration of her psychic chambers, and to walk beneath the spider legs of her giant *Maman*, 1994. A whole floor was given over to installations commissioned for the occasion, exploring the dialogue, in video artist Gary Hill's words, 'Between cinema and a hard place'.

Crowds queued and surged, too, at the Royal Academy, which was showing *Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art*. The exhibition was entered through a small hole that brought you to the space beneath the stairs of George Schneider's *Haus ur* in Rheydt, Germany, and then through the claustrophobic labyrinth that he has created there (a section was on view during the Carnegie International last year). Soon after, one was shocked to see that a meteorite had burst through the roof and felled a life-sized, *trompe l'œil* sculpture of the Pope (Maurizio Cattelan's *Ta Nona Ora*). New Age escape was possible if one immersed oneself in Mariko Mori's lotus bubble; a romanticism of rubbish was to be found in Tim Noble and Sue Webster's installation *The Undesirables*. Horror was more in evidence than beauty. The strongest works used one quality to evoke the other. British artist Darren Almond's *The Shelters*, 1999, focused us on the clean precision of German industrial design, until one realised that the two bus shelters in his icy cold room had been transported from outside Auschwitz. In the second last room, Jake and Dinos Chapman presented eight museum display cases in each of which hundreds of intricate, toy-size quasi-humanoids committed unspeakable atrocities on each other, acting out one's worst nightmares of Nazi concentration camps. It was entitled, appropriately, *Hell*, and it was hell to take in. In the final room, three huge, brightly-colored happy jingle paintings by Jeff Koons surrounded his *Balloon Dog*, 1994-2000.

My first thought, as I exited the exhibition, was that the organisers were giving us a soft landing after so much horror. Halfway down the stairs, it struck me that perhaps the last room could have been entitled *Hell* as well. What kind of world is it when we celebrate, as an amusing ironist, an artist such as Jeff Koons who encourages us to swallow, with a knowing smile, our manipulation as consumers of yet another commodity? There are moments when I think that Koons is, precisely, the interior designer from hell.

The point of these recollections of exhibitions recently seen is that they enable us to pinpoint the reasons for what might seem the surprising popularity of what is really quite challenging

current art. Certainly, expert publicity is assembled around these exhibitions, and, yes, much of this art has achieved the condition not just of advertising but of fashion, so it can be quick and easy to like. Concentrations of power, cultural and otherwise, attract interest, like magnets. And sometimes, there are adventitious reasons, such as New York Mayor Giuliani deciding to take on the *Sensation* exhibition during a 1999 election campaign. Mayor Giuliani's response itself precipitated a media sensation. The mass media feed off stories structured around conflict between classes, races, cultures and individuals. In Sydney, Contemporary Art hits the front pages when it coincides with our city's obsession with clashes between powerful personalities and the battle over property, especially waterfront real estate, most notably at Circular Quay. Yet Contemporary Art as art becomes news, mostly, when artists create works that seem to come from another cultural planet than that on which most readers of a given newspaper or watchers of a given television channel live.

Like Archbishop Pell, then of Melbourne, who objected to the display of Andre Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* at the National Gallery of Victoria, Mayor Giuliani found Christopher Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* 'blasphemous' and 'disgusting' because he saw a wilful, arbitrary and probably atheistic defilement of a sacred icon. Yet anyone who gave these works the time of contemplation that all art works, as all icons, deserve, would come to see them as, in fact, efforts to situate transcendent (and perhaps even religious) experience in settings that create a new, contemporary kind of beauty. Ofili combines elements of African/gay aesthetics; Serrano's draw to spirituality is evident in most of his work, for example, *White Christ*, 1989.

That National Gallery of Australia director Brian Kennedy retreated from these values when he circulated the *Sensation* catalogue to his ministers is as shocking in a person in his position as is his cowardice in withdrawing from the exhibition in the first place, and his smarminess in offering up his institution's independence as a cover for doing so in the second. Former National Gallery of Victoria director Timothy Potts took a similar path when he withdraw the Serrano work from exhibition on the

grounds that violent objection to the work by crazed members of the public endangered the safety of museum attendants. The mistake being made here, by all concerned, is that of reading works of visual art as literal statements, as offering up their meanings at first glance or not at all.

Such stunted judgement parallels that of the English science historian Lisa Jardine, who called for Nicholas Poussin's painting *Rape of the Sabines*, c.1636–37, to be taken down from the walls of the National Gallery, London (where it hung on loan from the Louvre, Paris) on the grounds that it portrayed and condoned violence. Again, time for contemplation reveals that while part of its evident subject matter is a specific violation, as a work of art it amounts to much more than that, and has a more complex and positive moral structure. It powerfully asserts, in its aesthetic form, in the tensions and poise of its visual order, exactly the classical virtue that the Roman leadership so conspicuously and despicably betrayed. (In contrast to Jacques-Louis David's version, *Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1795, it does not take the further step of celebrating the self-sacrifice of the Sabine women.)

All those who made censorious decisions in these cases have failed to allow the communicative time that is due even to the most media savvy of contemporary art. Indeed, each of these would-be and actual censors succumbed to reading the artworks they attacked as media events. Their imaginations have been taken over by assessing everything as to how it will play with the punters, with the people as mediated by the media at its worst. In this sense, they, too, have become subject to *spectacularisation*, that is, to the values of immediacy, superficiality and commodity that they would, in other forums, sententiously condemn.

But the people are not that stupid. Politicians, fear-ridden arts bureaucrats, and sensation-seeking media have got it wrong: the main reason that exhibitions of contemporary art keep on being popular is, I suggest, because they are answering public needs. That is, at least some of the art is engaging with the most important issues of our time, and doing so in full-blooded ways. As Damien Hirst does, in works such as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a shark suspended in fluid flight,

a visual embodiment of unconscious fear, of the trauma that is, perhaps, the emotional state definitive of our time, the great psycho-social legacy of the twentieth century. I sense that, just in the past year or so, this depth of engagement on the part of artists with the most important things is increasing. If so, then spectacularisation—the retreat of Contemporary Art into being just another brand of entertainment—may yet be defeated. Or, at least, pushed back.

The Terms

Let me now turn to the terms of debate, particularly the interplay between ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’. We are familiar with this in Sydney. On 5 April last year, in an interview on the ABC Radio 2BL morning show, New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, while dismissing Lord Mayor Frank Sartor’s first rescue plan for the Museum of Contemporary Art as unworkable, nevertheless ended up with this flourish: ‘Sydney is a contemporary city. Like all others of its kind it needs a place where works of the contemporary imagination can be compared by Sydneysiders and visitors to works that come from past times/periods at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. There will be a Museum of Contemporary art in Sydney and it will be in that building on the Quay’.

There is wisdom here. He is picturing the educative, civic value of a walk from the Domain to the Quay: the opportunity to experience the cultural and historical core of Sydney, in a direction that faces toward the future. But it has, for Carr, limits. At his press conference of February 27 this year, the Premier attacked the MCA collection as ‘modest’ and warned that if a ‘stunning’ building were created on the current site it would create a ‘mismatch’. I leave aside the colossal misjudgment as to the quality of the collection. I only ask that you go down and enjoy the current exhibition *MCA unpacked* if you wish to experience the bes. rejoinder. I leave aside, too, the crimping politics of the statement. Rather, I want to highlight the category mistake on which both are based.

The Premier based his judgement on 'world terms'. The MCA, he asserted, is 'not the collection of the Pompidou Centre. It's not the collection of Rothkos you see in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. It's probably not up to the contents of the new Museum of Contemporary Art in San Francisco'. In my rejoinder in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (7 March, 2001), I detailed the factual errors and misdescriptions here. I will not repeat them. The point is that the MCA aims only to present art since the 1960s and 1970s. Mr Carr contrasts it, unfavourably, to museums that take on the whole of modern art since 1880 or 1900. The MCA attempts nothing like this scope. He mixes up 'modern' with 'contemporary'.

We do need to pay careful attention to these differences, and to remember that both terms evoke not only a set of contra-concepts ('the past', 'the old,' etc.) but also a plethora of allied concepts. These include: 'avant-garde', 'art of today', 'work by living artists', 'rising artists', 'coming men', 'new wave' 'new art', 'modernism', 'modernist formalism', 'modern-contemporary', 'formalesque', 'ultra-modern', even, recently, 'neo-modernism', among others (including, of course, 'postmodern'). Yet all of these, it might be argued, fall within (even as they often press against) the scope of the two terms 'modern' and 'contemporary'. Indeed, it may well be that this is all one, not necessarily always happy, family of terms, tied together around a directional device, a pivoting between present, future and past (in that order, probably) in art. If so, the question then becomes: does this passageway itself have a history, or, better, what would be its histories at particular times and places?

An example is the opening of the MCA in November 1991. There was some difference of opinion among the planners about whether we should retain the name 'Power Gallery of Contemporary Art', shift to a more 'Contemporary Art Centre' concept, or come up with something else. Bernice Murphy and Leon Paroissien argued, successfully, that you could make a museum out of the contemporary, that the past/future divide was itself *passé*, that you could build the past and future into the present as it was being created—a classic 1980s, post-modern

idea. This is how to resolve the evident contradiction of a museum and contemporary art, of museumising the new. Bernice Murphy is clear about this in the opening chapter of her book *MCA: Vision and Context*.

So we can say that the MCA, when it opened, was the first post-modern art museum in the world. In the event, it exemplified another world-wide tendency, whereby the term 'postmodern' all but disappeared, to be replaced by the term 'contemporary'—acting, as it has done so often these past few hundred years, as a default term between new period styles. The Museum of Sydney was the next postmodern museum, and arguably has been more successful in conveying this sense of atomised history, of fragmented memory. This is much to the chagrin of some of its audiences, but I love it.

Yet the MCA opened in the early nineties, so it was actually the first museum of the previous decade. The moment that Contemporary Art, in its postmodern form, was just finishing was itself turned into a museum. The opening exhibitions were like entering a collector's cabinet of the present. Upstairs, the exhibition *TV Times* was a pop cult version of the same idea. These were the best museum ideas of their time—at least, they were from the affirmative perspective, because, on the other side, many artists, such as Richard Wilson and Joseph Kosuth in the United States, were doing work in museums that operated as a kind of internal critique.

My overall point is that Contemporary Art has come, on the level of official culture, to replace modernism and postmodernism as the general category for the art of the present and the recent. On this level, it is the new Modern Art. Let me explore this historically.

The Two Halves of Art

Despite the ahistoricism of the postmodern moment, everything has its discoverable and still effective history, including the concepts 'modern' and 'contemporary'. The French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire in his 1862 essay 'The Painter of Modern

Life' pinpointed the central value at the heart of artistic modernism. He spoke of 'the quality you must permit me to call *modernité*, by which I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable'. He mentioned the illustrator Constantin Guys, but Eduoard Manet is the outstanding example. His notorious *Luncheon on the Grass* of 1863 replays a well-known etching of a meeting of the gods, made by Raimondi in about 1517.

The emphasis here is on the kind of art that embodies in subject matter and technique the novel experiences of social modernity: accelerated yet increasingly measured time, transience of relationships, chance contacts, impermanent institutions. Modernity is understood as a cluster of circumstances which appears to be valuable in and of itself, but actually stands in contrasting connection to the slower, long-term, permanent values of classicism, history, and heritage. The desire to 'be modern' is tempered by a profound awareness of the persistence of the past. Soon this desire was to include a trenchant critique of the excesses and inequities of modernity itself, and a profound questioning of art's nature and role in this context. Avant-garde art became an art of disjunction, highly critical of the dominant aesthetic and social values of its time.

It may be that the story of Contemporary Art—and of much modern life—has been one of forgetting these critical connections. When separated from its disjunctive connection, Contemporary Art progresses along like a combine harvester, leaving deposits of Modern Art in its wake. There was a widespread use of the term 'contemporary' during the 1920s and 1930s, in Europe, the United States, and their economic and cultural colonies. It worked, mostly, as a default term for 'modern art', as a pointer to art that was slightly less threatening than that of the 'modernists' but still comfortably up-to-date. A gradual acceptance of the contemporary at its face values triumphed in the 1960s when modernist abstraction became an official art. Then, in the crisis of the 1970s, all such generalities evaporated, their institutions imploded. With the recent commodification of Contemporary Art, they are reappearing, rebuilding. It is now common to merge the terms

'modern' and 'contemporary' into one, or drop modernism into the past. The same, as I have noted, had happened by around 1990, to postmodernism.

The Contemporary Now

These shifts are evident in some recent common usages of the word 'Contemporary'—in museums, book titles, course names, for example—as a period style term. For many, 'Contemporary Art' is that visual art produced in the wake of the Pop-Minimal-Conceptual or 'postmodern' moment, especially art that rehearses or replays that moment. Key examples include post-conceptual painters such as German artist Gerhard Richter, artists who pursue their concerns across media, as does Mike Parr, conceptual photographers such as Canadian Jeff Wall, Australian Bill Henson and American Cindy Sherman. This was the kind of art that the late Peter Fuller attacked as Biennale International Club Class Art. His local acolyte John McDonald echoed this, as we have seen. But what happened when the latter finally took a curatorial position and was given a prime opportunity to provide an alternative account? He produced the dog's breakfast disaster of the *Federation* exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, an attempt to survey Australian art of the past 100 years as if both local and international modernism had not existed, as if the only art of consequence to our nationality was down-home, cheeky but comfortable, amusing art-craft. Such naïve nationalism does a disservice to us all, because it clings fast to the view that significant art can be made in ignorance of the challenges of the contemporary. It cannot.

A softer, more colloquial usage of Contemporary Art as a style term is rapidly gaining ground. Any art that clearly echoes something of twentieth-century avant-gardism and is connected somehow to the new technologies is instantly, easily, seen as Contemporary, especially when set in contrast to art of inherited subject matter presented in traditional media. Examples often include digital media, but if one followed the progress of the work of artists such as Patricia Piccinini of Melbourne, one

would see it to have moved from irony about computer game type manipulation to telling evocations of how digitality is transforming contemporary and perhaps future life.

It is now artworld orthodoxy to attack not just Koons for his seduction by the spectacle but also artists such as Andreas Gursky for being official visualisers of globalization. Gursky is currently being honoured by a massive retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Closer analysis reveals a more interesting ambivalence. We can see it at work in Gursky photographs such as his *Chicago, Board of Trade III*, 1999, and *Times Square, New York*, 1995. *His Rhine II*, 1999, with its coolly manic, relentlessly machinic framing of the river, evokes by contrast a paradigmatic image of Romantic individualism, Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting *Monk by the sea*, 1809.

Some writers, including myself, search for and value the critical, redemptive drives within current art, that is, art about survival within, and transformation of, the present social structures, art that is against art that merely reflects these structures. Yet it is misleading, nowadays, to line up artists and theorists on either side of a critical versus complicit divide. Everybody is both: it is the degrees that matter.

We are already well within my second answer to the question 'What is contemporary art?' We are looking at art that wrestles with the many-sided nature of contemporaneity itself, and does so in the terms that I set out before as my third answer.

The Challenges of Contemporaneity

If we were to turn to a good dictionary we would find a diverse cluster of meanings around the concept of the 'contemporary'. Let us review these, and draw a philosophical implication.

There is the banal sense of mere currency, that which is in circulation now. This echoes in the soft usage I just canvassed, and is scarcely worth our attention. It is not, moreover, a quality of the contemporary that distinguishes it from the modern. However, I can discern a current within the ways in which the artworld has responded to the post-Minimal, Conceptual moment

that, effectively, transforms the ordinary senses of the word 'contemporary' into its opposite. It is evident that, since the years around 1970, no tendency has achieved such prominence that it might be a candidate for becoming the dominant style of the period. Much effort went into promoting the 'return to painting' in the early 1980s, while installation and large-scale video modes have been ubiquitous in recent years. But nothing has succeeded Minimalism and Conceptualism as art styles, nor does the *de facto* minimal-conceptual aesthetic that pervades much practice amount to a style. It may be that we will always live in the aftermath of the 'crisis' of that moment, in a shifting that will never bring another paradigm into place. Will there ever be another predominant, period style in art? In this sense, the word 'contemporary' comes to mean 'out of time', suspended in a state after or beyond history, a condition of being always and only in the present. Horrific, or liberating?

More significant meanings cluster around the 'with time' or 'of one's time' elements of the contemporary. There is a multiplicity of relationships at work here. They range from overt interventions into major public sphere, world political issues (the art of the times) to subtle resonances between the normal activity of world-making and the artist's task of world-picturing. Of most interest is the precise quality of what it might mean for a set of ideas or values, a practice, an institution or a relationship—indeed, a period, a 'time'—to be *ours*.

Another interesting meaning of 'contemporary' is 'at the same time', that is, coeval, contemporaneous, simultaneous. Here in Australia we are experiencing an extraordinary example of art being produced simultaneously in closely connected cultures that nevertheless have distinct time conceptions. Between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures, for example, two distinct kinds of Contemporary Art are being produced by each culture, hybrids are emerging between them, and there are many non-contemporary art practices continuing alongside them. All artmaking in Australia occurs at angles of difference to more traditional practices—although much contemporary Aboriginal art includes surrogate traditional practice and much contemporary non-indigenous art

promulgates traditions of modernist and contemporary art practice. Much communication across these divides occurs but also much miscommunication. We see this at work in the exchanges between, for example, Imants Tillers and Gordon Bennett.

Contemporary Aboriginal art has many aspects. The direct inspiration of ceremonial stories is still evident in works by elders from remote communities: the recent *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales was but the latest testimony to the power of these forces, a highlight for me being the work of Uta Uta Tjangala of Yumari, and Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula of Papunya. The continuing power of self-replenishment in contemporary Aboriginal art is obvious in the extraordinary work, recently exhibited in the cities, that is now being done in the communities by artists who came to Sydney to see this show. This, to me, is a contemporary art, not because of its use of acrylics, or its smart gallery settings and marketing, but because it is about one of the most pressing personal, social and political needs of our time, the need to communicate, plainly, constructively and gracefully, yet with an eye to the complexities, across the divides between cultures. Its contemporaneity is that it is being forged in the double-time, the temporal differences between two, at base, incommensurable cultures.

In the terms of my third, technical, meaning, this art has given new depths of meaning to the surface as a communicative field in art. For the significant tribal Aboriginal artists, painted surfaces work as surrogates both for bodies marked for ceremony, particularly but not exclusively in bark painting, and for land, especially in Desert acrylics but, again, not exclusively. Politically, these often resplendent surfaces act as double-sided screens, at once revealing glimpses of but also concealing secret sacred content. Hiding in the *rarrk*, or dazzle.

The work of Tracey Moffatt is traced by similar yearnings. It uses the language of international Contemporary Art, but this is made strange by the otherness of these desires. She has for many years explored the details of racial tension and guilt, including its explosive, if temporary, resolutions. From her films *Night Cries* to *Bewitched*, through such photo sequences as *Scarred for Life*

to the dream memories in *Up in the Sky*, the ubiquitous theme of trauma in struggle with the desire for freedom keeps returning. Parallel issues also occur in specific forms in the Pacific, and in North and South Eastern Asia. For example, in the delicious parodies of Morimura Yasumasa of Japan, or the more chilling installations of young South Korean artist Do-Hu Suh.

The history of the word ‘contemporary’, and the examples of these artists, tells us that it is the simultaneity of all these ways of working in, of, with, against time that is at the core of contemporaneity. An art truly imbricated in contemporaneity is shaped from its deepest impulses, and marked across its surfaces, with the interplay between all of these usages, from the most banal through the most forward-looking to the most unreconciled.

Art to Come

My emphasis on the quality of contemporaneousness, on contemporaneity in art that is truly contemporary, raises the question: how do we think about the art of the future? My answer is unequivocal. By embracing wholeheartedly its most salient characteristic as a practice within a condition or context: that is, its unknowability yet inevitability, the unavoidable fact that what we cannot now know will come into being, will come to pass, will come into us and at the same time pass us by. I have adapted this idea from Jacques Derrida’s concept of ‘democracy to come’, as introduced in his book *Spectres of Marx*. It is, if you like, the manifestations in art of this same impulse that he identifies in the post-Fall of the Wall world as the counter-weight to multinational globalisation. The complexities and the energies of his concept—as well, I hope, as its relevance—will be evident in the exposition that follows.

Given that the idea of the avant-garde has lost its axiomatic force, why do we—indeed, why *should* we—commit to contemporary art to come? Let me advance three types of answer.

1. Because of the ways in which art—engaged, twistingly, with its times—has been contemporary to date, and because of the further, unknown, ways in which, we trust, art will open out

contemporaneity in times to come. This answer is based on the general fact of human continuity in the face of risk and self-destruction. It is, to me, a weak argument from tradition, of the kind of bland pessimism that characterised Clement Greenberg's 1968 Power Lecture, *Avant-Garde Attitudes*.

2. Because current art, as I have shown, is *precipitate*. It is constantly on the verge of self-transformation, of proliferation, rather than recursion and sameness. This may be a residue of the avant-garde axiom, but I think that it points to a situation much more open, unpredictable and diversifying than the single or relatively few (but nearly always exclusionist) kinds of avant-gardism that prevailed in the twentieth century.

3. Because the world is becoming even more complex than it was during the time of modernity. Baudelaire's *modernité* dialectic (contingency working on eternity leads to modernity) continues to have force, but only the fading, institutionalised force of convention and habit. Contemporaneity in art constantly pushes this now 150 year long tradition of modern art into a condition of mere continuity. Yet social contemporaneity is more and more complex, both in its relationships to art within continuing cultures and in the emergent relationships between cultures.

Thus, contemporaneity within art is becoming at once more complex and more central to practice. 'Contemporaneity' is an opening, constantly redefining set of forces and operations. In philosophical terms, it would be a 'deconstructive' par excellence in Derrida's early sense, that has by now become at the same time an 'undeconstructible' in his more recent sense. So my best short answer to the question posed by the title of this lecture, 'What is Contemporary Art?' is that it is that art marked by art to come, that is, by contemporaneity as I have (re)defined it. A slightly longer way of putting this would be to say that contemporary art today is that art driven by the multiple energies of contemporaneity, the art that figures forth those energies so we can glimpse them in operation, the art that works to transform those energies in ways that keep our futures open, an art that draws us into commitment to what is to come.

If I were to answer the lesser question 'What is Contemporary

Art Now?', I would say that within the institutions of art these days—the international museum and exhibition circuit, and all of us who dance attendance on it—'contemporary' is functioning as a default term for persistent modernisms and residual postmodernism. The forces of spectacularisation have indeed led to an evident dulling, even homogenisation, of the modern/contemporary art doublet. It has become official culture, not unlike the dead end reached by High Modernism in the 1960s. Yet that impasse released the still unrealised possibilities of Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism. So, the alternative to official Postmodernism is not the banal populism advocated by the mediocrities of the ugly Right, their dream of an art that goes forward pleasantly, as if modernism, let alone postmodernism, never happened. Rather, it is the significant, and increasing, body of practice that releases the differentiating energies inherent not so much in modernity or postmodernity but in the multiple internalities of contemporaneity itself.

I have been giving examples of this kind of art throughout. Let me provide some further examples, mostly large format, backlit photographs and video installations, which are the favoured current solutions to the demand that effective artworks work as surfaces and screens simultaneously, and do so photogenically. We have moved, as you will appreciate, into the third of my answers to the question 'What is contemporary art?'

Brazilian artist Andriana Varego makes past colonisation of her country viscerally present in works in which intestines pour out from cracks in the veneer of upper class culture and design. British artist Gillian Wearing records on video the testimonies of the most harrowing experiences, those that normally reach representation when they arrive at the courts, but that constitute the substance of everyday life for many. In her most recent work, *Trauma*, people who responded to an advertisement in *Time Out*, the London what's on guide, tell their 'worst' story from behind a mask. Sydney artist Denis del Favero also concentrates on the impact of trauma on memory, sense of self and on the tactility of bodies. His photo-installations have been exploring this subject, often in Central European settings, for some years. Christopher

Cunningham is best known for his MTV promos for Björk, Madonna and others, for the models in *Alien 3*, and in computer games for Playstation. In the *Apocalypse* exhibition he showed in an art gallery for the first time, presenting *flex*, a film that staged an extraordinarily intense interplay between aggression and tenderness, an elemental warring and marrying of the sexes.

This demonstration could go on. It will go on, in the work of artists such as these.

Sydney Style

I will conclude with some remarks about the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Power Institute, and the state of support for contemporary art in Australia. I make the following points entirely as expressions of my own views. They are in no way to be taken as the views of the University, or of any group or organisation with which I am associated. They are, obviously, made at a specific moment in what has been a long, and hotly-contested, debate about the nature and the future of the MCA. This debate will continue: my remarks will lose their contemporaneity, as we should expect.

In the few years since its opening, the MCA has created something special out of the raw materials supplied by the University of Sydney and the New South Wales Government. In honouring the terms of the Power Bequest, that is, in John Power's words, to 'bring the latest ideas and theories concerning contemporary art to the people of Australia by means of lectures and exhibitions and the building of lecture halls and galleries for this purpose', this University has made a huge commitment to art to come over many years. It has not sought to regulate, in any way, the content or the conduct of those it has trusted to run the MCA. It acknowledges the expertise and the independence of MCA Boards and staff, just as it respects the academic freedom of its lecturers and students. It has funded the Museum substantially, seeking always to bring it to a point of self-sufficiency. The Sydney art community has, since 1991, made a similar effort, in sheer money terms, and in terms of its trust in

the Museum's commitment to contemporaneity. The outcome is an institution that is deeply valued locally, and widely known in the rest of the world. Compared to contemporary art galleries in cities of similar size and sophistication, it is holding its own. Just.

Why is the MCA collection important? Essentially because it is one of the sites in Sydney where the potentialities of contemporaneity, of art to come, may be played out, and because it is the one place where this art may be assessed for storing for future reference. None of the other contemporary art sites around town, or in the state, has this extra obligation.

I still recall the excitement in the city in 1968 when Op Art, kinetic and light sculptures, appeared among us, in the first exhibit of the Power Collection, on a yet to be finished floor of what was instantly the best modern building in town, Harry Seidler's Australia Square. As a tutor at the Power Institute, in my first job, it was a joy to share with my students the experience of learning about contemporary art and life as it was happening. This pleasure remains to me, and is regularly replenished. For example, remember the experience of walking over the Bridge on Reconciliation Day and crowding into the Museum to see the recent Biennale. That was a moment to be savoured, particularly on this day. It was a moment in which the energies of contemporaneity, as I have outlined them in this lecture, with all their frustrations and all their possibilities, were most strikingly figured.

The MCA itself—including those of us who helped to shape it—must take some flak for the misunderstandings that it has attracted. There may well have been too much reference, in the planning and in the first years, to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, as a model. That venerable institution opened, after all, in 1929. It has had a crisis of identity ever since the end of Modern Art, something unimagined by its founders, which slowly became evident during the 1980s.

Premier Bob Carr's mix-up of the contemporary with the modern might never have occurred were he able to see regularly a substantial number of major works from the Power and other collections on regular display at the MCA. Four years ago he generously made the fifth and sixth floors of the old Maritime

Services Building available to the Museum. The opportunity was not taken to mount a proper permanent collection display. As a result, the people of Sydney and New South Wales have been deprived of an in-depth sense of the development of art since the 1960s and 1970s, the moment of change which, as I have suggested, still shapes contemporary art. The Art Gallery of New South Wales, which also holds some fine work from the period, can show only a fraction of it in its basement galleries.

Closing this gap would be one of the many benefits to flow from a fully funded, vibrant MCA, adequately housed in a building made worthy of its collections. There is genuine reason to be concerned if the great Sydney real estate tsunami is at work, if the proposals for the MCA are actually a front for giving developers a chance to turn the other side of the Quay into another Toaster. If, however, we see this as a visual arts issue, then someone is giving the Premier bad advice. The point is not that a stunning new building might show up a 'modest' collection. It is, rather, to seize the chance to transform the current dull monolith into a structure that channels the energy and openness of the art within it, and the art to come.

While I hold no brief for the building itself, I would not go as far as Treasurer Michael Egan, who, in the Legislative Council in February, responding to a question from James Samios, labelled it 'a Stalinist, fascist building', claimed that it was a 'travesty' that was built in the same decade that saw 'the construction of the absolutely magnificent contemporary Opera House on the other side of the Quay' and called for its demolition in favour of 'the creation of Cable and Holmes park' (*Hansard*, NSW Legislative Council, February 28, 2001, p.12007). To me, it is in no way a threatening building. On the contrary, it is dull: it is like a fraying doorstep at the bottom corner of the gateway to a wide-open city.

I would support the creation of a new building for the MCA on that site, but only if it were of Utzon's order of imaginative invention, only if it possessed the qualities of architecture to come, as does Frank Gehry's project for the new Guggenheim in Manhattan. Perhaps these qualities exist in one of the schemes announced today [1 May 2001] by the architectural partnership

Sauerbruch and Hutton, winners of the competition for a refurbished or rebuilt MCA. Their Scheme 2, which requires the demolition of the current building, has the seeds of such a solution. Let us hope that they are encouraged to develop it boldly.

If, however, this cannot be achieved, and if Frank Sartor's bold plan to raise the necessary capital (\$80-100 million) and to win over the people of Sydney proves to be unrealisable, then I do not think we should go cap in hand to the National Gallery of Australia for a partnership, not under its current *ad hoc* leadership. Perhaps under new management this connection could be revisited. If the Sartor scheme proves impossible, let us go on in the current building, as Lizanne Macgregor and her staff have been successfully doing for the past year: offering interesting, sometimes brilliant, exhibitions of the best contemporary art from all over the world to an ever increasing number of visitors from all over Sydney, the regions and the world. But let us also augment that with a floor that shows the permanent collection, which displays the histories of contemporary art since the 1960s. Above all, let us fund the MCA in a manner that enables it to do its job without constant fear of folding.

On 25 April this year the *Sydney Morning Herald* published statistics which revealed that the Victorian Government contributes \$66.91 for each visitor to the National Gallery of Victoria, the Federal Government puts in \$26.48 for each person who walks into the National Gallery of Australia, and the New South Wales Government subsidises the Australian Museum \$61.05, the Powerhouse \$23.56, and the Art Gallery of NSW \$16.05, per visitor. In comparison the MCA, which attracts more attendees than the Australian Museum, receives 75 cents per person. This is scandalous.

It is not, I hasten to add, a scandal of the State Government's own making. When the MCA began, it was a matter of pride to the University and its supporters that we would create a go-it-alone, independent art institution. For the first five years or so, we succeeded. Indeed, the Gallery Directors and Chairmen boasted of the fact that they raised, eventually, up to 89 per cent of the budget each year. This amounts to a massive support, now over

\$35 million, from the people of Sydney. It matches what is put in by this University.

But neither the people of Sydney nor the University can any longer carry the costs of a viable museum alone. The funds in the Power Bequest have reached a level where they can sustain only the public education functions carried out by the Institute from its base on campus. There are no hidden millions. As for the general recurrent funding to the University, that which pays for our teaching, this has, as everyone knows, been reduced to less than subsistence level by past and current Federal Governments.

Those of us committed to the MCA should, in my opinion, eat some humble pie, admit that the operations of the free market are no healthier for the MCA than they are for the environment, and approach the State Government with a simple offer. Please find a way of granting \$2.5 to \$3 million per year to the MCA for at least the remaining thirty-four years of the lease, at which time the situation could be reviewed. In exchange, the MCA should explore ways of cooperating with the contemporary art aspects of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, sharing works, staff and ideas. This would be a partnership of benefit to the AGNSW, an institution with much wider duties to all the visual art of the world throughout all time.

In concert with this, the University could make a relatively smaller contribution that continues to honour its obligations to the will of John Power, while the people of Sydney who support contemporary art reach further into their pockets to cement the arrangement with their blessing. The MCA's own energies would bring in the rest. The City of Sydney may also wish to join in this modest, but still promising, proposal.

Everything turns on that \$2.5–3 million per annum being a certainty on which the future may be built. The MCA is our one chance to secure an institution in Australia that will do the pivotal work of transforming contemporaneity into contemporary art, and Contemporary Art into the art of modernity. Otherwise, Australians will have to keep searching abroad for this vital link into contemporary culture. Cultural dependence will be perpetuated. Mr Premier and Treasurer, surely this is not too much to ask?

The Power Institute

On an occasion such as this, it seems natural (as well, of course, as being a cultural given) to return to Bernard Smith's inaugural lecture 'The Role of an Institute of Fine Arts in the University of Sydney', delivered on June 11, 1969. I remember listening to it, and being inspired by it. I am proud to be able to say that due to his efforts, those of his successor, Virginia Spate, and those of all of the staff of the Institute during their times and since, we have fulfilled all of the dreams for the Institute that Smith outlined in his lecture, and then added some. I could list our recent successes—continuing high student enrolment, outstanding postgraduates, unprecedented levels of research grants won in national competition, important research devoted to the visual arts in Australia (particularly in partnership with the National Association for the Visual Arts, the Australia Council, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and others), innovative publications, spectacular public education events, the beautiful Schaeffer Library, the establishment of the Institute as a Foundation of the University—all achieved in an atmosphere of wonderful support from our Council, friends, alumni and the University itself. But these are obvious.

The spirit of contemporaneity animated Bernard Smith's lecture. It is, as you will have gathered this evening, an unquiet, contentious spirit. All lectures such as these are, to a degree, self-portraits. I see this in Smith's detecting in John Power's art and actions 'an unconventional, restless, alienated spirit', and in the Power Institute 'a kind of institutionalisation of restlessness, the gift of an alienated man, a gift for the promotion of change'. Smith read this as 'an interesting twentieth century gloss' on the University's High Victorian motto, *Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato*. I have heard many translations of this phrase during my time here, but its essential message of the interplay of tradition and change remains pertinent to—as it will be revised by—the twenty-first century.

John Power challenged the University to 'bring the latest ideas and theories concerning contemporary art to the people of Australia'. As you can tell, I have never stopped trying to do

that. The Power Institute as a whole, however, has broadened its ambition: our mission now is to ‘generate the latest ideas and theories—concerning the art and visual culture of the past, present and future—and disseminate them, nationally and internationally’. I have no doubt that these high ideals will continue to be realised by all those whose efforts constitute the Power Institute.

Mike Parr will be at Artspace until the end of the day next Sunday [6 May 2001]. Artspace is one of many alternative contemporary art exhibiting, discussion, meeting, venues all over Australia that survive on relatively little government support and vast amounts of in-kind input from those who believe, not in the institutions of Contemporary Art, but in contemporaneity and art to come. This is the front-line, where the contemporary is being constantly rethought, reimagined, reinvented. It, too, needs much more sustained support, from governments and the people.

Parr has been in self-imposed but totally exposed isolation. He persists, in an empty white room, a parody—if it parodies anything—of the famous ‘white cube’ of modernist art museology, alone, for the sake of his art, of his career-long Self-Portrait project: an artist apparently without the materials of representation, a person enacting no evidently artistic practices. Yet his experience constitutes a visual image, projected via video, to spectators outside, or at their monitors, watching their screens. If we were to view Parr’s piece in the terms advanced in this lecture, we might say that the enervation that he is experiencing physically, and perhaps psychically, produces, paradoxically, an affect of innervation in the observer. There is only the artist (as a person), only the image (as a screened surface), only the spectator (as us considering the implications of this degree of dedication, and doing so alongside others). An art that prefigures its own obliteration, as well as his, and ours. A pure art, against which labels fade into insignificance.

Is this contemporary art? Yes. Is it one model for art to come? Yes.

POSTSCRIPT: On 3 July 2001 the Lord Mayor announced that the City was pulling out of the MCA on the grounds that the

people of Sydney had not sufficiently embraced the Schemes. The future of the MCA remained in the Premier's hands. Ten days later, on 13 July, it was announced that the State Government would underwrite the MCA's financial future and guarantee its curatorial independence and its use of the Circular Quay building in perpetuity. Premier Carr is quoted in the *Weekend Australian*, 14 July 2001, p.4, as saying 'Having a museum of contemporary art is important. We are a modern society, a modern city ...'. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Professor Gavin Brown, is quoted in the same report as saying 'Our support for the MCA was always an investment in the future of contemporary art ... This plan gives the possibility of achieving that goal'. It is wonderful to see our representatives not only making the right decisions, but doing so for the right reasons.

References: (including books which illustrate the artworks referred to in the lecture)

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- Iwona Blaswick and Simon Wilson, eds, *Tate Modern: the Handbook*, London, 2000.
- David Bromfield, *Identities: A Critical Study of the Work of Mike Parr 1970-1990*, Perth, 1991.
- Lisa G. Corrin, *Mining the Museum: an Installation Confronting History*, Baltimore, 1994 (installation by Richard Wilson).
- Graham Coulter-Smith, *Mike Parr: The Self-portrait Project*, Melbourne, 1994.
- Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, New York and London, 1994.
- Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde Attitudes', in Bernard Smith, ed., *Concerning Contemporary Art: The Power Lectures 1968-1973*, Oxford, 1973.
- Andreas Gursky: *Images* (Tate Gallery Liverpool), London, 1999.
- Damien Hirst, *I Want to Spend the Rest of my Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*, London, 1997.
- Brian Kennedy, letter of 29 September 1999 to Senator Richard Alston (in the *Australian*, 25 January 2000) describing the exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* and asking if the

Senator had any ‘concerns’ about it. Note the Senator’s expression of antipathy to work in the exhibition to the Gallery Council on 12 October 1999; see Kennedy, evidence before Senate Estimates Committee, Parliament of Australia, 10 February, 24 and 25 May, 25 July, 2000; see also newspaper articles, including Valerie Lawson, ‘The Art of Elimination’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 March 2000, *Spectrum*, pp. 1, 4–5. (Dr Kennedy denies emphatically that he sought ministerial protection in backing out, arguing that the Council of the National Gallery took the decision to cancel in November 1999, when entanglement in commercial gallery support became evident; see his ‘How much do we care about museum ethics?’, *Artonview*, the Gallery members’ magazine, no. 23, Spring 2000, pp.3–5. There is no doubt that commercial support for the exhibition increased to an unacceptable degree, a degree apparent, on Dr Kennedy’s own evidence, at the end of October 1999, as the Brooklyn Museum sought more private monies in the face of Mayor Giuliani’s threat to withdraw public funding. Nevertheless, the intense involvement of advertising guru and art dealer Charles Saatchi was a very public part of the exhibition’s first showing two years earlier at the Royal Academy, London, when 300,000 visitors attended. There is no evidence that Dr Kennedy attempted to negotiate a version of the exhibition on independent terms.)

Jeff Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, London, 1992.

Adrian Lewis, cited in Rita Hatton and John A. Walker, *Supercollector: a Critique of Charles Saatchi*, London, 2000, p.191.

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Gael Newton and Tracey Moffatt, *Tracey Moffatt: Fever Pitch*, Annandale, 1995.

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Robert Rosenblum, *Jeff Koons: Celebration*, New York, 1996.

Norman Rosenthal, et al., *Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art*, London 2000; *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, London, 1997.

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