What Is Distinctive about Contemporary Art?

You might enter a gallery and encounter a collection of lamps with intricate shades, hanging from the ceiling and casting elaborate shadows on the floor. The shades seem to be made of a white, crystalline material adhering to a metal frame. Their uneven texture and irregular shapes give these objects an appealing idiosyncrasy: if they were installed in a contemporary domestic interior they would provide considerable visual interest, but without overwhelming their surrounds.

I find these objects easy to enjoy based on their sheer visual appeal. Perhaps you agree with me; perhaps not. But in any event, simply to enjoy them visually would not be to engage with them as artworks; or, at least, it would not be to engage with them as the artworks they are: Sigalit Landau's *Barbed Salt Lamps* (2007).

The title, *Barbed Salt Lamps*, helps us to understand a bit more of what we are seeing. The white coating is salt, and it covers a framework made of barbed wire. At this point it seems obvious that we have to move beyond the work’s visual appearance to appreciate it fully. What does it mean to make an artwork out of salt and barbed wire? Barbed wire wounds; salt can be rubbed into a wound. Landau clearly wishes us to be mindful of these connotations: she has sometimes shown the lamps in conjunction with a video of her performance *Barbed Hula* (2000), which shows her hula hooping a length of barbed wire as welts and puncture wounds appear on her bare skin.

Sigalit Landau is Israeli, and to create the lamps she immersed the barbed wire structures in the Dead Sea, allowing salt to crystallize around the structure until the barbed wire was no longer visible. The medium of the work is listed as “barbed wire and Dead Sea salt.” Now we have a more specific context by way of which to understand the significance of barbed wire and salt. Barbed wire: a powerful and ubiquitous symbol of oppression, both of Jews by the Nazis in World War II and of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Salt from the Dead Sea: a tourist attraction; a tonic (unless, of course, it is being rubbed into your wounds); a substance that flows freely between Palestinian and Israeli territory, eluding all the barbed wire fences that have been erected to separate the two. This salt is being used to hide the barbed wire, to cover it over with a decorative, innocuous-seeming surface. These genteel objects, whose muted palettes and
handmade qualities give them the stamp of luxury, are constructed out of the harshest of materials.

Now let us turn to another aspect of the works, an aspect that isn’t as easy to learn about through our usual channels of studying an artwork (titles, wall labels, and so forth). The salt coating of the lamps is, not surprisingly, fragile. Over time, as they are exhibited, stored and relocated, the salt begins to chip away. Most sculptures would be sent for restoration if parts of the material began to fall off. Consider, for instance, the plaster sculptures of Rachel Whiteread. Plaster, like salt crystals, is fragile, and pieces tend to chip off. When this happens to Whiteread’s sculptures, there is a very specific procedure to be followed: the plaster chips are to be collected, ground down, and mixed with water to form a paste, which is then used to fill in the gaps. It is important that the original plaster be used, because plaster tends to discolor over time, and the whiteness of new plaster would stand out against the gray patina the work has acquired over time.¹

But when it comes to the Barbed Salt Lamps, Landau specifies that they are not to be restored: the gradual revelation of the barbed wire as the salt is lost is part of the work.² Does this matter? How?

I suggest that this aspect of the Barbed Salt Lamps is highly significant to their meaning. Through the nature of their materials, the works clearly make reference to the political context of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The knowledge that the salt is meant to chip off over time, without repair, adds a crucial element of meaning to the work: it suggests the cracking over time of a fragile, decorative façade to reveal a brutal underlying structure.

Now, consider a series of works that look just like these Barbed Salt Lamps and were made in the same way and of the same materials. But suppose that the artist has given instructions like the ones Whiteread gave for her plaster table, specifying that the salt is to be painstakingly reattached to the surface every time a piece chips off. Would these works have the same meaning? Could they allude in the same way to the notion of a fragile political situation that is destined to crumble? I suggest that they could not. The range of interpretations that would be appropriate to this hypothetical set of Barbed Salt Lamps would be different from the interpretations that are appropriate to Landau’s actual works. To make fragile objects but cling to the idea that they can be maintained in their original form has a fundamentally different meaning than to make fragile objects and allow the consequences of their fragility to play out unhindered.

---

¹ Interview with Peter Boswell, Senior Curator, Miami Art Museum, July 2010.
² Interview with Peter Boswell, Senior Curator, Miami Art Museum, July 2010; Miami Art Museum Conservation Record for Barbed Salt Lamp 16.
Landau’s *Barbed Salt Lamps* are emblematic of a number of developments in contemporary art. Like many contemporary works, the lamps are not made of standard art-making materials. And the nature of the materials matters deeply: not just because they deliver a certain kind of appearance, but also because they contribute crucial meaning elements to the work.

The work embraces, as opposed to resisting, change over time. The traditional emphasis on conservation and restoration, on maintaining the objects in a pristine state, has yielded to a welcoming of change as an element of the work.

Both of these aspects of the work – the significance of the materials used and the embracing of change over time – stem from choices the artist has made in creating and presenting the objects. She made the lamps from barbed wire and Dead Sea salt and also chose to announce that they were made in this way. She highlighted the salience of barbed wire by presenting the lamps in conjunction with another work in which injuries from barbed wire were made manifest. And she specified that the salt is not to be reattached if it drops off. When we encounter the *Barbed Salt Lamps*, we are able to appreciate them more fully by attending to these choices made by the artist and considering how they contribute to the work’s meaning.

In chapter 2, we will give further consideration to the way that the work arises from the artist’s choices. But first, we’ll explore a number of developments in contemporary art, some of which we have already seen exemplified by the *Barbed Salt Lamps*. Many of these developments are not exclusive to contemporary art: typically, they stem from elements that were inherent in earlier artworks. But the cluster of characteristics I will discuss below is largely responsible for giving contemporary art its distinctive flavor, and for generating the need for a new philosophical analysis.

One might wonder how I define the historical period of “contemporary art.” As it happens, not much will hang on the historical cutoff we choose. I will discuss works made from about 1960 onward, though most of my examples are more recent. Some of the specific claims I make about contemporary art will apply to some works created earlier in the 20th century, and some of my conclusions apply to artworks of earlier periods as well. The contemporary period, as we will consider it here, is a period during which the cluster of tendencies identified below has become especially salient.

I take a broad approach to visual art, including works that are conceptual or performative but have a clear connection to visual art traditions. I focus on art that has been shown in the international network of contemporary art galleries, museums and biennials, or that aspires to be shown or responds to work shown
in such contexts. While that network has its roots in Europe and North America, there are now artists, galleries, museums and art communities all over the world that participate in it. There are, of course, also valuable artistic traditions that continue largely independent of this network. They are outside the scope of this inquiry, though certainly worthy of consideration in their own right.

**What Is Distinctive about Contemporary Art?**

Why a philosophy of contemporary art, rather than just a philosophy of art? Because contemporary artworks differ in systematic ways from their predecessors: there is a cluster of features prominent in contemporary art that were seen far less frequently, or not at all, during earlier historical periods, and these features require special attention. An important thing to emphasize is that the features in question are *structural* rather than *thematic*: they concern the form contemporary artworks tend to take rather than the subject matters they tend to explore. As we will see throughout the book, formal and structural features are crucial to the construction of meaning, so having a clear sense of the work’s structure is central, and in an important sense prior, to interpreting its themes and meanings. And certain kinds of formal or structural features may lend themselves especially well to the exploration of specific subject matters: for instance, use of materials that degrade over time makes contemporary art especially well suited to the exploration of mortality. But the focus here will be on structural features, not themes.

I should emphasize that the point of claiming that this cluster of features is distinctive of contemporary art is *not* to claim that every contemporary artwork has one or more of these features, or that no earlier works have them. In fact, all of these features have emerged out of historical developments; and some contemporary works hew to traditional materials and methods. However, as we will see, our understanding even of more “traditional” contemporary works is affected by the changes that characterize the contemporary period.

A few terminological points: I use the term *display* to refer to the actual physical stuff the audience member sees on a particular occasion. A display is a particular arrangement of material components or objects; or, for some kinds of works, it may be an event involving such components. I use the term *artwork* to describe the entity the artist has created, which the viewer, ideally, aims to appreciate in contemplating the display. I don’t mean, in using distinct terms for these concepts, to assume that an artwork can never be identical to an object or display. However, I will offer an extended argument that artworks are not, in general, identical to objects or displays, and to make this argument I need to use a vocabulary that allows for the distinction.
Material

The first cluster of distinctive elements has to do with the materials of contemporary art. We have seen the relevance of material in Sigalit Landau’s *Barbed Salt Lamps*. Let’s now consider Zoe Leonard’s (1992-1997) *Strange Fruit (For David)*. Leonard, grieving the death from AIDS of her friend, the artist David Wojnarowicz, began gathering the peels of fruits that she and other friends had eaten. She used needle and thread to sew the pieces of peel back together, leaving the stitching quite visible. On some of the peels she added embellishments like zippers and sequins. To display the work, the reconstituted and decorated fruit peels are spread out in a seemingly random array on the gallery floor.

As you might expect, fruit peels degrade rapidly, even in a climate-controlled environment like a museum. Normally, when art objects suffer damage or degradation, we try to restore them, since these conditions impede our ability to grasp the work: when a significant amount of paint has flaked off an oil painting, we may be unable to see many of the relevant details. With Leonard’s work, though, the situation is different. Reflection on mortality and decay is part of the point of the work, and for this reason Leonard did not wish for aggressive conservation measures to be taken on all of the objects. She did permit such measures for a small subset, however, so that when the rest of the objects can no longer be displayed there will still be a material trace of the work.³

In using unconventional materials, Leonard did more than just create a conundrum about whether and how to preserve fruit peels. She also made it possible for the nature of her materials to be a source of the work’s meaning. When a traditional artwork is made from oil paint on canvas, this does not contribute to its content in the same way: the work’s meaning is given chiefly by the array of colors and forms presented on the canvas, and by what these colors and forms depict. Oil paint and canvas, as traditional artmaking materials, are to a large extent neutral or given: we don’t typically ask what the artist was trying to express by choosing oil paint.⁴

⁴ I don’t mean to overstate this point. The fact that a work is made from oil paint connects it with a rich historical tradition of other works in the same medium, and this may contribute to its meaning or resonance. As Dominic McIver Lopes has suggested in conversation, Michelangelo’s use of stone for his *David*, in contrast to the bronze of Donatello’s, connects his work with classical sculpture and thereby affords his subject a particular dignity.
Fruit peels, though, are not like this. The choice to make a work out of fruit peels is a meaningful choice, not a neutral one. Fruit is a source of pleasure and sustenance; but in this work, we are given only the hollowed-out shells that remain after the pleasure of eating has ended. The use of fruit also contributes to the meaning of Leonard’s work by facilitating a number of allusions. The work alludes, through both its materials and its title, to the song *Strange Fruit*, written by Abel Meeropol (under the pen name Lewis Allan) and first recorded by Billie Holiday, which poignantly condemns lynching and other forms of racism; and it alludes to the use of the word ‘fruit’ as a pejorative term for gay men. It also evokes theistic notions of the Garden of Eden and the Fall, whereby humans lost their privileged status through a choice to consume the forbidden fruit – often used, of course, as a metaphor for sex – and were condemned to earthly suffering. This complex of allusions invites us to contemplate the role of societal oppression in the AIDS epidemic.

Leonard could have secured such allusions by, say, making a painting that *depicts* fruit. But the choice to make the work out of actual fruit peels allows Leonard to secure the allusive content in a very direct, and particularly powerful, way. It also allows her work to *exemplify*, rather than merely suggest, the degradation of the fruit over time. Moreover, our knowledge that Leonard and her friends actually ate all of this fruit and collected the peels over a period of years, and that she painstakingly sewed them all back up again, may help us to see the work as an expression of grief and also, in the gesture of repairing and decorating the objects, of care for David. Both the *nature* of the materials and their *history* contribute to the work’s meaning and its power to evoke responses in us as viewers.

As the example of *Strange Fruit* suggests, use of non-standard materials is often interwoven with issues of change over time. This is not to say that all contemporary artworks employing unusual materials embrace degradation: the donuts in Robert Gober’s (1989) *Bag of Donuts* are made of fried dough, but the artist used very aggressive measures to minimize change over time. The interesting thing is that in the contemporary art context, this choice to resist degradation becomes, itself, a meaningful one. When we interpret the work, we must consider the meaning of making objects out of food materials that naturally decompose, yet obstinately attempting to preserve them indefinitely.

I have emphasized the importance of both unconventional materials and change over time. Of course, change in art objects over time is hardly a new

---

5 These allusions are also identified by Martha Buskirk (2003), *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 145.
phenomenon: we appreciate the Nike of Samothrace despite the fact that the head and arms have been lost. The difference is in the significance of change in the objects. We recognize that the Nike was made to be appreciated as an intact object; the breaking off of the head and arms is an unfortunate accident, not something that we figure into the meaning or message of the work itself. The statue may be headless and armless, but it does not depict a headless and armless deity. In a sense, the object has changed but the artwork has not: it is just that we have lost full access to the artwork’s features.

When it comes to Leonard’s work, on the other hand, change in the object over time is a feature of the work, not simply an external factor to be contended with. It is something we take into account in interpretation; it shapes the meaning possibilities of the work. This is why a correct understanding of the work’s nature is critical: when we are unclear on whether change in the object is a feature of the work or simply an external occurrence, we are not in a good position to begin reflecting on the work’s significance. Grasping the work’s features is a precursor to interpreting and appreciating it.

Arrangement

Another characteristic that distinguishes many contemporary artworks is the importance of the arrangement of the material components of the work. Traditional visual artworks typically involved only one item or, occasionally, a small number of items (e.g., triptychs, consisting of three elements), and the placement of the items was straightforward. A representational painting, for instance, was hung with the representational content right side up, and a narrative diptych or triptych would often be hung so that the events narrated were positioned chronologically from left to right. There was little need for the artist to specifically stipulate such arrangements; they were so deeply conventional that they appeared natural.

For many contemporary artworks, though, arrangement is crucial to the nature of the work and cannot simply be intuited from inspection of the objects. Consider Liz Magor’s (1980) Production, an installation artwork involving 2800 bricks, along with the press Magor used to make them out of wet newspaper. Simply bringing these material components into a gallery wouldn’t be enough to generate a display of the work; it is also necessary that they be arranged in an acceptable way. Magor and curators at the National Gallery of Canada had an extensive correspondence by fax in which they exchanged diagrams, proposals and principles for the work’s installation. At one point, Magor stated:

Yes, there are a thousand different ways to do it. But there’s a notion or rule of thumb that eliminates some of them and modifies the others. I like it best when the bricks are trying to act architecturally—they’re trying to make a wall or a column or something. The ultimate would be
that they totally cover a wall, with no space at the top, bottom or sides.\textsuperscript{7}

The bricks dumped in a heap alongside the press, then, would not be an acceptable display of the work. However, there is no one required configuration; the bricks can be rearranged for different exhibitions. In fact, it is important, if viewers are to understand the work fully, for the work to be displayed in different ways on different occasions.

Why is arrangement so important? The arrangement of materials helps to imbue the work with meaning. By titling the work \textit{Production} and spending many weeks of messy manual labor to make the bricks, four at a time, using the press, Magor highlights the importance of the productive labor that generates, literally, the building blocks of society. Through the possibility of installing the bricks in different configurations, the work makes reference to real world strategies of production in which modular, interchangeable components are assembled to form a variety of different structures. The reference to real-world practices of construction is relevant to interpretation of the work: it opens up possibilities for seeing the work as social commentary that would be unavailable if the bricks were always used to generate the same static structure. If the work were always installed the same way, viewers would not be pressed to reflect on the relationship of individual components to the final, overarching structure, or on the way that workers’ labor is a crucial precursor to more ‘elevated’ creative activities like design and architecture.\textsuperscript{8}

Magor’s work is an example in which the arrangement of components is crucial to the work and helps to establish its meaning. For other contemporary artworks, arrangement of elements is even more important: it replaces, rather than supplementing, material components. Consider Lawrence Weiner’s (2008) \textit{A WALL BUILT TO FACE THE LAND & FACE THE WATER AT THE LEVEL OF THE SEA}. This conceptual artwork has no enduring physical components at all; the only thing that was transferred to the Miami Art Museum upon acquisition was an authentication certificate.\textsuperscript{9} To display the work, the museum simply inscribes the words contained in the title so that they are visible to the viewer. Although text-based conceptual artworks like Weiner’s are often displayed by affixing vinyl lettering to a gallery wall, for \textit{A WALL BUILT} the possibilities for display are quite open-ended: the artist’s representative told a curator “that it’s ultimately totally up to us – we can carve it into the building, we can write it in lipstick on a

\textsuperscript{7} Fax from Liz Magor to Germaine Koh, National Gallery of Canada, November 25, 1998.
\textsuperscript{9} Interview with Senior Curator Peter Boswell, Miami Art Museum, July 2010.
sidewalk, whatever." Any visible inscription of the words making up the work’s title, in the context of the institution that owns the work, counts as a display of the work.

Of course, every display of A WALL BUILT has material components, since the words must somehow be made visible. However, the work itself is not identical to these displays or to the material components that make them up. The norm for arrangement of elements is crucial.

History

Several of the works discussed above share an important feature: the objects have a particular history that is important in fully appreciating the work. Sigalit Landau dipped the Barbed Salt Lamps in the Dead Sea; Zoe Leonard collected and laboriously sewed the fruit peels of Strange Fruit; Liz Magor spent weeks making the bricks of Production. In each case, it seems important that the work actually has this particular history, and not just that it looks a certain way. Had Sigalit Landau found an accelerated way to spray salt crystals – even made from Dead Sea salt – onto the barbed wire frames of her lamps without ever leaving her studio, these works would not have the same resonance: the fact that the accrual of the salt was a natural process, such as might occur with an ordinary object lost in the Sea, connects the Barbed Salt Lamps with the ancient natural history of the political site where a momentous conflict is playing out.

For other contemporary works, too, it matters that the work has a specific appearance because it has a particular history. Injustice Case (1970), by the black American artist David Hammons, is a direct print taken from Hammons’ body. The work shows Hammons seated in a chair, gagged, with his hands and feet bound. The rectangular print is laid on top of an American flag, which serves to frame it.

Injustice Case alludes to a 1969 courtroom drawing of Black Panther Bobby Seale, who, along with other members of the Chicago Eight, was accused of

---

10 July 1, 2009, e-mail from Associate Curator René Morales to Senior Curator Peter Boswell regarding a telephone discussion between Morales and Andrew Richards of Marian Goodman Gallery, which represents Weiner.
11 Some of Landau’s other works involve salt-encrusted ordinary objects, such as bicycles, boots and fishing nets.
conspiring to cross state lines in order to incite a riot in connection with the 1968 Democratic National Convention. When Seale’s request to represent himself at trial was denied, he verbally confronted the judge, who ordered him bound and gagged in the courtroom. When, one day, he managed to speak despite the gag, he was brought back the following day gagged more tightly and with a wad of cotton stuffed in his mouth. The gag was loosened only after he began to choke. The judge subsequently sentenced Seale to four years in prison on 16 counts of contempt of court, described in the *New York Review of Books* as “an unprecedented punishment.”

Hammons has chosen not simply to create an image of a bound and gagged man, but to use his own gagged and bound body to apply pigment to paper. This is important for a number of reasons. First, it connects the work to fingerprinting, which is the most familiar use of direct printing from the body. Fingerprinting is seen by the public as a highly reliable form of evidence, though smudges and other distortions can compromise this reliability in actual cases, and false convictions based on faulty fingerprint analysis have occurred. The appearance of the work and the use of a direct printing technique also bring to mind Rorschach inkblots, which were originally created by the direct transfer of pigment from one side of a folded page to the other. The allusion to the Rorschach test, in combination with the work’s title, *Injustice Case*, raises the specter of alternate interpretations of the image: is it the bound and gagged subject who has committed an injustice for which he is being rightly punished by the American government? Or is the injustice constituted, instead, by the forcible restraint and silencing of a criminal defendant who wishes to advocate for himself?

The fact that Hammons’s own body was used to make the print is also significant. By using his body as a surrogate for Seale’s in the creation of the image, Hammons suggests that as a black man he, too, is subject to silencing, excessive force and unreasonable punishment at the hands of the US government. And seeing the actual trace of the artist’s bound body forces us to confront more directly the physical condition of being restrained and gagged.

Bahamian artist Janine Antoni’s *Gnaw* (1992) is a further example of a work for which history of production is crucial. For this work Antoni began with a 600-pound cube of lard and another of chocolate, and she literally shaped each

---

material by chewing it. The portions of chocolate and lard that she chewed off the edges of each cube were then molded into chocolate candies packaged in Valentine’s hearts and into lipsticks, respectively. Antoni’s work is sculpture, not performance art: the display that is available to the viewer consists of a set of objects, not the artist’s activity of shaping them. But our knowledge that she did in fact carve the cubes with her mouth, rather than with instruments leaving marks only resembling tooth marks, connects the work intimately with themes of bodily excess, discomfort and shame. We imagine the turn from pleasure to disgust to pain, as the initial delight taken in the flavor of chocolate yields, over hours of work, to a feeling of being force fed, and as the acidity of the chocolate eventually leads to sores in the mouth. We envision the disgust of repeatedly filling one’s mouth with lard, both cause and symbol of the unwanted curves in unwieldy female bodies. As Antoni says,

Chewing on the lard wasn't a pleasant experience, but I'm really interested in the viewer empathizing with my process and I feel that somewhere in your body you can imagine what it's like to chew on 600 pounds of chocolate or chew on lard, and I'm very aware of the kind of visceral response you have to that.\(^\text{15}\)

By working these materials directly with her body, and specifically the part of the body that takes in food, Antoni leads us to imaginatively experience a bodily engagement with those materials that deepens our grasp of the work’s themes.

Obviously, our interest in the artist’s trace, or more generally in how the work was made, is not new with contemporary art.\(^\text{16}\) It is exhilarating to see, juxtaposed with the delicate handling of portraiture, the loose and free strokes that Rembrandt used in laying down the costume embellishments in his 1654 portrait of Jan Six. Details of the work’s making may contribute to our understanding of its content, insofar as they convey the artist’s way of thinking about his subject – and about painting itself – and allude to or contrast with the methods of other artists. But the use of methods and material traces to allude to processes and events outside of art, as in the work of Hammons and Antoni, is magnified in contemporary art.


\(^{16}\) For illuminating discussion see David Davies (2004), Art as Performance (Oxford: Blackwell), especially chapters 3 and 7.
(Inter)activity

As we have seen, our knowledge of the artist’s activity in making the work can affect our appreciation. The fact that Zoe Leonard collected and stitched up fruit peels over a period of years helps us to see Strange Fruit as a labor of grief and healing. David Hammons’s making a direct print from his own body brings out a number of themes in his work, including the vulnerability of black men to racialized forms of injustice in a white-dominated society.

Sometimes, though, the artist’s activity becomes part of the work more directly: rather than being a crucial part of the causal history that informs our understanding, it is the work. For Tehching Hsieh’s One Year Performance 1978-1979, the Taiwanese-born artist spent a full year locked in a cell in his New York City studio. He did not speak to anyone (including the friend who saw to his needs for food and clean clothing), read, write, watch television or listen to the radio. He was available to be viewed in his cell from 11-5 p.m. one day every three weeks. The performance was documented with daily photographs, and an attorney applied seals to the cell at the beginning and verified their intactness at the end so as to certify the authenticity of the piece. ¹⁷

Most audience members, of course, gain access to Hsieh’s work through some combination of photographs and descriptions. The work, however, doesn’t simply consist of photographs and descriptions: in Hsieh’s words, “The document of art is a trace through which you can approach my work, but it doesn’t equal the art itself.” ²⁸

Works of performance art raise interesting questions about the identity and boundaries of the artwork. While a theatrical work may be performable on multiple occasions and by different performers, this is less often true for performance art. It seems that Hsieh’s One Year Performance 1978-1979 is a particular event, and another artist’s performance under similar constraints wouldn’t count as a new presentation of that very work. Very often, performance artworks are very closely associated with the identity of the performer, so that they can’t be performed by anyone else. However, this isn’t always true. In 1977, Marina Abramović and Ulay performed Imponderabilia, for which they stood naked, facing each other, in a narrow doorway, forcing people entering the gallery to turn sideways and squeeze through the space between

their bodies. *Imponderabilia* was presented by different performers in a 2010 retrospective of Abramović’s work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, suggesting that the identity of the performers is not essential to the work.19

The activity of people other than the artist can also be incorporated within the artwork. For *Rhythm 0*, a 6-hour performance in 1974, Abramović put 72 objects on a table with instructions that the audience could use the objects to interact with her in any way they wished. The selection included, in Abramović’s words, objects “for pleasure” and “for pain,” as well as “objects that can bring you to death.”

In the beginning the public was really very much playing with me. Later on became more and more aggressive. It was 6 hours of real horror. They would cut my clothes; they would cut me with the knife close to my neck, drink my blood and then put the plaster over the wound. They would carry me around half naked, put me on the table, and [stick] the knife between my legs into the wood. And even somebody put the bullet in the pistol and put it in my hand and seeing if pressing it, her hand against my hand, if I would resist. But I remember after 6 hours when the gallerists come and say, “This piece is finished,” and ... I start walking toward the audience, naked and with blood and with tears in my eyes, everybody [runs] away, literally [runs] out of the door.20

Clearly, interaction is a sine qua non for this work: the artist places herself in the audience’s hands, and the scenario becomes a test or experiment to see how people will respond to the opportunity to either preserve or threaten another human being’s comfort and safety. The disappointing results were in line with a number of prominent social psychology findings about interpersonal dynamics during the decade preceding the *Rhythm 0*.21

---

19 In an interview, Abramović says, “It’s reperformed now with the four couples during the show, and this is really important, how that one piece, which was made in 1977, can function in 2010, and what kind of reaction and response the public will have. We will know only ... at the end of the show.” Museum of Modern Art, [http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1974](http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1974).


Some contemporary works, in a more playful mode, incorporate the activity of people who work in galleries and museums. Jason Rhoades’s (2003) *SLOTO: The Secret Life of the Onion* is a complex installation work, varying in appearance, that fills a large room. One element is a set of posters that are written faintly in pencil. The posters offer instructions, visible to everyone but intended for museum staff to follow. These instructions specify how to construct “onions” by mixing materials available in the room in large, green, bulb-shaped glass containers. Having constructed an onion, the staff member is then to climb into the front car of a child’s carnival ride, a train in the shape of a pink pig, and ride around the room with the onion on her lap, looking inward (toward the objects in the center of the room) rather than forward, before placing the completed onion on one of the yellow shelves affixed to the wall. This work is in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, where the curators do, in fact, follow the instructions.  

Rhoades’s involvement of the curators in such manifestly absurd activity has the feel of a stunt. But it also invites us to reflect on the fact that less colorful bureaucratic rituals have become central to the engagement between museums and artworks. “What are we doing here?” the work seems to ask. “Curators, I order you to break away from your paperwork and come to play!”

**Place**

Many contemporary artworks have a particular site or location as an essential element. Christo & Jeanne-Claude’s 1971-95 *Wrapped Reichstag* is a famous example. For the work, which was completed in 1995 after 24 years of planning, the artists used over a million square feet of white fabric and 51,000 feet of blue rope to cover the Reichstag in Berlin. The installation remained in place for two weeks. The location is essential in more than one way. The work’s formal features depend heavily on the underlying characteristics of the wrapped building; wrapping a different building would have resulted in a structure with a very different appearance. Even more important, it seems, is the political significance of this building, originally designed as the seat of the German Be severe electric shocks to others, was published by HarperCollins in 1974, the year of Abramović’s performance.

22 Interview with Christiane Berndes, Curator and Head of Collections, Van Abbemuseum, December 2011. The work is discussed in Eva Meyer-Hermann, *Jason Rhoades* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2009), pp. 84-8.

parliament, with its tumultuous history spanning the separation and reunification of Germany. Konrad Weiss emphasized this in a speech defending the project to fellow members of parliament in 1994:

The wrapping of the Reichstag ... enables us to see in another light and newly, perceptually experience this central and ambivalent place in German history. The wrapping is no debasement. It is an expression of reverence and creates room for contemplation of the essential. In the Catholic liturgy of Holy Week, the cross is wrapped so that it can be unwrapped in celebration at the high point of Good Friday. In the Jewish faith, the Torah rolls are wrapped in order to remind us of the preciousness of what they contain. The Reichstag will not be desecrated by Christo's wrapping, it will be ennobled – as strange as this may sound for a house of democracy.... Our memory will be enlivened to that which has occurred within and with this building, the creation, the downfall and the rebirth of democracy through the wrapping.\(^{24}\)

Whether or not we think the wrapping by Christo and Jeanne-Claude is a straightforward “expression of reverence” – which certainly seems open to doubt – it is clearly essential to the identity of this work that it was the Reichstag, with its particular formal features, history and cultural significance, that was wrapped.

Some contemporary works make the political significance of place even more explicit. Christoph Schlingensief’s (2000) Please Love Austria: First Austrian Coalition Week involved 12 participants seeking political asylum in Austria, who were locked into a shipping container near the Vienna State Opera. Atop the container were the flags of Austria’s right-wing anti-immigration political party and a large banner with the words “AUSLÄNDER RAUS” (foreigners out). Viewers could watch footage from within the container, which was streamed online, and vote against their least favorite participants. Each morning, the two participants with the most votes were deported. The winner was to be offered a cash prize and the possibility of Austrian citizenship through marriage, but protesters eventually vandalized the sign and evacuated the participants from the container.\(^{25}\) The local context of increasing anti-immigrant sentiment and political activity was clearly central to Schlingensief’s performative and


interactive work, which gave viewers an opportunity to participate in or take a stand opposing punitive control of immigrants’ lives.

Contemporary works are sometimes responsive to the morphological rather than political features of place, or to a combination of the two. Nancy Holt’s (1973-1976) *Sun Tunnels* consists of four large concrete pipes on the floor of the Utah desert. The pipes are arranged so as to line up with sunrise and sunset on the summer and winter solstice each year, and holes drilled in each pipe represent a particular constellation.\(^{26}\) For Agnes Denes’ (1982) *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, the artist spent a year preparing a 2-acre site in lower Manhattan that was filled with construction debris from the World Trade Center. She coordinated the removal of debris, installation of an irrigation system, delivery of topsoil, and hand-digging of furrows. For a season, the land became a functioning field of wheat with prime views of the Twin Towers and the Statue of Liberty.\(^{27}\) The jarring juxtaposition of a densely populated urban environment and world financial center with activities of manual labor and food production allows the work to explore themes of production, consumption, and the relative values placed on divergent human activities and forms of life.

The importance of place in art is not a new phenomenon: many traditional artworks were made for specific sites, particularly churches, and it would be appropriate to assess their success, in part, by considering how they interact with their social and architectural surroundings. Contemporary art has seen a resurgence of works that are both designed for and essentially tied to particular locations.

**Hybridity**

Contemporary artworks are often in the business of expanding, straddling or traversing boundaries between art forms, between different cultural domains, or between art and life.

In using materials from everyday life like fruit peels, contemporary artists have broken down barriers between art and other domains. They have also broken down traditional barriers between art forms, making works whose hybridity can complicate our attempts to understand and assess them.

---


Micah Lexier’s (1995) A work of art in the form of a quantity of coins equal to the number of months of the statistical life expectancy of a child born January 6, 1995, in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, is such a hybrid. The material components of the work include two boxes and 906 copper coins. Clearly, there is something sculptural about this work: most viewers, seeing it at any time other than while the transfer is occurring, will encounter it as a set of static objects. However, the work also involves a set of instructions requiring that a coin be transferred from one box to another on the sixth day of every month, until all coins have been transferred. This transfer is to be done regardless of whether the work is on display. The display evolves over time as months pass: initially, the coins are neatly stacked in the box on the left, but gradually the supply in the left box diminishes as coins are dropped haphazardly into the box on the right. Thus, in addition to the sculptural presence that most viewers will experience, it enlists the museum in a sort of extended performance: the institution must commit to facilitating the monthly occurrence of a particular sort of event over a period of 75.5 years.28

Some contemporary artworks incorporate many of the elements discussed in this chapter. For his 1987 Artifact Piece, James Luna created a hybrid performance-installation piece that included his own activity as part of the work and essentially incorporated its specific location, the San Diego Museum of Man. In the midst of a museum that typically displayed only artifacts presented as the products of past cultures, Luna, who is a Pooyukitchum/Lujeño Indian, showed his own living body, clothed in a loincloth, in a display case. When he was not present, the imprint of his body could be seen in the sand that he lay upon. Other display cases held labeled artifacts from his life. He thus created the initial impression that his body was one artifact among others on display in the museum; some viewers were astonished to realize that a living body was on display.29 The work’s crossing of boundaries between artistic mediums as well as between art and non-art contexts gives it great power to challenge a paradigm of museum display that ignores living cultures or treats them as mere producers of static artifacts.

Christoph Schlingensief’s (2000) Please Love Austria: First Austrian Coalition Week, discussed in the previous section, is part of a new movement known as participatory art that challenges the boundary between art and other domains of life. Further work in this vein is Fritz Haeg’s ongoing series of Edible Estates,

---
initiated in 2005. The artist works with residents, in locations from Kansas to Budapest, to transform non-sustainable and sometimes bedraggled landscaping into gardens filled with climactically appropriate plants that generate edible produce. For the (2008) Edible Estates project in Austin, Texas, the artist worked with residents of a non-profit affordable housing complex and other local volunteers to replace a yellowing lawn with a beautiful garden that is now maintained by residents, who make adjustments after observing which plants thrive in the hot Texas summers. The participants report that the activity of gardening, the beautiful surroundings, and the fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs enhance their quality of life. The project clearly aims to deploy the resources of art to produce aesthetic satisfactions, along with other benefits to health and well-being, that extend far beyond traditional artistic contexts.

Some may wonder whether such projects are really art at all. I will address this question in chapter 3. For the present, I will note a few relevant facts: Fritz Haeg presents himself as an artist and his activities as artworks; his work both responds to and emerges out of earlier art-historical trends, such as the tendency to insularity in museum art and the rise of performance art; the project has received uptake from the artworld, with projects commissioned by such institutions as the Tate Modern and the Walker Art Center; and it has emerged in the context of a broader, well-recognized movement in participatory art. Taken together, these facts give us good reason to accept that Haeg’s work is art, however different it may be from more familiar paradigm cases.

New Technologies and Time-Based Media

Intersecting with several of the above developments is the use of new media and computing technologies in contemporary art. Film, video and computers have typically been used to incorporate a time-based element within the display, often facilitating a narrative quality more difficult to secure through still images and static objects. Adrian Piper’s Cornered (1988) is a video installation involving a television set that shows Piper, a light-skinned black American artist who is sometimes taken to be white, addressing the audience about themes of racial identity. The television set is positioned in the corner of the gallery, blocked in by a table turned on its side. Hung on the wall to either side of the television are two birth certificates for Piper’s father. One, issued in 1953, shows his race as “Octoroon,” while the second, issued in 1965, lists it as “White.” Video allows

---

30 I first learned of the project from Elizabeth Dunbar, the curator who commissioned the Austin project for Arthouse. See Fritz Haeg (2010), Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn, 2 ed. (Metropolis).

31 See, e.g., Thompson, Living as Form; Claire Bishop (2011), Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (Verso); Claire Bishop (2006) Participation (Whitechapel/MIT Press).
Piper to speak directly to her audience about her blackness, while querying audience members about their own understandings of racial identity and challenging those who might urge her to remain silent about her race or even to pass as white. Discussions about race in US society are rather fraught when they occur at all, and tend to be characterized by deep interpretative rifts among members of different races.32 Directly addressing the audience through video allows Piper to convey an extended and unambiguous message in her own voice, making it less likely that audience members will come to contradictory interpretations of the work or perhaps miss its racial themes altogether.33

While film and video have sometimes been used to augment the possibilities for narrative in contemporary art, computing technology may be used to complicate and fragment narrative by giving the viewer multiple options for navigating through the work. The Russian artist Olia Lialina, an early practitioner of net.art, created My Boyfriend Came Back from the War in 1996. The work, accessible from any computer that has an internet connection and suitable browser, involves images and texts, most with clickable hyperlinks.34 At the beginning of an encounter with the work, the viewer has only one option: to click on the face of a young woman that is presented on the right panel. But soon the work opens up: the screen gradually subdivides, including more and more panels of clickable images and text, so that there are hundreds of options for choosing a narrative pathway through the work. The work takes the form of a conversation between two young lovers, but interspersed with images and with many digressions and non-sequiturs, and sometimes a lack of clarity about who is speaking. It ranges from exploration of feelings about betrayal and culpability for violence, to cryptic reflections on time, to a discussion of whether the couple should marry. The viewer’s many options about how to experience the work, and the resulting narrative fragmentation, lends itself to themes related to emotional confusion and the juxtaposition, in real life, of the earth-shattering and the mundane.

Contemporary artworks have often used computers to facilitate interactivity, with or without a narrative element. My Boyfriend Came Back from the War is interactive in a weak sense: the nature of each display depends on the viewer’s choices about the order in which to access the content, but the interaction has

33 Shortly after Piper’s work was created, Maurice Berger argued that art museums tend to present works by black artists in a way that suppresses race-related themes. Berger (1990), “Are Art Museums Racist?” Art in America vol. 78, no. 9, pp. 69-77.
34 The work can be accessed at http://www.teleportacia.org/war/wara.htm.
no effect on how the work will be seen by subsequent audience members.\textsuperscript{35} Other works allow the audience member to interact in a stronger sense, both by shaping the structure of the display she sees (not just the order in which elements are revealed) and by leaving a trace that alters the experience for others. Viewers of John F. Simon, Jr.’s (2002) \textit{Unfolding Object} can click to unfold a virtual object, creating an increasingly complex visual display on the viewer’s terminal. Each time a viewer unfolds a panel of the object seen on the screen, that panel is marked with a line that is visible to viewers who interact with the work subsequently. Viewers are thereby able to tell whether they are following a well-beaten path or, instead, unfolding panels that have never been seen by anyone else.\textsuperscript{36}

Not all computer artworks are designed to allow the viewer to shape the display. The works of South Korea-based Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, such as (2003) \textit{CUNNILINGUS IN NORTH KOREA} (screen captures, figs. 9 and 10),\textsuperscript{37} present coordinated arrays of flashing text and music using the Flash multimedia platform. Once the viewer has triggered the work, there is no way to alter its course other than by closing the browser window or tab in which it appears, or hitting the back button. These works offer non-interactive time-based displays much like those of film or video, but employing the distinct look and feel of computing technology. \textit{CUNNILINGUS IN NORTH KOREA} purports to be a message from Kim Jong-Il about the sexual liberation of North Korean women, who, unlike their repressed South Korean counterparts, “enjoy prolonged foreplay with a partner” which leads “to climax after climax after climax after climax.”

The non-interactive format of the work clearly plays into its theme: the work takes over the viewer’s computer just as a fascist state takes over loudspeakers, radios and TV sets to broadcast propagandistic messages. The large fonts and flashing texts of the work, which the viewer has no power to alter, mimic the aggression and intrusiveness of these tactics.\textsuperscript{38} At the same time, the patent

\begin{flushleft} \textsuperscript{35} For the distinction between strong and weak interactivity, see Dominic M. McIver Lopes (2001), “The Ontology of Interactive Art,” \textit{Journal of Aesthetic Education} 35: 65-81, at p. 68. \\
\textsuperscript{36} The work can be accessed at \url{http://unfoldingobject.guggenheim.org/}. \\
\textsuperscript{37} See \url{http://www.yhchang.com/CUNNILINGUS_IN_NORTH_KOREA.html}. \\
Following this URL will directly launch the work, flashing lights and all, on your computer. For a list of works by YHCHI, see \url{http://www.yhchang.com/}. \\
\textsuperscript{38} Regarding his 1989 trip to North Korea, the journalist Nicholas Kristof reports, “The most surprising thing I found was The Loudspeaker affixed to a wall in each home. The Loudspeaker is like a radio but without a dial or off switch. In the morning, it awakens the household with propaganda. (In his first golf outing, Comrade Kim Jong-il shoots five holes-in-one!) It blares like that all day.” Kristof, “A New Kim. A New Chance?” \textit{New York Times}, Dec. 21, 2011, p. A37. \end{flushleft}
absurdity of the text and its pairing with a sultry Nina Simone song make the work quite humorous.

**Why a Philosophy of Contemporary Art?**

I have described a cluster of characteristics that are more salient in contemporary artworks than in works from earlier periods. But artworks have always been subject to change over time; why does this set of changes demand a new philosophical approach to art?

The answer, in short, is that this cluster of characteristics gives rise to a gap between the physical display we see and the nature of the artwork. When we look at a display of Lawrence Weiner’s *A WALL BUILT TO FACE THE LAND & FACE THE WATER AT THE LEVEL OF THE SEA*, we don’t know whether the display has a specific set of features because they are genuinely part of the artwork, or because (as is actually the case) he left the nature of the display up to the museum to determine. When we look at one of Sigalit Landau’s *Barbed Salt Lamps* and notice that crumbs of salt have collected on the floor below it, exposing some of the barbed wire, we don’t know whether the object has been damaged (and should, if possible, be fixed) or, instead, has undergone evolution that is proper to the work.

With regard to traditional paintings and sculptures, such conundrums rarely arise. When we see the *Nike of Samothrace*, we do not ask ourselves whether the work is damaged or has, instead, evolved in a way that is relevant to appreciating and interpreting it. The conventions surrounding our understanding of such works specify that when paint flakes off a painting or arms break off a sculpture, this is a form of damage. We don’t figure the paint loss or the missing parts into our understanding of the meaning of the work; instead, we do our best to either repair the damage or disregard it, appreciating the work as it was roughly at the time of its completion.

In general, contemporary artworks have loosened or dispensed with conventions that, for centuries prior, gave us the ability to reason seamlessly from our observations about the object to an understanding of the nature of the artwork. During earlier historical periods, it was clear that if an art object had particular features, this was because the artist had specifically given it those features, or instructed assistants to add such features (and, typically, ratified the assistants’ work). But when we look at a display of a contemporary artwork, we don’t

---

39 This is not to deny the role of accident and chance in the making of some works. But historically, the artist would directly ratify chance effects, thus bringing them under the umbrella of the artist’s specific creative activity.
know whether its features are the result of specific actions taken by the artist, of specific choices made by the artist and executed within a narrow range of variability by others, of general instructions allowing installers a great deal of leeway, or of an invitation to viewers to alter the features of the display.

It’s important to note that this loosening of conventions affects even contemporary works in traditional media and materials, like painting. Conventions that used to be quite powerful for works of painting, such as the convention that damage is to be repaired and that representational content is to be presented right side up, have been loosened by such developments as Georg Baselitz’s choice to present the representational content of many of his paintings upside-down and Saburo Murakami’s choice to create (1957) Peeling Off Paintings that are not to be restored when paint flakes off. In fact, Fiona Banner’s (2007) Shy Nude defies even the convention that the object is to be hung so that the content is visible to the spectator: the panel is leaned against the wall in such a way that only the back is visible, and the text inscribed on the front surface is hidden. As a result of such developments, when we see a painting we don’t immediately know how it is to be hung or whether it is to be restored. Even when we see it on display, we can’t be certain that the display is correct or definitive: artworks are sometimes presented incorrectly, and it is open to an artist to specify that a work should be displayed in different ways on different occasions. (Imagine, for instance, Intermittently Shy Nude, which is sometimes displayed with the text facing away from the wall and visible to the viewer.)

This destabilizing of conventions means that when we encounter contemporary artworks, we need a form of knowledge that was not required for traditional works. We need something that will tell us when change in an object is damage and when it isn’t, something that will tell us when the history of the materials or the particular location has special significance and when it doesn’t, something that tells us which features of the display are mandatory for the artwork and which are variable. The aim of the following chapter is to begin working out a theory that will allow us to answer such questions in a systematic way, by referring to a full understanding of the process of artistic creation. When artists make their works, they (typically) fabricate physical objects and engage in actions and communications that shape how those objects are to be displayed and treated. The creation of the work involves both types of processes, not just the former. A deep understanding of how the work is shaped can guide us in

---

40 In 1989, when many fewer foreigners visited China, I saw a large abstract expressionist painting displayed upside-down at a museum in Beijing. The artist’s scrawled signature in Roman script, visible upside-down in the upper left of the display but rather similar to other marks on the canvas, had escaped the notice of the museum staff.
grasping the work’s nature and thus being in a position to interpret and appreciate it.

Since the artist’s communications about display and treatment of objects are a crucial part of the creative process, the making of the artwork often continues outside of the studio, as the artist interacts with people in institutional settings. Curators, conservators and the institutional frameworks within which they operate can, through these interactions, have a very substantial effect on the nature of the work. In addition, curators and conservators play a significant role in the constitution of displays. In the following chapters we will examine the division of labor between artists and people working within art institutions, and will consider some of the conflicts and difficulties that can arise within institutional contexts. We will also consider whether we must understand contemporary art differently when it is presented outside of institutional contexts.