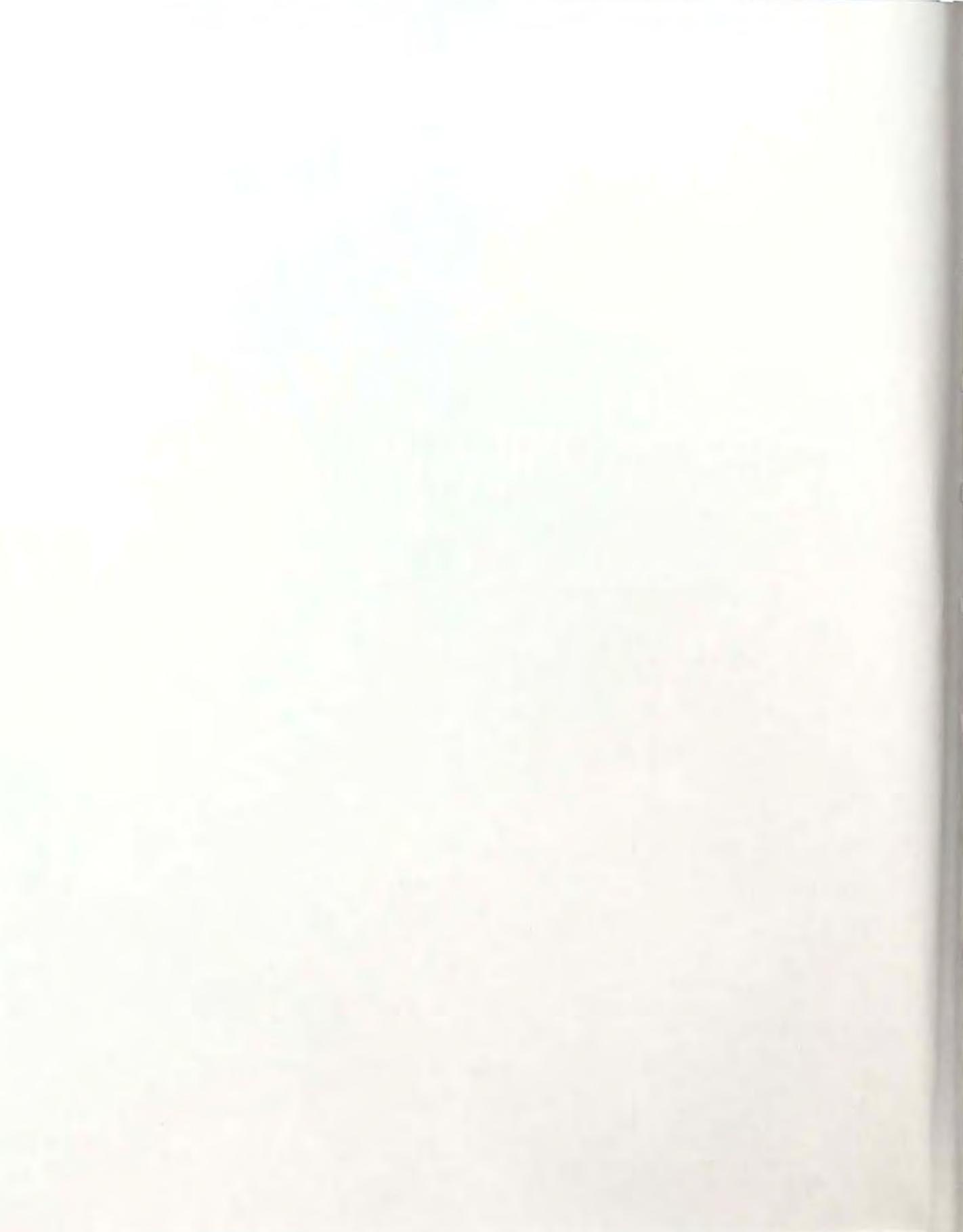


WHAT WAS CONTEMPORARY ART?





WHAT WAS CONTEMPORARY ART?

Richard Meyer

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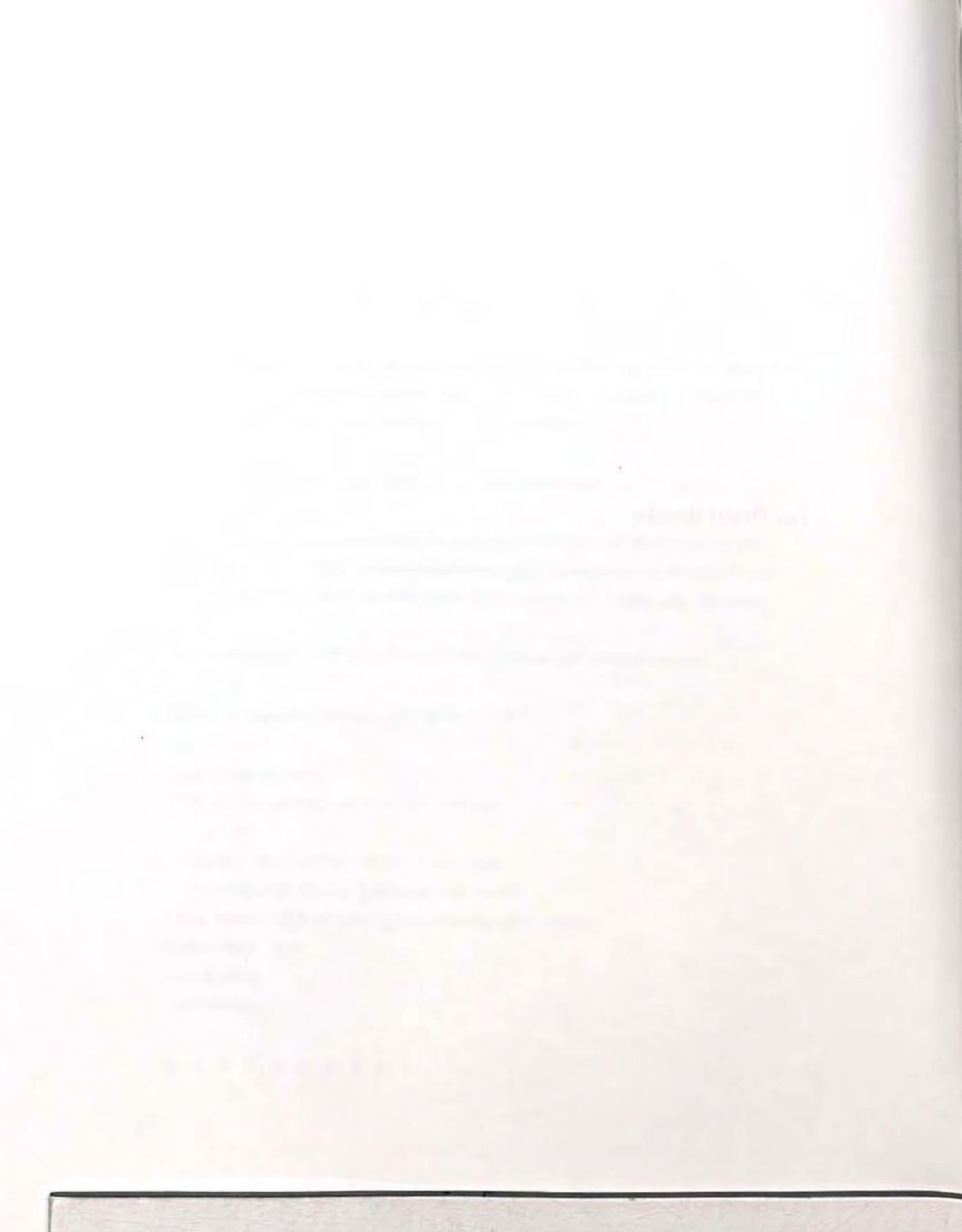
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For David Román



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1 Introduction: The Art-Historical Postmortem

In 1969, a young woman named Rosalind Krauss filed a dissertation in the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard University. Fifteen years later, after she had emerged as one of the leading critical and art-historical thinkers of her generation, Krauss would explain the unorthodox means by which she had devised her dissertation topic:

I was in fact thinking of a topic in nineteenth-century European art that would have been much more palatable to my professors at Harvard, but it was going to be difficult for me to go to France for a year in the middle of this marriage [she had recently wed Richard Krauss]. I didn't know what to do until one morning I woke up to an announcement on my clock radio that a sculptor had been killed in Vermont. I thought it was Tony Caro, because they said "Bennington, Vermont" where he was teaching. I thought, "Oh, how terrible," because I knew Tony. Then, after a couple of sentences, they repeated the name and I realized it was [David] Smith. I thought, "Um, I now have a thesis topic." I knew they would never allow me to do a dissertation on somebody who was still alive, but he had just died. I went rushing to Harvard to announce this as my topic!

Within the logic of this anecdote, the shift from the imagined death of Anthony Caro to the actual one of David Smith constitutes a passage from personal

loss to professional opportunity, from the register of friendship to that of scholarship, from the "terrible" thought that a sculptor Krauss knew firsthand had perished to recognition of the use value of an entirely different sculptor's demise. Death here delivers the artist into history, or at least into the history of art. Sealed off from the possibility of new works, stylistic shifts, imaginative breakthroughs, or creative disappointments, Smith's artistic output could at last be scrutinized, interpreted, and catalogued by the art historian. Krauss could now write a thesis on David Smith—but only, and almost literally, over his dead body.

Even here, however, there was a catch. To make Smith "more palatable," Krauss's advisors approved her topic on the condition that she prepare a catalogue raisonné of Smith's sculpture as part of the thesis. Krauss dutifully researched and photographed some seven hundred sculptures dating from 1932, the year that Smith turned from painting to three-dimensional construction, or what he called "drawing in space," to 1965, the year in which he was killed in an automobile accident (he missed a turn in a road and was crushed inside his pickup truck)—a range represented here by *Construction*, one of Smith's earliest three-dimensional works (no. 4 in Krauss's catalogue raisonné), and *Cubi XXVIII*, the last work he completed before his death.²

Given the exhaustive scope of Krauss's catalogue raisonné, the logic that guides the rest of her dissertation is brilliantly paradoxical. In the three-chapter essay that precedes the catalogue, Krauss argues that art-historical chronology and biographical sequence are precisely the wrong tools for understanding Smith's "preeminence" as a modernist sculptor. To explain the absence of biographical narrative from the essay, Krauss writes, "I feel the simple succession of events in Smith's life is as mute and unrevealing about his art as are the simple facts of his sculptural chronology."³ As though in response to the advisors who required her to locate, photograph, and date

some seven hundred sculptures, as well as dig up every public statement, lecture, and radio interview by this famously loquacious artist, Krauss positions her interpretation of Smith's modernism "against the testimony which a brute chronological succession of works provides" and against "any simple idea of symbiosis between David Smith and his historical context."⁴ (The first chapter of Krauss's dissertation is titled "Defining Smith's Career: Beyond an Historical Context.")⁵

In describing the parameters of her study, Krauss notes that "while the catalogue of Smith's sculpture which follows this essay contains nearly 700 items, I have dealt explicitly with only about 40. This is because I believe that the quality of Smith's work derives from a particular attitude he had toward sculpture—an attitude which is fully embodied in the masterpieces of his career."⁶ Note the self-assurance of Krauss's voice in this passage—the certainty with which she identifies and separates the forty "masterpieces" of Smith's sculptural output from the remainder of his oeuvre.

For Krauss, Smith's best sculptures exemplify how "certain objects or occurrences detach themselves from their historical background and strike [the scholar] with their overwhelming importance."⁷ The scholar's task, Krauss continues, "is to understand and to account for their sharpness of focus within his own view."⁸ With such statements, we see art history moving away from comprehensive cataloguing toward critical accounts of selected artworks; away from the seven hundred in favor of close readings of the forty. By unraveling the structural logic of the very catalogue raisonné she had compiled, Krauss helped launch the self-critical turn in contemporary art history.⁹ In her writing as in that of other leading figures in the field, the present-tense encounter between object and scholar increasingly came to take precedence over the "brute chronological succession" of artworks and the monographic logic of biography.¹⁰



1.1 David Smith, *Construction*, 1932,
wood, wire, and plaster, $18\frac{1}{2} \times 5 \times 9\frac{1}{2}$
inches. © Estate of David Smith/Licensed
by VAGA, NY.



1.2 David Smith, *Cubi XXVIII*, 1965, stainless steel, 108 × 110 × 45 inches. © Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, NY.

Like her Harvard colleague Michael Fried, Krauss wrote art criticism while pursuing her doctorate in art history in the mid to late 1960s. And like Fried, she was a disciple of the New York critic Clement Greenberg. The preface to Krauss's dissertation notes her debt to modernist criticism above and beyond any academic advisor or art-historical training: "My knowledge of modern painting and sculpture was largely formed and nurtured by the critical essays of, and discussions with, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. With their aid, I began, while a graduate student at Harvard University, to write criticism. It was during the kind of contact with modernist works of art involved in that endeavor that my own conviction about American sculpture strengthened, and with it, my desire to write about the work of David Smith."¹¹ The term "conviction" surfaces repeatedly in Krauss's dissertation.¹² It draws attention to the self-assured judgment of the critic rather than to the purported objectivity and temporal remove of the art historian.¹³ As Greenberg would succinctly put the point years later, "The first obligation of an art critic is to deliver value judgments."¹⁴

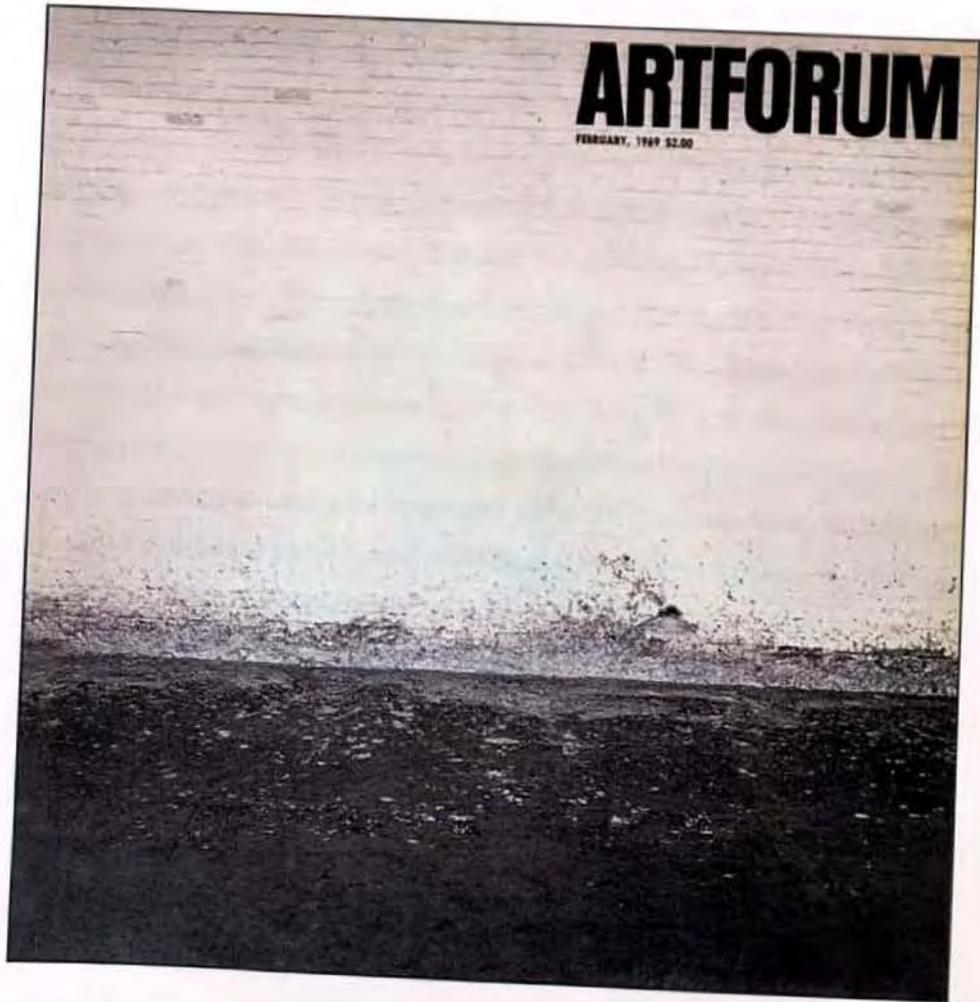
Shortly before filing her dissertation at Harvard, Krauss published a two-part article drawn from it in the February and April 1969 issues of *Artforum* magazine.¹⁵ Titled "The Essential David Smith, Parts One and Two," the article blurred the boundary between contemporary art criticism and doctoral research in art history. The intervening *Artforum* issue, March 1969, was given over to the publication of Fried's dissertation in its entirety. *Artforum* readers expecting coverage of contemporary art and film (such as that included in every prior issue of the magazine) were instead offered a book-length treatise titled "Manet's Sources: Aspects of His Art, 1859-1865." Apart from several pages of gallery advertisements and a few letters to the editor, nothing appeared in the issue other than Fried's fourteen-part thesis (complete with 258 endnotes as well as the author's extensive translations of the French

sources cited in his text). No explanation for the special issue was offered by the editors.

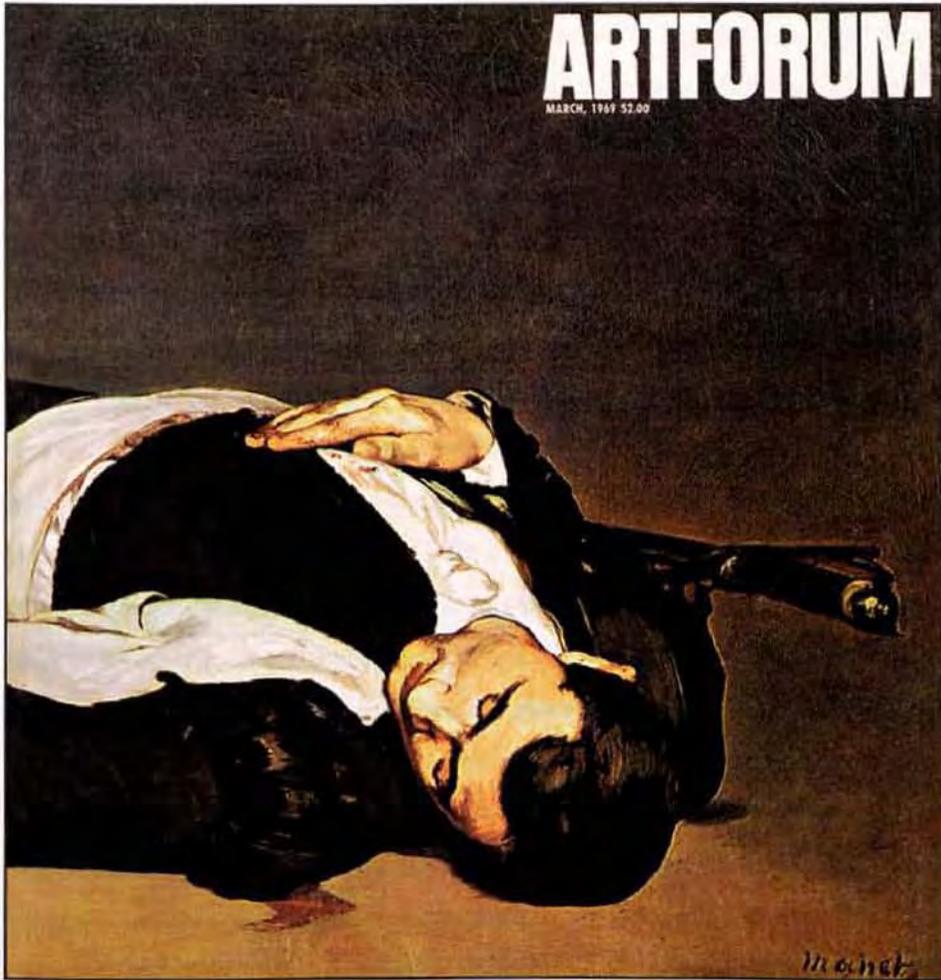
The anomaly marked by Fried's issue may be suggested visually by comparing the covers of the February 1969 and March 1969 issues. Where the former presents Richard Serra's site-specific, molten-lead sculpture *Splashing* (created earlier that same winter at the Leo Castelli warehouse), the latter reproduces a large detail from Edouard Manet's *The Dead Torero* of 1864. Fried's special issue of *Artforum* bracketed the currentness of contemporary art such that the "clock" of art criticism could be wound back a century.

In another sense, however, "Manet's Sources" was no less contemporary than Serra's *Splashing*. While Fried's subject was over a century old, his project had only just been completed: his dissertation was filed at Harvard two months prior to its publication in the magazine. Like Krauss's two-part article on Smith, the all but instantaneous appearance of Fried's thesis in *Artforum* challenged the divide between art-historical scholarship and contemporary art criticism in 1969.¹⁶ Fried would later comment on his dual practice of art writing at the time: "I kept my activity as an art critic distinct from my work in art history; I never considered writing a dissertation on a living artist or seeking academic credit for my New York reviews. Intellectually, however, it was another story: from the start the distinction between art criticism and art history seemed to me a matter of emphasis rather than of principle, and my understanding of contemporary art had implications for the questions I began to put to the past."¹⁷ At the beginning of this passage, Fried locates criticism and scholarship as separate spheres of production.¹⁸ By the end, however, the two spheres have intersected to such a degree that only a matter of "emphasis" distinguishes them.

Krauss likewise understood the practices of art history and criticism to be "mutually inclusive," but only when realized "in their most supreme



1.3 *Artforum* cover, February 1969. © Artforum.



1.4 Artforum cover, March 1969. © Artforum.

examples."¹⁹ In lesser cases, she warned, the art historian's dogged insistence on "systematic objectivity" limited his method to bloodless chronology and deadening taxonomy. What remains dazzling about Krauss's dissertation essay is the confidence of her critical voice, the magisterial conviction with which she passes judgment not only on artworks but also on other critics and historians.²⁰

Krauss set contemporary critical judgment (or "conviction") against the reductive logic of chronology and biographical determinism. As though rendering this opposition in concrete form, the two halves of her dissertation would ultimately appear as freestanding publications. In 1971, a revised version of the essay was published by the MIT Press as *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith*. Six years later, Garland Press published the catalogue as *The Sculpture of David Smith: A Catalogue Raisonné*. In the gap that opened between these two accounts of "The Sculpture of David Smith," and in the far greater degree of professional attention that *Terminal Iron Works* received, we see one model of scholarship displacing another. We see art history becoming criticism. And we see art history becoming contemporary.

As the dissertations I now advise attest, artists no longer need to be dead—or even very old—to be the subject of intensive scholarly analysis. Today, dissertations are routinely written on artists who are mid to late career, on recent museum exhibitions and biennials, and on current critical debates in the art world. Tenured and tenure-track jobs are posted for historians of contemporary art, and endowed chairs have been established in the field. In 2009, a new professional society was founded in order to "foster strong scholarship and to promote collegiality within the vital field of contemporary art history."²¹ In the United States, at least, contemporary art has emerged not only as a viable area of art-historical study but as, by far, the most popular. In

an analysis based on the annual listing of dissertations in progress issued by the College Art Association (CAA), the art historian Michael Lobel observes that “in 1996, American and Canadian dissertations in progress, in all art history fields, numbered 210; by 2005, dissertations in progress, in post-1945 art alone, numbered 214.”²² The number of dissertations on contemporary art history thus exceeded the sum of all dissertations in the discipline a decade before.

In keeping with Lobel’s findings, an article by *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter reported in 2011 that “an overwhelming number” of applicants to art history graduate programs “now declare contemporary art their field of choice: 80 percent was a figure I heard repeatedly—but unofficially—in conversations during the annual College Art Association conference this winter.”²³ One source for that figure may well have been Patricia Mainardi, a scholar of nineteenth-century European art, who convened a panel called “The Crisis in Art History” at the 2011 CAA conference. In her opening remarks, Mainardi lamented the preponderance of art history doctoral students (“eight of out every ten”) specializing in contemporary art. “Maybe we should drop the word ‘history’ from ‘art history,’” she proposed, a bit caustically, to a hotel ballroom full of art historians.²⁴

Consider the following anecdote as further evidence of the rise of what might be called “now-ism” within art history. In 2009, I offered a graduate seminar at the University of Southern California that sought (much as this book does) to historicize the idea of contemporary art. At the first meeting of the course, I was taken aback when a Ph.D. student expressed the hope that we would not have to endure “that long slog through the ‘90s” before arriving at the current decade of art and criticism. Prior to that semester, I had rarely taught a seminar that reached the 1990s, much less “slogged through” them to arrive at the millennium on the other side.

The students in the class understood the designation “contemporary” differently than I had expected. Rather than referring to art since 1945, art since 1960, or even art since 1970, “contemporary” meant to them the work of artists exhibiting today and in the immediate past. Banksy, Mathew Barney, Sophie Calle, Patty Chang, Sam Durant, Nikki S. Lee, Glenn Ligon, and Catherine Opie were some of the artists on whom students in the seminar had already written or declared their intention of doing so in upcoming projects. In one or two cases, the students were nearly the same age as the artists they wished to study. The history they proposed to chart neatly coincided with the time of their own lives.

In response to this emphasis on the present, I posed to the students a series of questions at once straightforward and admittedly aggressive: “Why are you studying art history if what you really want to do is write about the contemporary moment?” “Where are the archives for your research on contemporary art—in the files of a commercial gallery, in a drawer in the artist’s studio, in a theoretical paradigm, in a series of interviews that you intend to conduct with the artist, or in the testimony of the works of art themselves?” “What, if anything, distinguishes your practice as a historian of contemporary art from that of an art critic?” And, finally, “How does the history of art matter to the works you plan to write about and to the scholarly contribution you hope to make?”

One student (not the ‘90s “slogger”) effectively redirected these questions to me. During her admissions interview the previous year, she recalled, faculty had emphasized the close association the doctoral program in art history enjoyed with contemporary art museums, curators, and artists as well as its location in an international center of early twenty-first-century art (namely, Los Angeles). Since “the contemporary” had been used as a device to attract graduate students to the program, she reasoned, perhaps it was the

professor (rather than those very students) who should define and defend the relation between contemporary art and art history.

She was right. If graduate students and emerging scholars now take contemporary art for granted as an area of specialization, it is because the discipline of art history invites them to do so. When I started graduate school in 1988, no such invitation was forthcoming. It was understood that “modernists,” like everyone else in the program (“medievalists,” “classicists,” “early modernists,” “Americanists,” “Asianists”), worked on historical artists, issues, and objects.²⁵ It might have been conceivable for a modernist to study the early work of a living artist who had reached a certain, golden age. In that case, however, the work at issue would have been old enough for sufficient “historical distance” (say, about forty years) to have been achieved.

None of these ground rules were spoken aloud, nor did they need to be. At the time, there were no professional societies for historians of contemporary art, nor were there tenure-track jobs in the field to which one might aspire. Had someone proposed the practice of something called “contemporary art history,” I could only have understood it as an oxymoron. Somewhere along the line, sometime in the (long) 1990s, things changed. The discipline of art history embraced the work of living artists. This book is an attempt to reckon with that shift. But it is also an effort to grapple with the broader dialogue between contemporary art and the historical past. It does so by investing in the power of particular pictures, people, and institutional episodes to illuminate larger patterns of art and culture. By looking in detail at selected art-historical episodes, *What Was Contemporary Art?* ignores others that might have been equally illuminating. Rather than a definitive survey, the book is presented as a modest proposal for putting the “history” back into contemporary art history.

When Is Contemporary Art?

In the last few years, several scholars and critics have situated “the contemporary” as a distinct period in the development of art and culture. According to the art historian Alexander Alberro, for example, “the contemporary” may now be traced to specific sources and a date of origin:

The years following 1989 have seen the emergence of a new historical period. Not only has there been the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the heralding of the era of globalization, but technologically there has been the full integration of electronic or digital culture, and economically, neoliberalism, with its goal to bring all human action into the domain of the market, has become hegemonic. Within the context of the fine arts, the new period has come to be known as “the contemporary.”²⁶

For Alberro, this “new period” has displaced previous paradigms of twentieth-century art, particularly the concepts of modernism and the avant-garde:

New forms of art and spectatorship have crystallized in the past two decades. These new forms have come to be discursively constructed as “the contemporary.” There is no question that they owe a great deal to their modernist forbearers, and that there is much that carries over into the present. However, since the late 1980s these new modes have outstripped their debt to the past, and the hegemony of the contemporary now must be recognized.²⁷

In a formulation that mirrors Alberro’s, the editors of the January 2010 issue of *e-flux* journal write that the term “contemporary” “has clearly replaced the use of ‘modern’ to describe the art of the day. With this shift, out go the grand narratives and ideals of modernism, replaced by a default, soft consensus

on the immanence of the present, the empiricism of now, of what we have directly in front of us, and what they have in front of them over there."²⁸ A few pages later in the same issue, the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina argues that "above all, 'contemporary' is the term that stands to mark the death of 'modern.'"²⁹

In his 2009 book *What Is Contemporary Art?*, the art historian Terry Smith frames the demise of modern art and the concomitant ascent of the contemporary as a global phenomenon of the late 1980s: "We are starting to see that in the years around 1989, shifts from modern to contemporary art occurred in every cultural milieu throughout the world, and did so distinctively in each."³⁰ And again: "In the visual arts, the big story, now so blindingly obvious, is the shift—nascent during the 1950s, emergent in the 1960s, contested during the 1970s, but unmistakable since the 1980s—from modern to contemporary art."³¹ Like Alberro, Smith situates contemporary art within a post-1980s period marked by globalization, digital media, hegemonic capitalism, and spectacular culture.³²

This book pursues a different tack. Rather than focusing on the past two decades, it takes a longer view of the history of the new. It does not nominate the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rise of the Internet, or the effects of globalization as the origin of "the contemporary." Instead of positioning contemporary art as a stylistic movement or chronological period that comes after the modern, this book returns to earlier moments in the twentieth century when the work of living artists was at issue.³³

In doing so, it draws on the semantic fact that "contemporary" has not always signified a quality of being up-to-date, current, or extremely recent. Indeed, the first definition of the word given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*—"Belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time"³⁴—conveys coexistence rather than newness. According to

the entry, the variant "co-temporary" was in usage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and "became so popular c. 1725 as to almost expel 'contemporary' from use." Although the preference for "co-temporary" faded relatively quickly, this antiquated synonym is a useful reminder that contemporary is, at its core, a relational condition.³⁵ It takes two, in other words, to be contemporary.

As the art historian Tom McDonough puts it, the original definition of contemporary "might naturally lead us to ask in the case of art: contemporary with what?"³⁶ By asking "contemporary with what?" we are forced to look beyond the individual artist or masterwork to a broader field of artistic and cultural production. Once we do so, our conception of "contemporary" can no longer be reserved exclusively for those artists whose work is most highly valued by the market, the museum, or the academic discipline of art history. Those artists are "contemporary" to many others who have not been granted—and, in some cases, have not sought—recognition in the pages of art magazines, the halls of biennials or international art fairs, the portfolios of blue-chip galleries, or the PowerPoint presentations of art historians.

This book does not argue that contemporary art is over or that we have arrived at a "post-contemporary" moment of cultural production. But it does retrieve selected episodes in the history of once-current art so as to reclaim the "contemporary" as a condition of being alive to and alongside other moments, artists, and objects. Consider in this context the title of a book published in 1907. Randall Davies's *English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art* focuses on art that portrays British "Society" in the 1700s, not on art contemporary to Davies's own moment of writing or on works that conveyed any particularly modern quality or spirit of innovation. "Society" for Davies meant the elite of the British aristocracy as represented, for example, by a mezzotint after a painted portrait of Mary Somerset, Duchess of

Ormonde, a watercolor drawing of Queen Charlotte and the Princess Royal, or a cut-paper silhouette of a patrician family in their drawing room. For Davies and his contemporaries in 1907, "modern" was a property of work that was original, progressive, and forward-looking, of art that was not so much of its time as ahead of it. "Contemporary," by contrast, described a neutral condition of temporal coexistence between two or more entities. While a portrait of the Duchess of Ormonde attended by an African child-servant was contemporary to eighteenth-century British society, few in 1907 would have called it modern in the sense of being progressive or forward-looking.³⁷

Even here, however, the matter of what constitutes contemporary art does not necessarily remain straightforward. The temporal existence of an artwork is not bound by its moment of production or by the life (or death) of its creator. As the Renaissance art historians Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood write,

No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural. The artwork is made or designed by an individual or a group of individuals at some moment, but it also points away from that moment, backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artifact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity. At the same time it points forward to all its future recipients who will activate and reactivate it as a meaningful event. The work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting.³⁸

As it persists over time, the artwork may become newly relevant to later works and social-historical contexts. Contrasting the study of art history to that of literature, music, and dance, Thomas Crow has observed that the "unique, physically sensible pattern"³⁹ of the work of art links the time of its making to that



QUEEN CHARLOTTE WITH THE PRINCESS ROYAL, AND THE DUCHESS OF ANCASTER.
*From a Water-colour Drawing by Francis Cotes, R.A.
British Museum.*

1.5 Title page, Randall Davies, *English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art* (London: Seeley and Co., 1907).

ENGLISH SOCIETY

OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
IN CONTEMPORARY ART

BY

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1.6 *The Duchess of Ormonde*, mezzotint after a painting, reprinted in Davies, *English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art*.

of our viewing in a peculiarly vivid manner. For Crow, art is distinguished by its status as an expressive object “from the past that arrives in our midst like a traveler through time.”⁴⁰ Building on this line of argument, I propose that the category of contemporary art might include not only newly produced works by living artists but also those time travelers that arrive “in our midst” from earlier moments and historical contexts.

Those time travelers sometimes disrupt the distinction between contemporary and historical art by rendering the past newly present. A specific example might be useful here. The eighteenth-century silhouette by Thonard (published by Davies in 1907) cannot help but look contemporary (to the writer of this book in 2012) because of my prior knowledge of the work of the living American artist Kara Walker. In pieces such as *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, yet We Pressed On)* (2000), Walker draws upon a history of cut-paper silhouettes extending back to the late seventeenth century even as she introduces bodies, gestures, and terrors never before visible in that history.

For all the fierceness of Walker's reckoning with the historical past, her art can do nothing to change the social conditions and inequities that shaped eighteenth-century Society, whether British or American, lowercase or capital s. But Walker can change our retrospective view of those conditions, such that, for example, the “delightful”⁴¹ drawing-room formality of the eighteenth-century scene comes to seem rigid and compulsory, a world of enforced protocols and exacting regulations to which each figure, even the family dog, must submit. Seen “through” Walker's *Insurrection!*, Thonard's rendering of aristocratic privilege begins to unravel. It is as though Walker's insurgent figures may breach the boundaries of Thonard's sedate Society, as though the black-and-blue history of servants and slaves might at any moment overtake the black-and-white patrician family in its drawing room. Walker's art



1.7 "A Family Group," from an eighteenth-century silhouette by Thonard. (Collection Sir George Sitwell, 4th Baronet.) Reprinted in Davies, *English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art*.



1.8 Kara Walker, *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, yet We Pressed On)*, 2000, cut-paper silhouettes and light projections. (Courtesy Guggenheim Museum.)

operates according to a dialectical model of history in which the past is no more settled or secure than the present.

The challenges posed by contemporary art are not unique to the current moment or the immediate past. All works of art were once contemporary to the artist and culture that produced them. Part of the task of the art historian, then, is to retrieve a vivid sense of the world into which an artwork was introduced and so to measure the distance between its contemporary moment and the scholar's own. Our return to the past must acknowledge the impossibility of forging a comprehensive account of the artwork "as it really was" while nevertheless attending to the specificity and heft of history. In its persistence over time, the material life of artworks challenges us to think beyond the punctual limits of now and then. "[All art has been contemporary]" reads Maurizio Nannucci's 2010 neon work in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. To make that glowing text into more than a truism, we need to recognize that all historical art was once current and that all contemporary art will soon be historical. We also need to grapple with how the art of the past informs and reconfigures the contemporary moment.

Making Contemporary Art History

While the emergence of contemporary art history as a field of study may be quite recent, debates over whether such a field should exist are not.⁴² In November 1941, the director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Alfred H. Barr Jr., published an essay in the *College Art Journal* titled "Modern Art Makes History, Too." It pled for more art historians—and especially for more graduate students—to study the art of their own times: "The field of modern art is wide open and crying for scholarly research but how many candidates for Ph.D. or M.F.A. are doing theses in twentieth century art? Or even in late nineteenth century? And if they were would they receive the proudly learned guidance available to them in Medieval or Sumerian archaeology?"⁴³



ALL ART HAS BEEN
CONTEMPORARY®

1.9 Maurizio Nannucci, *All Art Has Been Contemporary*, 1999, fabricated in 2011, Neon, transformer, 216 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches. (Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum purchase with funds donated by members of the 2010–2011 Contemporary Art Visiting Committee.)

In arguing for modern art as a field worthy of scholarly attention, Barr will go on to suggest potential research topics on painting and sculpture but also on film, dance, photography, architecture, and industrial design.⁴⁴ According to Barr, the study of twentieth-century art offered one special advantage over every other arena of art-historical research: the possibility of direct dialogue between artist and scholar. Barr was both excited by this possibility and distressed that it was so rarely exploited at the time:

And what opportunities are being lost! Graduate students can't correspond with John [sic] van Eyck, Masolino or Vasari to clear up scholarly problems but they can air-mail Maillol or Siqueiros and write or phone for an appointment with Wright, André Breton, Stieglitz, John Sloan, Balanchine, or D. W. Griffith. (It is already too late to ask art historical questions of Klee or Vuillard, two of the best painters of our time—they died within the year.)⁴⁵

The study of modern art necessarily involved firsthand contact with artists, a category Barr understood capaciously to include painters, sculptors, architects, photographers, choreographers, and filmmakers. Whether most graduate students in 1941 could really have phoned up Frank Lloyd Wright or George Balanchine or D. W. Griffith for an appointment is another matter. Art-historical method demanded that they do so. Or, rather, it would have demanded so had graduate students been permitted to write dissertations on living artists at the time.

The mention of Wright in "Modern Art Makes History, Too" was particularly charged given that Barr had just endured a bitter professional battle with the architect over an exhibition devoted to Wright's work that MoMA opened in 1940.⁴⁶ Far from clearing up "scholarly questions" in a straightforward manner, the essays prepared for the MoMA catalogue were seen

by Wright as nothing short of a “conspiracy” to distort his achievement and undermine his career. The dispute escalated to the point that, at Wright’s insistence, the publication of the catalogue was canceled. In the end, the exhibition was mounted almost entirely by the architect and his students rather than by MoMA’s curatorial staff.⁴⁷ Both the museum’s invitation and a sign posted by the show’s entrance specified that the exhibition was “arranged by the architect himself.”

A negative review in *Parnassus* magazine described the exhibition as “a bewildering mélange of blue-prints, architectural renderings, scaled models, materials, and photographs” for which “surprisingly enough there is no catalogue.”⁴⁸ Barr, still furious with Wright about the situation, responded with a letter to the editor that spelled out the museum’s conflict with the architect in no uncertain terms:

I would like to make clear . . . that Mr. Wright . . . was not interested in the plan proposed by our curator—a plan which involved a lucid chronological exposition of Wright’s development, particularly as regards his handling of space. For six months, the Department of Architecture had been planning and working upon a catalog which would have comprised a great deal of factual and critical material, including essays by a half-dozen of the foremost architects and architectural historians in this country. Mr. Wright refused to permit the publication of the catalog as planned, although it had been intended as a tribute to him. It was then too late to prepare a new publication. At the beginning of one of our conversations here at the Museum, Mr. Wright announced, “I am a very difficult man.” We agree, but we still believe him to be the greatest living architect.⁴⁹

According to Barr, the exhibition planned by the museum would have offered a “lucid chronological exposition of Wright’s development.” But Wright

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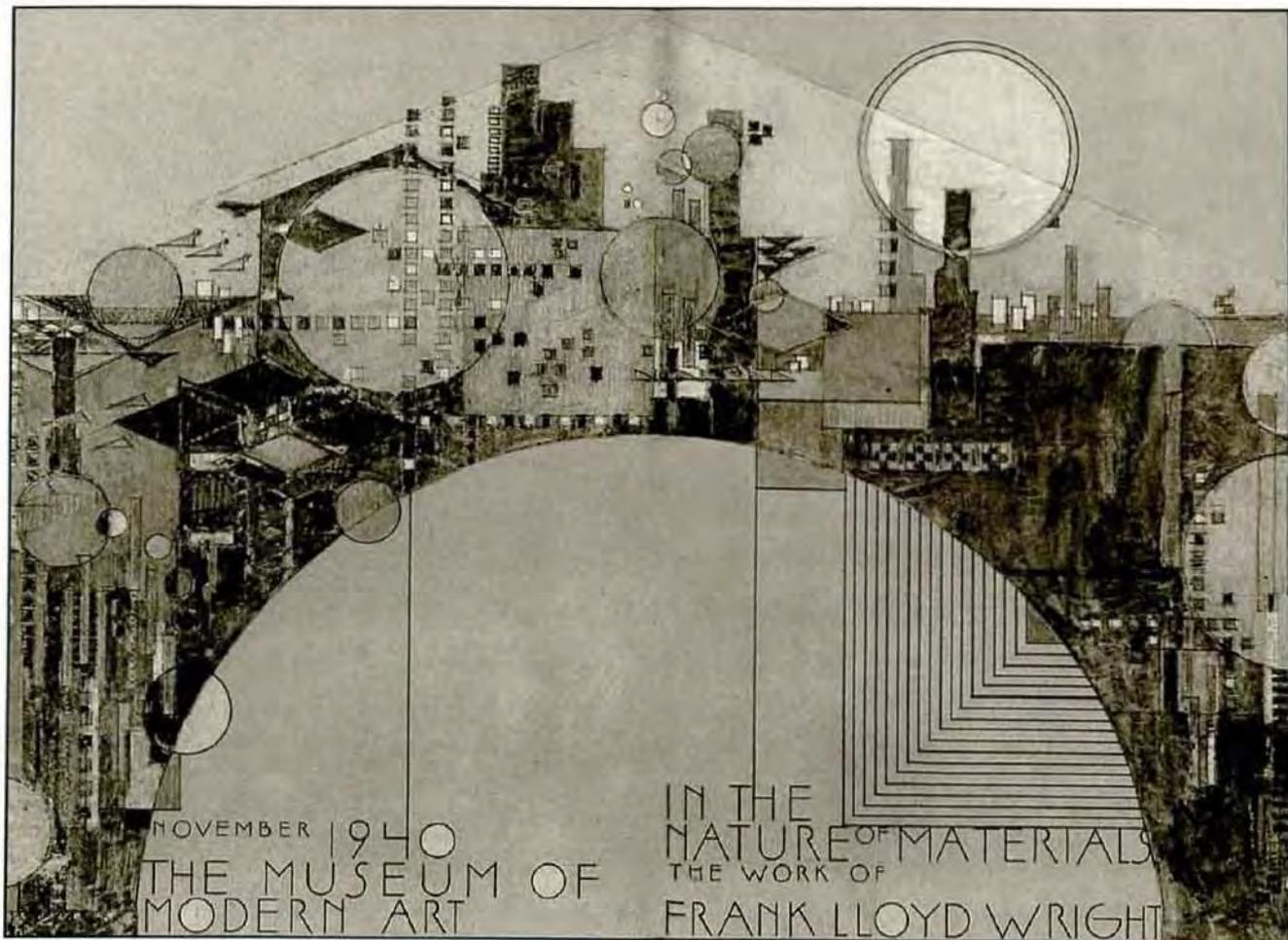
**THE PRESIDENT AND TRUSTEES OF
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART INVITE YOU TO ATTEND
THE PRIVATE OPENING OF A COMPREHENSIVE EXHIBITION
OF THE WORK OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, ARRANGED BY
THE ARCHITECT HIMSELF, ON TUESDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER
TWELFTH, 1940, FROM EIGHT-THIRTY TO ELEVEN O'CLOCK
AT 11 WEST FIFTY-THIRD STREET, NEW YORK CITY.
THIS INVITATION IS NOT TRANSFERABLE AND WILL ADMIT TWO PERSONS**

1.10 Invitation to the exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright, American Architect*. Exhibition Pamphlet Files, # 114. (Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.) Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

was not just a leading figure in the history of modern architecture; he was also a living force to be reckoned with. Drawing on his considerable resources at the time, Wright refused to be contained or confined by the museum's "lucid chronological exposition." He would not submit docilely to the terms of his own historicization.

While still on good terms with the museum, Wright drafted a marvelously intricate cover design for the catalogue of the upcoming MoMA exhibition. Dissatisfied with the show's title ("Frank Lloyd Wright: American Architect"), he took the liberty of renaming it "In the Nature of Materials: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright." Within a few months of submitting the cover design, Wright saw to it that the catalogue was never published. His ill-fated design recalls the discord between the "greatest living architect" and the museum that sought to pay tribute to him. More broadly, the cover illustration suggests the ongoing challenge (and potential hazards) of making contemporary art into history. In "Modern Art Makes History, Too," Barr does not mention the possibility that the artist may prove "a very difficult man" (or woman) or that the professional relationship between artist and scholar may unravel into misunderstanding, mutual resentment, or misrecognition. The unhappy encounter between Wright and the museum suggests the potential for conflict of interest that arises when artists (or, as in more recent instances, dealers, collectors, or museum trustees) intervene in a curatorial process from which they stand to benefit directly.⁵⁰

In "Modern Art Makes History, Too," Barr bemoaned the fact that "the average teacher of art history" has not "really studied the art of the recent past . . . he loves it little and regards it with suspicion as too ephemeral or too new, too untested by time, or too trivial or eccentric to be worth the serious study of graduate students, let alone undergraduates who he feels should concern themselves with the classics, the values of which seem dependably



1.11 Frank Lloyd Wright, cover design for the publication planned to accompany the exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright, American Architect*, The Museum of Modern Art, November 12, 1940–January 5, 1941. © 2012 Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, AZ/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY.

permanent."⁵¹ But, as Barr goes on to suggest, the values of the past are remade and reframed by the concerns of the present. The past is not so permanent after all.

In agitating for more students to study the art of their own time, Barr was arguing against the orthodox view that only historical artifacts were worthy of scholarly attention. Today, we face something of the opposite problem from that diagnosed by Barr sixty years ago. Rather than dismissing the art of our own moment as invalid or untested, art historians shower it with ever more scholarly and critical attention through academic conferences, magazine reviews, exhibition essays, blog postings, dissertations, and university press books. We may, in other words, have developed too much love for the new and now, while retaining too little for the old and then. By retrieving fragments of the art-historical past, this book means to temper the demands made by our own contemporary moment, including the demand to be always already "up-to-date."

Scholars of contemporary art frequently seek to interview, correspond with, or otherwise interact with the artists about whom they are writing. The twenty-first-century equivalent of airmailing Maillol might be emailing say, Mathew Barney or, more likely, contacting his gallery in the hopes of setting up an appointment to interview the artist. The protocols and limits of such negotiations have rarely been addressed in the literature on contemporary art. The unpredictability of contemporary art history as a field of study flows in part from the unpredictability of living artists and their responses to the scholars who seek to write about them.⁵²

"To grasp reality," the art historian Erwin Panofsky wrote, "we have to detach ourselves from the present."⁵³ Yet, when scholars are contemporary with the artist on whom we write, we cannot detach ourselves entirely from the present. To share the same moment as the artists we study opens the

possibility of a knowledge based on proximity and direct contact rather than posterity and critical distance. But it also courts the risk of rendering the art historian a glorified publicist or ventriloquist for the artist. We need to speak plainly, then, about both the privileges and challenges that follow from being “contemporary with” the artists on whom we focus.

Episodes from the Past

Each of the book’s chapters opens with a specific episode in the display, criticism, or study of (then) current art: an undergraduate course at Wellesley College in 1927, an exhibition of newly rendered facsimiles of cave paintings at MoMA in 1937, an institutional dispute over the word “contemporary” in 1948. In each case, I try to reconstruct both the logic and the vividness of these episodes when they were contemporary, when they were “now.” The years appended to the chapter titles serve both as punctual markers of the past and as departure points for the open-ended narratives that follow.⁵⁴

What we now call contemporary art history might be said to begin with the introduction of works by living artists into the art-historical curriculum. Chapter 2 focuses on a key moment within that introduction: Barr’s undergraduate course on modern art at Wellesley College in 1927. From avant-garde painting in Europe to industrial architecture and automobiles in the United States, from Russian stage designs to German expressionist cinema, the course took the art and culture of its own moment as both subject matter and inspiration. The chapter examines the iconoclastic pedagogy and experimental sense of modernity that shaped Barr’s unprecedented class on contemporary art.

Chapter 3 charts a highly selective path through the curatorial program of MoMA under Barr’s directorship (1929–1943). It looks in particular detail at the ways in which several exhibitions of premodern art—*Persian Fresco Painting* (1932), *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* (1937), and *Italian*

Masters (1940)—were positioned in relation to early twentieth-century art at the time. Far from staying put in the distant past, premodern art kept resurfacing in the exhibition program of the young museum—and it did so not in opposition to contemporary culture but in dialogue with it.

Chapter 4 considers the surprisingly bitter controversy sparked by the decision of the Institute of Modern Art in Boston to change its name to the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in 1948. The change was necessary, according to the institute, because the idea of modern art had collapsed into a narrow version of European modernism. In a public statement announcing its new name, the ICA declared that modern art had become “a cult of bewilderment” that “rested on the hazardous foundations of obscurity and negation, and utilized a private, often secret, language which required the aid of an interpreter.”⁵⁵ Drawing on the archival files of the ICA and contemporaneous news coverage of the controversy, this chapter reconstructs the symbolic and political stakes of the modern/contemporary divide at midcentury.

The figure of Alfred Barr looms large in what follows, larger, in fact, than I originally anticipated or intended. Before working on this book, I subscribed to the prevailing view of Barr (and the museum he directed) as narrowly formalist and concerned primarily with elite forms of cultural production.⁵⁶ The figure I encountered in the pages of Barr’s own letters, diaries, and writings—as well as, to varying degrees, in the scholarly accounts of Sybil Kantor, Rona Roob, and Kirk Varnedoe—was a different man altogether.⁵⁷ Here was an art history professor who taught his students how to look not only at painting, sculpture, and architecture but also at photography, typography, film, theater, and the design of goods for sale at the local five-and-dime. Here was a museum director who engaged fully with contemporary—or what he often described as “living”—art while insisting on its rootedness in the historical past. In returning to Barr’s teaching, writing, and curatorial practice of the

1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, we may glimpse contemporary art history in the making.

Pictures from the Past

While each chapter returns to a particular time and place, none stays put there. Individual moments of art, criticism, and exhibition open onto other artworks, institutional contexts, and interpretive concerns. Rather than attempting a comprehensive history of works that answer the question, "What was contemporary art?" I have assembled a dossier of selected episodes in that history. As the dossier unfolds, its contents reposition and cross-reference one another.

What Was Contemporary Art? follows from the premise that artworks have the ability to, as Nagel and Wood put it, "generate the effect of a doubling or bending of time."⁵⁸ The work of art inhabits different temporalities and contexts, including, but not limited to, its latest moment of reception. As it endures over time, the artwork may act simultaneously as an emissary from the past and an interlocutor in the present, a historical relic and an object of contemporary visual interest.

The works of art discussed in this book are variously European, African, Asian, and North American. My account of their exhibition and critical reception, however, unfolds almost exclusively within the United States. *What Was Contemporary Art?* might therefore be said to propose an alternative definition of "Americanist" art history. Rather than focusing solely on the work of artists born or living in the United States, the book analyzes the idea of contemporary art within American culture during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The images in *What Was Contemporary Art?* are its central objects of investigation and occasionally (via the use of pictorial juxtaposition or surprise)

its method of argument. Whenever feasible, images have been reproduced in color and generously sized. To borrow a distinction made by Thomas Crow, this book attempts “to speak to the visual as well as of it.”⁵⁹ Rather than simply illustrating points already made in the text, the pictures reactivate moments in the history of once contemporary art.

In addition to works of fine art, a range of visual materials makes an appearance in the chapters that follow, including exhibition announcements, installation photographs, illustrated books, posters, magazine covers, and museum brochures. The analysis of such materials often benefits from the practices of close analysis and sustained formal description traditionally reserved for works of fine art. To look with a certain intensity at, say, an ad in *Vanity Fair* magazine featuring a Picasso portrait, a flyer from an artists’ protest against MoMA, or a color facsimile of a Matisse painting is not to argue for the aesthetic value of that object or to elevate it to the status of high art. It is, however, to acknowledge that the history of contemporary art extends well beyond the frame of original works.

In each chapter, images are called upon to conjure a sense of the art-historical past and to transport us, however fleetingly, out of the here and now of our current moment. The works reproduced in this book challenge any neat periodization of contemporary art. They were made some time ago but will, in many cases, be so obscure as to qualify as new for many readers. These pictures were contemporary to their own moment. Now, they may be to ours as well.