John Smith: ARH 205_ Fall 2014 Reading Response Paper

From the 1990s forward, the emergence and subsequent engulfing growth of Contemporary art (in both concept and status), has evidently caught the field of art history off guard. In spite of increasing, stringent research in the field, there is still a sense of bewilderment regarding how to go about refining this concept into distinct, uncontested terms of classification. In his article, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," 2008, Terry Smith unwraps and examines the concept of contemporary art from the time of its perceived advent, to what it offers at this very fluid moment in the history of humans and art making. The differing perspectives of this subject are presented and worded by Smith in ways that the reader is able analyze and draw assumptions from the ideas presented, and smoothly assimilate that new information into the writing that follows.

The author's thorough examination of the terms specific to contemporary art explains some of confusion among scholars. Semantics have a way of creating misunderstanding and confusion, but in this case, the disorientation is exponentially multiplied as it has been spread across time and cultures. The hashing out and revealing of the historical terms that have led to the notion of "Contemporary Art" go a long way in untangling the web of misunderstandings with terms such as "Modern", "Modernism", "Modern Art", "Post-modernism", "Global Art", "Contemporaneity", and "Post-contemporary Art", among others. Nonetheless, the scope of the term "contemporary", as elucidated by Smith, remains extremely complicated.

The "master narrative" of art history that has traditionally been so heavily relied upon by art historians, curators, writers of survey texts, instructors, and the artists themselves, no longer applies in this age of information. Smith makes this very clear through his array of theoretical examples. As we have relied upon the notion of linear "progression" in the field of art, there is a strongly implied assumption that there is a goal, or an end, to that progression. Organization, categorization, and defining markers of one period within other periods are part of the craving for completion and perfection.

Smith's inclusion of Danto's theoretical synopsis of emerging contemporary art being "less a style of making art than a style of using styles" (p. 375) is important. Although very insightful, and most likely true, Danto's perspective does not take into consideration the myriad of temporal and geopolitical complexities involved. His view is too black-and-white—similar, in fact, to the exclusionary categorizations and minimizations of yesteryear.

Strikingly similar to other scholars' affirmation concerning the cultural art encounters between "non-Western" and "Western", Smith also notes the critical attention in the 1960s and 1970s to "the trafficking back and forth between art centers in Africa and those in Europe, as countries actively struggling for their independence called on their artists to participate in freedom fights and then nation building, while the artists were also discovering the challenges of presenting their work to international audiences" (p. 373). This is only a small portion of the complexities that have ballooned over time in relation to the concept of "Contemporary art".

According to Smith, there are two main rivalries of perspective on what

Contemporary art is today. One is "capable of renewing itself from within its own resources" (p. 377). This may be true, but the art is not exempt from the geopolitical and temporal influences that continually emerge and shift within today's contexts. The other is a postcolonial constellation, which takes into account the complexities concerning non-West and West. The broader argument encompasses much more, but there still remains the tendency to neatly frame categories within boundaries. This tendency, of course, is part of the reason for this struggle in capturing the concept of our "new art history". What Smith convincingly reveals, more than anything else, is that scholars of art history are out of their comfort zone on this question: "Just what exactly do we mean by Contemporary art?"

Smith's assertion that there cannot be one single story is well argued. The evidence he presents reflects the very real assumption that we have before us (and probably should have attempted discovery of before now) the many parallel historical narratives from different cultures and geographical locations that *do* exist. So many narratives, so many regions—all relevant, all viable. This multitude of significant stories, subject to all the vagrancies and nuances of time and space, are also contingent upon the revising of the restructured histories that continue to inform them. The author's final (and oldest) definition of the concept of "contemporary" refers to the "multiplicity of relations between space and time". If we must have a historical marker for these times in the field of art history, "Contemporary art" may just be the beginning of the understanding that art is, and always has been, contemporary.