Lost in Thought

LELAND DE LA DURANTAYE ON PETER OSBORNE'S *ANYWHERE OR NOT AT ALL*

***Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, by Peter Osborne.** London: Verso, 2013. 282 pages.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CONTEMPORARY? As a rule, it means to miss a great deal. A visitor to the Sistine Chapel circa 1525—barely a decade after Michelangelo finished painting it—referred in his diary to what is today perhaps the most famous image in the Western world as one "of an old man, in the middle of the ceiling, who is represented in the act of flying through the air." The diarist in question (the bishop of Nocera) should not be judged harshly for not recognizing God, since, in 1525, God was not yet old, or rather, was not depicted as old. As with all truly new things, the elderly God took some getting used to; and, as is always the case for contemporaries, being close does not necessarily help one see clearly.

Looking back at the history of being contemporary is not a particularly heartening exercise. The bishop of Nocera may not have recognized the powerfully built old man zooming across the ceiling, but he liked him, and liked the painting. The vast majority of past masterpieces, however, have been met by their contemporaries with less warmth. We might long for great art to be like lightning and its appreciation like thunder, but this is rarely the case—so rarely that to be misunderstood in one's time has come to be something like a qualifying criterion for greatness. And so one question every generation faces is, Why it is so hard to be a good contemporary? A present-day philosopher reflecting on the question has written that "those who coincide fully with the period, who touch it at every point, are not its contemporaries because, for this very reason, they fail to see it, they cannot keep their gaze fixed upon it." Giorgio Agamben's response here to the riddle of the contemporary is thus to separate those who are merely living at a particular time from those who are truly contemporary with their times—and to suggest that to be a true contemporary demands a special sort of distance. Another philosopher, Peter Osborne, in his recently published *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, offers dozens of good reasons for not trying to do what he intends to do—formulate a philosophy of contemporary art—before going ahead and trying to do so all the same. Or does he?

By way of illustrating the hazards of his enterprise, Osborne—a professor of modern European philosophy at London's Kingston University and an editor of *Radical Philosophy* who has written extensively on art—begins with an anecdote about an artist (Francis Bacon) and a philosopher (Gilles Deleuze) meeting and, despite their mutual interest, having nothing interesting to say to each other. Osborne claims that "this often happens when philosophy meets art," and adds that "when philosophy meets contemporary art, the situation can be even worse." A nitpicky reader might observe that this is not what happens when philosophy meets art, but what happens when a fantastically retiring philosopher is made to dine with an artist he admires. To remain within the confines of the example, that reader might also say that what happens when philosophy meets art is not the dinner but the book by Deleuze on Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, which by virtually all accounts was a success. The real point, however, lies not in how apt an emblem this meeting might be, but the worse case scenario of the contemporary Osborne means it to illustrate. Is Osborne right that when philosophy and art meet a boring evening is in store?

What Osborne announces as his "main thesis" is that "it is the *convergence* and *mutual conditioning* of historical transformations in the ontology of the artwork and the social relations of art space—a convergence and mutual conditioning that has its roots in more general economic and communicational processes—that makes contemporary art possible, in the emphatic sense of an art of contemporaneity." Osborne refers to this as his thesis "baldly stated," and it is easy to imagine many a reader, even many a philosophically oriented reader,

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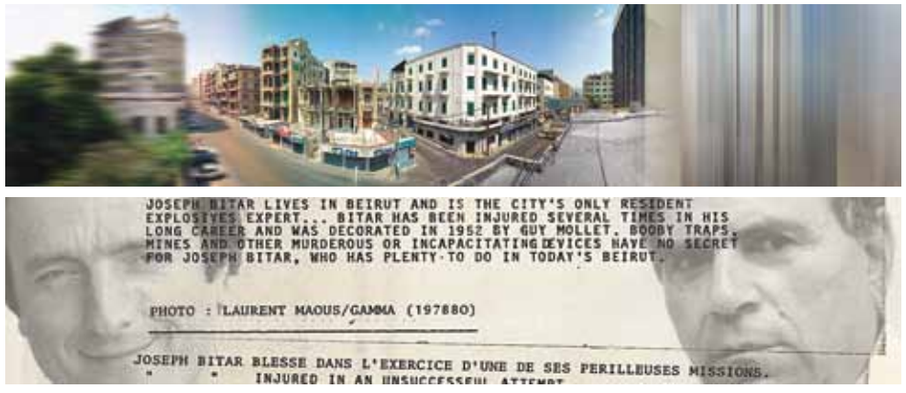
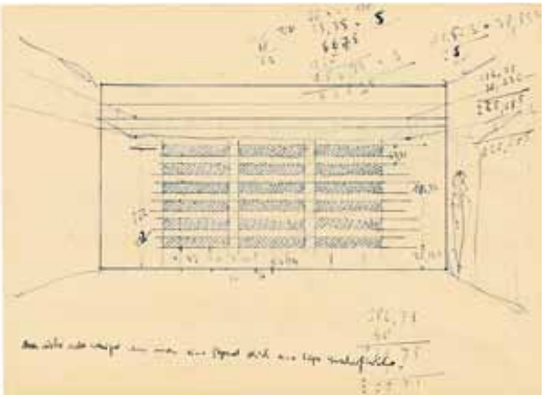
wishing for a slightly balder statement. What is clear, however, is that Osborne is saying that contemporary art and the spaces in which it is encountered have changed one another radically, and that this process has been determined in significant part by market forces.

Osborne proceeds to underline that "the contemporary is a utopian idea." The word *utopia* literally means "nowhere," and because the contemporary is everywhere around us there is nowhere from which we can view it clearly—no way to establish the distance Agamben advocates in his 2008 essay "What Is the Contemporary?" As Osborne reminds his reader, not only is the word *contemporary* used in different ways at different times, not only does the term have a history, but if taken as the totality of things happening at a given time, it is unknowable. Osborne writes: "As Heidegger famously argued, 'the present' itself . . . in its presentness, cannot be considered some kind of self-contained temporal receptacle for objects of experience, since it only exists as the differentiation or fractured togetherness of the other two temporal modes (past and future), under the priority of its futural dimension." Here, too, more baldness might be welcomed. But the problems to which Osborne points are evident. As no one person could experience all that is contemporary to him or her, they

Below: **Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel ceiling (detail), 1508–12,** plaster fresco, gold, 133 x 46'.

Right: **Two stills from Walid Raad/The Atlas Group's *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, 2003/2006,** video, color, sound, 18 minutes.





Above, left: **Gerhard Richter**, ***Atlas Sketches (Designs for Colour Charts)* (detail), 1966**, four pencil, ballpoint, and felt-tip-pen drawings on paper, 20⅜ x 26¼".

Above: **Gordon Matta-Clark**, ***Splitting*, 1974**, mixed media. Installation view, Englewood, NJ.

cannot know the contemporary as an object of experience. They can only know it as an idea (i.e., they would need to augment their limited experience by doing things like reading books and magazines, knowing all the while that they will never reach some mythical Total Knowledge of the Present). To this (Kantian) problem Osborne adds the one he finds in Heidegger: Time is what you make of it, how you live in it; time is not everywhere and always the same, either for individuals or groups. This state of affairs is, of course, in no way specific to contemporary art. It concerns the limits of individual experience and collective knowledge, and could just as well apply to cinquecento frescoes or fifth-century Confucianism. The question with which Osborne's reader is then confronted is why he has chosen to underline this perfectly intuitive idea. If the idea of the contemporary is utopian, if it exists nowhere in sufficiently pure form, why write about it?

One possibility is that this is a bold rhetorical tactic on Osborne's part: to show how very hard something is—and then do it. Another possibility is that he is doing this to present an advance alibi for anything that might remain unclear or fall by the wayside. I do not know which is closer to the truth of Osborne's intention, but I do know that the book does not shed clear light on the nature of an art of contemporaneity. Heidegger is famous for nothing so much as what he called the "hermeneutic circle," which is given such admirable exposition at the outset of his own contribution to a philosophy of contemporary art, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935). Therein, Heidegger says that when the thinker is confronted with a circle such as the one implied by Osborne's observation concerning the limitlessness of the contemporary, the point is not to make the circle magically disappear, but to enter it in the right way. And the way we enter is through our own experience, through our own place in history. What is left out by Osborne and left in by Heidegger is how we experience—and thereby come to know—those things that we know only from the inside. Like being. And time. And being a contemporary.

Given the importance Osborne places on a "philosophy of contemporary art" (as well as on "the fiction of the contemporary," "the semantics of the contemporary," "our incipiently global contemporaneity," and a great many other kindred expressions), it is surprising how little contemporary art there is in the book. The works of the Atlas Group are discussed at some length, but they are virtually alone among artworks of the last twenty years. Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, and Robert Smithson are examined so as to advance the claim that "contemporary art is postconceptual art," by which Osborne means that contemporary art is what comes after the Conceptual art that so interests him, but to which he adds the caveat that "postconceptual art is a critical category that is constituted at the level of the historical ontology of the artwork; it is not a traditional art-historical or art-critical concept at the level of medium, form or style" (which indeed sounds a bit like "don't try this at home"). More contemporary contemporaries such as Cyprien Gaillard and Ilana Halperin rate very passing mentions as "neo-Smithsonian." It is tempting to imagine what might have come from seeking out and studying those contemporary artists who are most contemporary—literally: not only artists whose material is the contemporary in their addressing issues of burning social and political importance, as is done by the Atlas Group, but artists who make the contemporary their medium in other respects, such as Tino Seghal, whose "staged situations" *only* exist for their contemporaries and might seem to exist only partially for any one of their contemporaries.

The aim of what Osborne advocates as a "revival of a philosophical art criticism" surely cannot be to point out the fact that even the most assiduous researcher will never arrive at a Universal Contemporary that is true for every living thing at a particular time, nor can it be to address the list of all the reasons why the altered "ontology of the artwork" should be approached with care. Instead, the point of a philosophy of contemporary art must be to better illuminate what it is like to experience the art of our time. This entails reflecting upon what it is like to experience works of art in which we cannot separate—as we might for a work of a hundred or a thousand years ago—historical background from artistic foreground, to reflect upon all that passes away and what remains of this passing. The central problem with Osborne's book is not that it fails to discuss contemporary artists or that its author is insufficiently like Heidegger—or Kant or Adorno or Deleuze or any of the other philosophers cited—but that it lacks the fundamental clarity of purpose which is a precondition for clarity of prose.

The task of the philosopher of contemporary art is difficult, and has been for some time. Reflecting on contemporary art in 1828, Hegel wrote that "art . . . in its highest vocation, is . . . for us a thing of the past." He meant by this not that the art of his day had lost commercial value or cultural prestige, but that it had ceased to shape the way that people saw themselves and experienced their world; he meant that there was a crisis that it was up to philosophy to formulate. In this light it is easy to see that the highest vocation for contemporary art, like the writing that would illuminate it, is that it be, for us, a thing of the present. And it is equally easy to see that, philosophically speaking, so long as you do not clarify your language and focus your discussions, you are apt to find your inquiry pretty much anywhere, or not at all. □

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