

AGAMBEN AND NANCY ON CONTEMPORANEITY AND ART

TERRY SMITH

(March 2012)

The concept of contemporaneity has become vital to a number of the most original thinkers working today. Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy are among those who consider the concept in ways that acknowledge its currency in artworld discourse, yet seek to explore its broader resonances. These notes assess the strengths and the limitations of their efforts to do so.

What does it mean to be contemporary?

Some strange usages of words relating to “contemporary” attend the actuality, the translations, and the edited text of Giorgio Agamben’s 2007 seminar at the European Graduate School. Presented online as “Giorgio Agamben on contemporaneity,” its title when published in Italy was *Che cos’è il contemporaneo?* It has settled in English as “What is the Contemporary?”¹ His opening—“first and foremost”—question is “What does it mean to be contemporary?” His concern throughout is to articulate “contemporariness” as it is experienced by those who are most capable of understanding its true nature—a truth found precisely in that experience, in the grasping of its inner registers. Thus he proceeds by posing, mostly via metaphor, one paradox after another to demonstrate the shadow play that comes into being whenever “the contemporary” is subject to analysis. If he is seeking to explicate a state of being that has special relevance to our present times, he does not do so (as I attempt to do) by showing how this state, however universal or preexistent aspects of it may be, has qualities that are characteristic of current conditions, understood as a general or widely shared situation. Rather, he wants to show how “contemporariness” is experienced—at its most profound, ontological register—by philosophers, poets and others. He thus takes his examples from across the span of modern thinking about such matters, from Nietzsche to contemporary astrophysics.

What is “contemporariness”? Agamben himself uses the word as he reads out his lecture in English. The Italian text prefers *contemporaneità* at these points: for which the standard translation is “contemporaneity” or “contemporaneousness,” the standard definition of which is “a contemporaneous condition or state.” Yet, clearly, Agamben is searching for a term that takes us beyond the mere simultaneity or plain coexistence implied in ordinary and simple usage of the term. “Contemporariness” does appear in Noah Porter’s *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: C. & G. Merriam Co., 1913) where it means “Existence at the same time; contemporaneousness.” It is absent from most other dictionaries, and ordinary language use. But in April 2007 it appeared in *Wiktionary*, defined as “The state or quality of being contemporary.” This latter is Agamben’s meaning, in the somewhat circular terms of his discussion. Whereas the dictionary definitions envisage, in rather straightforward fashion, certain temporally proximate relations between things, events and people, he wants to show the complexities of their existential necessity as a succession of acts of insight. In this ambition we see the brilliance but also the limits of his account. Let us unpack his argument.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1873-6)—above all his passionate insistence that overweening respect for the determinative power of History had reduced his contemporaries to servile subjects, incapable of making their own lives, let alone future history—is cited as a prime example of the apparently paradoxical proposition that those who are “truly contemporary, truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands.” [40] On the contrary, Agamben insists, “Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it.” Total immersion in the present, absolute up-to-datedness, is blindness. Distance within inescapable implication is a necessary condition of truly contemporary being.

But it is not sufficient. What is *critical* distance? Agamben offers an elegant analysis of Osip Mandelstam’s poem *Vek* (“The Century”), in which the linkage between the poet and his era is imagined as that between an empathetic observer and a creature

that changes from having the flexibility of an embryo into a broken-backed cripple. This image is as pertinent as “He” in Kafka’s story of the same name, as cited by Hannah Arendt as the figure of what it is to live in the present, crushed between past and future, fighting for air, for the opportunity to escape, however tentatively, from their implacable temporality. 2 The contemporary, then, is he “who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.” [44] A rare observer can see light within this darkness, but only as a “too soon” that is also “too late,” an “already” that is also a “not yet.” [47] Agamben then ruminates on a number of examples, in each case evoking others who have speculated on these questions. The logic of fashion (Baudelaire and Barthes), the archaic within the avant-garde’s thirst for origins (Poggioli, Baudrillard), the as-yet “unlived” of the present asking us for an archaeological reading of it as a future-filled past (Jameson), and St Paul’s revelation that every present is filled with the potential of the Messiah’s return, making us all potential contemporaries of Christ (Kierkegaard). Benjamin has brilliantly elaborated this last insight in his concept of the “dialectical image,” as has Foucault in his “archaeology of knowledge,” and Derrida in his concept of *a-venir*, the truth to come—in each case these are descriptions of what it is to perceive, as a living component of the present, the multi-temporal nature of historical actuality and of possible, perhaps likely, futures.

Insights of this kind have, of course, always been available. Those who had them were the true contemporaries of their eras. St Augustine, writing in the years 378-9, shares this quality with Walter Benjamin in 1940, and with many but not a great number of others, both before and since. “Contemporariness” is, in this sense, “natural” to insightful speculation on what it is to be in time. Because he is not taking a historical or geopolitical perspective in this text (as distinct from his major contributions in these fields), Agamben does not go on to claim that insights of this kind are especially pertinent to the understanding of contemporary experience now, nor that they are more widely held, by increasing numbers of intellectuals, these days. I have suggested that, indeed, they are eclipsing other kinds of insight into the past, the present and the future (indeed, that they place the famous triad itself into

question). This is what the times require of us, more so than any other kind of understanding, modern or postmodern, in whatever variant. 3 Almost everything about public culture, economic life and political processes *invite* us to be contemporary in the obvious sense—to take it at its own words, appearances and images. But the deeper currents of today *require* us to be their critical contemporaries in the sense that Agamben begins to sketch.

There are some crucial aspects of his topic that are surprisingly underdeveloped. The sense of being “in” *this* time, *these* times, and “out of” them *at the same time* is of the essence of contemporaneity. Agamben offers a sequence of metaphors of this state of experience—all intensely poetic and theoretically suggestive—but does little to describe it directly. Each of the authors he cites or alludes to struggle to evoke the experience of feeling that one is in a “space” in which you remain aware of, connected to but psychically apart from, the ongoingness of measurable temporalities, of historical consequence, etc. A “space” that, whatever else is occurring within it, is palpably also located in time, but in a different kind of time—indeed, different kinds of time, contemporaneously. Certain passages indicate that he is sensitive to this state, but less (in this text) to its historicity. “Whoever has seen the skyscrapers of New York for the first time arriving from the ocean at dawn has immediately perceived this archaic *facies* of the present, this contiguousness with the ruins that the atemporal images of September 11 have made evident to us all.” [51] This passage evokes a classic experience of modernity displaying itself (as a fascist bundle!) to all comers (as if they were immigrants!), and then moves into the “time/space” to which I am pointing. The reference is so brief that I am uncertain whether I have just read a brilliant encapsulation of the argument of my book *The Architecture of Aftermath*, or an insouciant gesture towards the capacity of contemporaneity to oblige everything to start again, *ab initio*, while also shouldering the burden of multiple pasts. 4

This kind of “time/space” has always been of enormous interests to artists. It was a major theme within modern art, pitching it against the Past and many specific pasts, and doing so in the name of imaginable and inevitable futures. It is even more of a

core subject for contemporary artists, including Tacita Dean, Christian Marclay, Isaac Julian, Steve McQueen, and many others. The past-present-future triad divides us no longer, as contemporaneity includes within its diversity many revived pasts and wished-for futures, all of which are being lived out as live present. None are dead, all are possible, and (as distinct from the modern era) no overriding narrative is deciding which is which.

Because he is puzzling over the nature of “contemporariness” as an, in principle, universal experience, it is of no relevance to him that his instinctive frame of reference is modernity. Mandelstam’s poem was written in 1923, and its immediate contemporaneity is the “long” nineteenth century that broke apart during the years of World War I and the Russian Revolution. We can extrapolate its message for our recent millennial transition--the crushing of vertebrae marked the entire twentieth century. For the imagery of spreading darkness he could have traced a trajectory from Goya’s Black Paintings to Antonioni’s *L’Eclipse*, from Victor Hugo to *Apocalypse Now*, or from Nietzsche’s madness through James Joyce’s epiphanies and Freud’s discontent to the Marxist melancholia of the Frankfurt School. I would argue, however, that modernity’s fog is being countered in contemporary culture and thought, not only by the blinding light of consumerist equanimity but by agents whose conflicting, antinomic interests are having a dispersive effect. Dark matter is not necessarily negative: it is just invisible. For the time being...

The Origins of the World

Jean-Luc Nancy begins a 2006 lecture by explaining why he choose “Art Today” as his title instead of the name of his subject: “Contemporary Art.”⁵ He offers the usual reasons, each of them acknowledging one of the (partial) meanings of the concept, together amounting to a slippery domain that cannot take one name for itself: contemporary art is an art historical category still in formation, so may change in unexpected directions; in ordinary usage “contemporary” means the past 20 or 30 years, so it is a constantly moving measure; because it excludes art being made today but in pre-contemporary modes, it cannot encompass all current art; and,

finally, when it is used to name kinds of art it “violates” not only the traditional categories of the practice-based (plastic) arts but also more recent ones, such as “performance art.” In the face of such confusion, “how is it possible that in the history of art we have come to adopt a category that does not designate any particular aesthetic modality the way we would, once, describe hyperrealism, cubism, or even ‘body art’ or ‘land art,’ but a category that simply bears the name ‘contemporary’? [92]

Nancy is not tempted to treat this fact as an indicator of the vacuity of contemporary “thought,” the systemic “unthink” of those subject to spectacle. Nor does he see it as evidence of the triumph of witless presentism on the part of those who live only to consume the latest offering, in art as in the general culture. Rather, he goes, as he so often does in his philosophy, straight to *origins*. At the moment of making, every work of art is *ipso facto* contemporary with other art being made at the same time. It is also contemporary with its own times in the general sense. Every work of art, therefore, enables us (the artist, and we who see the work) to feel a “certain formation of the contemporary world, a certain perception of self in the world.” [92] It does so, not in the form of an ideological statement (“the meaning of the world is this”), but more as a kind of suggestive shaping of possibilities, one that “allows for a circulation of recognitions, identifications, feelings, but without fixing them in a final signification.” [92] Thus the contribution of Giotto, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and others, who give us more than the Christian program that occasioned their masterworks, and the secular artists—Picasso, Cézanne, Brancusi, Proust are among his examples—whose art exceeds the factuality of the everyday from which they begin. The worlds that they (as artists) are, the worlds that they create, are “there every time to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world,” in contrast to the closure of fixed and ordinary meaning. [93] In contrast, he goes on to say, to works of art that “offer a surcharge of significations,” the message of which seems too obvious, and which thus effect a closure for all concerned. [96. He cites a work about rape in Bosnia, in which, he regretfully observes, message preceded form.]

Worldmaking in and by works of art is, as Heidegger has shown us, as fundamental to the practice of art as is the contemporaneity of every work of art. What, then, is so special about the kind of art that is designated “contemporary”? Or, better, what qualities with regard to worlding might a work of contemporary art be said to possess? How does it *world* (taking world as a verb)? His first stab at this is as follows: “contemporary art could be defined as the opening of a form that is above all a question, the form of a question.” [94] He is not alone in highlighting the interrogatory gesturing of contemporary artists (in contrast to the projective impulses of modernist artists, and the propositional character of late modern transitional art): it is the starting point of *What is Contemporary Art?*, a study, among other things, of the changes in art that allowed the return to viability of such a title.

6 He quickly realizes, as many of us have, that commitment to the interrogatory is not quite enough: “Perhaps a question does not entirely make a world, or a world in which the circulation of meaning is solely an interrogative and anxious circulation, sometimes anguished; it’s a difficult world, a fragile world, an unsettling world.” [94]

We might expect that these terms would invite him to attach art practice to the broader condition of being-in-the-world today. He does not take this path, trying out first the (opposite) route of proposing that “Art today is an art that, above all else, asks: ‘what is art?’” [94] This is, of course, the central question of one of the two great strands of twentieth century art, the conceptualist questioning initiated by Duchamp, in contrast to the formal and figural elaborations continued by Picasso and Matisse. Nancy does, however, offer an original spin on Duchamp’s gesture via the readymade, the rendezvous with that which, until that moment of the artist’s designation, was not regarded as art. “The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given.” [94] By “preliminary form” he means “schema” in Kant’s sense, the non-sensible that precedes and makes possible the sensible. He does the same with his suggestion that Picasso’s *Guernica* was the last history painting in the grand manner that had prevailed since the later eighteenth century. From this observation Nancy draws the

implication that, subsequently, signification itself went into crisis (one famously identified by Foucault as the posthuman and Lyotard as postmodernism): “that whole ensemble of schematism disappeared, even the schematism of man himself, of different figures of man and humanity. ...this disappearance is what characterizes the present world, which causes us to be in a world that is in a way at a loss for world, at a loss for meaning.” [94-5] This sudden absence of “great schemas, great regulating ideas, whether they be religious, political and hence also aesthetic” removes the “supports” of art, the bases on which artistic form arises. Contemporary art, therefore, begins from “this shapeless state of self.” [95] It is on this shaky ground that it asks the question “What is art?” necessarily in a new way, one that Duchamp prefigures—perhaps as a lone but increasingly influential precursor, his influence increasing with the accelerating evaporation of the master narratives.

Nancy is here identifying some of the key elements of what I see as a world historical shift from modernity through postmodernity to contemporaneity. And he picks out some of the key implications for art making in such circumstances. But, having seen a clear set of connections between epochal changes in world-picturing and the interrogatory nature of contemporary art, he retreats towards a set of his core beliefs, above all those concerning art as a fundamental *gesture*, one that “puts us in direct communication with the creation of the world.” [99] In favor neither of art for art’s sake, nor of art dedicated to religious, political or ethical purpose, Nancy celebrates art as an act that manifests being, which brings worlds into being. The closest he gets towards identifying what might be contemporary about such art today is his remark: “I would say that a contemporary signal is a signal towards this: there is always, again, as before, there is always the possibility of making a world, it opens up a world to us.” [98] He links this with the French preference for the term “*mondialisation*”—the worldwide creation and circulation of sense by all concerned—over the EuroAmerica-centric economic and geopolitical schematism underlying the term “globalization.” [98].

In the limited framework of a single lecture, we cannot expect more than brief allusions to how contemporary art might connect with larger contemporary conditions. So we must value Nancy's forthrightness in bringing his core insights about artistic creativity and metaphysical presence to bear on this question. In particular, we find useful his recognition that in Duchamp's gesture, and that of countless artists after him, especially since the 1970s, "The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given." This does, I would argue, point to a distinctive and definitive fact about what it is to make art today: that artists search for the supports that will generate form within a worldscape across which great schematisms continue to contend for universal dominance, yet which have also become massively elaborated attack machines, destined to fail because--as the Arab Spring and the occupy movement, in their different ways, demonstrate--there is no longer a territory on earth that will, once invaded, stay conquered.

1. Respectively, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSS9VPS_gms&feature=related; Giorgio Agamben, *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?* (Rome: Nottotempo, 2008); and Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39-54. Numbers in the text refer to the last.
2. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 7-14.
3. See Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
4. Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).
5. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Art Today," lecture Accademia di Brera, Milan, 2006; "L'arte, oggi," in Federico Ferrari ed., *Del contemporaneo* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007); also in *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 9, no. 1 (April 2010): 91-9. Numbers in text refer to the last.

6. See ch. 13. Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).