

# WHAT WAS CONTEMPORARY ART?

OCTAVIAN ESANU

## 1

*Preamble.* Over the past decade critics within various disciplines have increasingly drawn attention to the category of the “contemporary.” This interest is notable particularly within the art world as various institutions, periodicals, critics, and art historians have boldly posed the question, “What is contemporary art?”<sup>1</sup> The question is tricky, for those who pose it do not merely ask what kind of art is being made today. In fact the term “contemporary art” has accumulated multiple meanings, becoming a catchall phrase that, depending on the context in which it is used, may refer to many different things: a certain kind of art-making, a particular aesthetic sensibility, an art historical period, a way of exhibiting, a particular department within a museum of art, or even certain habits, tastes, and prices in the higher echelons of the art market. Within art critical circles an interest in the contemporary seems to have overlapped with a fading of interest in the “postmodern,” a category that dominated critical debate over previous decades. This fading away, along with a gradual substitution of umbrella terms often deployed to perform tasks of periodization, may suggest a certain re-adjustment of the art critical apparatus.

1 I refer here to the title of Terry Smith's book *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), as well as to two special issues of *e-flux journal* dedicated to the same question. See *e-flux journal* vols. 11 and 12 at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal>.

Unlike the postmodern debate, however, which was thoroughly theorized by architectural, literary, and cultural critics and theorists in its period of ascendancy, recent discussions of contemporary art are still at an early stage. If the postmodern was understood as a cultural “mode” (rather than an “epoch”) that came to announce the end of the grand narratives after the demise of modernism (Lyotard), or as a periodizing concept employed by critics to express the cultural logic of late capitalist production (Jameson), little has been said in comparison about the contemporary. Is contemporaneity a new form of temporality, and the contemporary a new periodization concept? Is “contemporary art” a strictly chronological term, or also an aesthetic one, or both? Does it refer to another temporal frame of cultural history or to a new paradigm or mode of art-making? What should we make of the relation between the postmodern and the contemporary, and how do these two relate to the category of the modern?

It seems to me that the contemporary differs from the postmodern in one noteworthy respect: it possesses a certain materiality or concreteness that the postmodern never had. What I mean by this is that even at the height of the period of postmodernism there were no institutions officially called “for postmodernist art.” I have never seen any art museums or art centers that have their façades inscribed in capital letters with the words “Museum of (or Center for) Postmodern Art.” Nor have I heard of art marketing departments specifically devoted to “postmodern sales.” Aside from architects, who have used the term to refer to certain stylistic characteristics within their discipline, practitioners of literary criticism and cultural studies have used it abstractly in order to grasp the cultural logic of postwar capitalism.

In the case of the contemporary, on the other hand, there are “really existing” practices and institutions such as museums, art centers, journals, academic courses, documentation programs, job positions, market niches, and so forth. Unlike the postmodern, which appeared more as an immaterial mode or an abstract logic introduced and theorized by critics from within the walls of academia, the phenomenon of contemporary art seems to extend and exist concomitantly across and within diverse parts of the real art world, academia, the culture industry, finance, services, and businesses. This concreteness is suggestive of the very origins of these two terms—“postmodern” and “contemporary”—for if the category of the postmodern has primarily circulated among literary and cultural critics, artists, and architects,

the designation “contemporary art” as we use it today has been persistently used, in the second half of the last century and beyond, by art managers to name new types of art institutions and museum departments, or to delineate a new segment of art sales within major auction houses. At times, it even seems that the term “contemporary art” has entered critical and art historical academic discourse through the back door of certain institutions engaged in distribution of or even speculation with art.<sup>2</sup>

I do not intend to further pursue a clarification of the differences between periodization labels, crucial though they may be especially today, when one senses in the air a “paradigm shift” toward yet another label: global art.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I would like to delve deeper into the contemporary itself, which like the postmodern tends to be very forgetful. The loss of a sense of history or of historicity, a loss that Fredric Jameson has identified as one of the most distinctive features of the postmodern,<sup>4</sup> also seems to haunt the contemporary. Today special issues and books dedicated to questioning the nature of contemporary art tend to remain on the surface of the ever-present contemporary, as if they were themselves entangled in the ahistorical logic that they try to unravel. I would like to offer a more historically informed view of what has been understood by the phrase “contemporary art” in a region of the world where that phrase emerged most suddenly and unexpectedly. By looking closely at a series of meanings invested in this term and by comparing contemporary and pre- or noncontemporary artistic comportments, I would like to suggest that contemporary art (as these two words are used today) refers to specific conditions of artistic production that have flourished under the latest phase of global capitalism, a phase known in some areas as neoliberalism, in others as neoconservatism, corporatism, free market ideology, or laissez-faire economics. Contemporary art—insofar as it denotes a segment of artistic production maintained by a global network of art institutions, a segment that has persistently claimed and won hegemony over other, “undemocratic” forms—consolidated itself in the second half of the last century against the

2 Some of the literature relates the origin of the periodizing label “contemporary art” to the new marketing strategies of the two major British auction houses introduced in the second half of the last century. See for instance Elisabeth Couturier, *L'art contemporain, mode d'emploi* (Paris: Filipacchi, 2004), 22.

3 See for instance Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje/Cantz, 2009).

4 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

background of receding welfare and socialist states, leaving certain traces and shadows that await exploration.

## 2

*Contemporary art, the product of postsocialist transition.* An especially fertile place to begin a historically informed discussion of contemporary art may be found at the margins of the Western world—in the postsocialist countries of what was once called Eastern Europe. It is in this region that the “concreteness” of the contemporary—which, in more general terms, may be understood as a habitualization or institutionalization of certain types of artistic behavior—has manifested itself most clearly. To be sure, the process of contemporary artistic institutionalization also has a rich history in the Western world, except that there its development proceeded at its own pace (like Western historical modernization in general), entangled in the rise of postwar consumer society. What is radically different about the emergence of contemporary art in the postsocialist countries is that here new and unfamiliar forms of artistic behavior were hastily transfused into, or grafted onto, existing cultural scenes. This abrupt institutional transference makes what goes by the name of contemporary art in this region more susceptible to critical perception.

This process took place during the so-called decade of transition, a period in which foreign and local governmental and private initiatives began to assemble new types of institution in every sphere of social life. Under the slogan “transition to democracy,” a large-scale process of institution building was unleashed. It was widely believed during this time that the imitation and implementation of already-tested Western institutional models was the most effective method of changing the behaviors of former socialist citizens, in accordance with the logic of the new political-economic regime. This approach to modernization has been dubbed “capitalism by design.”<sup>5</sup>

Similar processes of democratization by design took place in the field of art. Here, radically new types of art institution, financed from abroad, sustained and promoted “open” or “democratic” forms of artistic production, display, and distribution. In this endeavor the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) network has been the

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5 On “capitalism by design,” see Claus Offe, “Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe,” in *German Sociology*, ed. Uta Gerhardt (New York: Continuum, 1998).

most effective, and it would later be credited with laying the foundation of what is today presented as contemporary art in this region. The network was implemented throughout the 1990s in eighteen postsocialist countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia,<sup>6</sup> and in what follows I will consider what appears to me to be of critical significance with regard to this network's mission and subsequently to the question of what contemporary art is.

### 3

*The mission of a contemporary art institution.* Although many believed (and some still do) that the main goal of the Soros centers was artistic charity—that is, providing support for artists in the difficult time of transition—this was not entirely the case. First of all, one must make a clear distinction between charity and philanthropy, and the easiest way to do so is to turn to a proverb that became the motto of many private and governmental institutions operating at the margins of the Western world: “Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.” The work of the SCCA program, like that of the Open Society Institute and of many other foundations operating in the postsocialist countries, has been philanthropic, for each center was above all a resource that taught artists “how to fish” in the new sociopolitical and economic waters.

The mission of the SCCA program was inspired by new trends in cultural policy that were taking shape during the second half of the last century in the West, in particular in the United States. At the heart of their activities were a series of changes that followed the so-called managerial revolution in the arts.<sup>7</sup> The main outcome of this revolution was the eclipse of the individual patron and the rise of nonprofit institutional forms of cultural sponsorship, a shift in cultural policy that led to the decline of the figure of the art patron, of the so-called friend of the muses or rich benefactor who has accompanied the artist through various periods of art history. In the United States, the Ford

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6 Western readers often confuse the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) with the Soros Foundations (or Open Society Foundations). The SCCA or the “Soros centers” were autonomous regional programs within the local Soros Foundations. For a concise history of the SCCA network, see the website of C3 in Budapest, <http://www.c3.hu/scca/>.

7 On the managerial revolution in the arts, see Paul DiMaggio, “Social Structure, Institutions and Cultural Goods: The Case of the United States,” in *The Politics of Culture: Policy Perspectives for Individuals, Institutions, and Communities*, ed. Gigi Bradford et al. (New York: New Press, 2000).

Foundation was the first private institution to promote such a radically new model for cultural philanthropy, introducing for example the notion of the arts grant. This was no longer regarded as an expression of personal charity, as a gift offered by a wealthy individual to an artist out of love for art, but as a highly leveraged investment.<sup>8</sup> While the supporters of the cultural managerial revolution regarded the new policies as a path toward wider cultural engagement, a more democratic and decentralized form of culture that would offer a voice to multiple identities, players, and interest groups by inviting them to participate in and make culture, critics regarded the turn toward active philanthropy as an intrusion of private capital into the field of culture, as an attempt to subdue and control erratic artistic tendencies and to establish instead a form of “coercive philanthropy,” that is, a form of cultural support in which artists, in order to survive, must respond “artistically” to specific programs and projects written by cultural managers.<sup>9</sup>

In Eastern Europe, dissatisfaction with the new forms of cultural management came later than in the West, coinciding with the so-called social turn at the turn of the millennium. At the time that the Open Society Institute implemented its SCCA program, the centers were regarded as progressive Western models brought in to contribute to the democratization of art. The philanthropic activism of the SCCA aimed at the very roots of a series of questions concerning what the role of the arts and of the artist in the new posttotalitarian society might be, how one should perceive the artist’s relation to the autonomous institution of art, and who will see to the artist’s economic interests.

#### 4

*Two institutional models.* In the early 1990s, Eastern European art critics commented on the coexistence of two dissimilar art institutional models, describing one using terms such as “fine arts” and “elitist” and the other as “contemporary” and “democratic.”<sup>10</sup> From an early stage in the SCCA program’s implementation many centers found themselves

8 On pre- and post-Fordist eras of cultural funding, see John Kreidler, “Leverage Lost: Evolution in the Nonprofit Arts Ecosystem,” in Bradford et al., *Politics of Culture*.

9 See Robert Brustein, “Coercive Philanthropy,” in Bradford et al., *Politics of Culture*. See also Andrea Frazer, “A Museum Is Not a Business: It Is Run in a Businesslike Fashion,” in *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*, ed. Nina Möntmann (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006).

10 I encountered this view in a text written by the Romanian art critic Anca Oroveanu, “Cele doua modele,” *Arta* 1–2 (1993): 1–4.

in opposition to the local Unions of Artists (the professional associations of artists akin to the socialist trade unions)—an opposition that was not always, or not necessarily, confrontational but that nevertheless persisted due to contrasting missions and modes of operation. The Union of Artists was an organizational model under Soviet socialism that evolved through multiple institutional formats (cooperatives, trade unions, committees) and whose social tasks were close in scope to those of the SCCA network. However, aside from their common goals of supporting artistic production and the distribution of art, the two differed significantly in how they proposed to achieve these goals.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the Unions, which provided professional support to large numbers of artists based on their membership, the privately funded Soros centers assisted artists without demanding membership or any other form of professional affiliation. While the Unions were (and many still are) ruled by collectively elected committees and chairpersons—with the latter position usually occupied by a painter or sculptor elected by the members on the basis of his or her professional achievements—the SCCA offices were mechanisms run by hired managers recruited among local liberal art historians and critics, following a posted job announcement (or, in the early phases, hired upon recommendations received from the network’s executive director). While a Union’s artist-chairperson ruled in accordance with resolutions taken collectively (*de jure* but not *de facto*) at all-Union congresses, the SCCA managers conducted their activities in accordance with decisions approved by a small board of experts (a relationship comparable to some degree to that existing between executive managers and legislative company shareholders in the West). While the exhibitions organized by the Unions were juried by committees of artists, the SCCA annual exhibitions were juried, in most cases, by a board consisting of critics and art historians, and in later phases by commissioned curators. While the Unions oversaw almost all aspects of their artist-members’ lives (from offering exhibition space to distributing, through the Artists’ Funds, state commissions, studios, materials, or even apartments, summer holiday trips, pensions, and subsidized kindergarten facilities for children), the SCCA network operated on a

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11 In those parts of this text where I discuss the differences between the SCCA network and the Artists’ Unions I draw primarily on the situation in the former Soviet Union, with which I am most familiar, as well as on my personal experience as the founding director of the SCCA Chisinau, Moldova.

time-to-time basis, offering only short-term contractually based grants, or renting and subcontracting goods and services through third-party agents, often through a publicly announced tender. While the Unions served only those who were their members (and in order to become one an artist had to have first completed formal training in one of the state's art academies), the SCCA offices were formally open to anyone regardless of education, and artists who collaborated with these institutions did not always hold an arts degree. Finally, the institutional structure of a Union was organized in accordance with the taxonomy of particular arts—the Artists' Unions were divided into such departments or sections as Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Arts, and Decorative Arts, whereas a Composers' Union consisted of such sections as Symphonic, Chamber, and Choral Music. The Soros centers, on the other hand, operated along a cross- or intermedia pattern, with no preferences given to any particular technical agency, remaining open to all artistic formats and media. Even if there did exist a certain internal structure, it was organized not according to art genres that had historically evolved around a particular medium or *métier* but rather according to the partition of their budgets into three main categories of general activity: artists' grants, art documentation, and contemporary art exhibition.<sup>12</sup>

It is not necessary to recall here that the contemporary art model popularized by the SCCA network embraced a different artistic and aesthetic agenda as well. To better understand this difference, a dichotomy that has been widely exploited by the ideologues of postsocialist transition might be useful. Karl Popper's distinction between open (democratic) and closed (totalitarian or authoritarian) societies was adopted by Western private and governmental agencies and deployed to deliver the message of transition. This dichotomy, so favored by neoliberal social scientists and policy makers, may also be well suited to describe the clash between the two aesthetic and artistic principles that divided the postsocialist cultural field during the transitional period. One may describe the contemporary art model, for instance, in terms of an "open art" that was promoted by the Open Society Institute, and define this type of artistic production along the lines of what Umberto Eco calls the "open work" (*opera aperta*).<sup>13</sup> Eco calls "open" that segment

12 For a concise review of the Soviet Artists' Unions, see M. Lazarev, "The Organization of Artists' Work in the USSR," *Leonardo* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 107–9.

13 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).



of art and poetics that builds upon the modernist cultural heritage, and whose artistic and aesthetic properties allow for a wide range of interpretive possibilities and readings thanks to a democratic conception of form that permits various constellations of artistic elements to form multiple relations. A “closed” artwork, then, would be the opposite; it would be an artwork produced in accordance with pre-established hierarchical orders and sets of preconceived principles in which poetic or artistic relations are mediated through one or several central categories, as in premodern art founded upon metaphysical or Christian theological assumptions.

The above differences between opposing artistic models—which I have gathered here under such umbrella terms as “open” versus “closed” or “contemporary” versus “fine arts”—have wide implications for artistic production. Each model encourages a different type of artistic comportment. I will list a few of these differences by drawing upon a relatively little-known book by Thierry de Duve, who has compared two conflicting models of art education: the beaux arts and Bauhaus models.<sup>14</sup>

If the Union of Artists model, which would correspond to de Duve’s “fine arts” model, was based on the assumption that an artist must have *talent* (a natural aptitude with which only a few have been gifted), then within the democratic contemporary art model all artists are equally gifted (think of Joseph Beuys’s slogan *Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*—“everyone is an artist”), for what in this model counts is not the artist’s talent but his or her *attitude*. If in the precontemporary model the artist knew a technique, a craft, or a *métier* (for instance, painting or sculpture taught within the apprenticeship system of workshops), then in the contemporary art model the artist works with various *media* (understood as data or information delivered through a particular channel of communication), and the process of learning may not necessarily be confined within the art school, as was widely believed to be necessary within the context of nineteenth-century artistic academism. If a *métier* is practiced, a medium is questioned; if a profession is taught, a medium is discovered; if a craft relies on technical experience, a medium benefits from constant experimentation; if at the heart of the fine arts model is the notion of *imitation*, one might say that by contrast the contemporary paradigm privileges *invention* (the “concept” or “conceptual acuity” that was favored by so many on the SCCA juries).

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14 Thierry de Duve, *Faire école* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 1992).

From these differences between the SCCA and the Unions—the list above is by no means comprehensive—one may draw some preliminary conclusions regarding the novelty of the model of contemporary art popularized by the SCCA. Politically speaking, we may distinguish between a state-supported mass organization based on a collective decision-making mechanism (even if it was a formal one) and a private office-based model in which artists do not have the formal right to influence the decisions of the managers. (It may be relevant here to mention the Chto delat collective’s insistence—following Jens Hoffmann—that the next *Documenta* be curated by an artist.) Institutionally speaking, we may distinguish between a somewhat anachronistic association organized in accordance with a craft-guild division and with certain historical genres or *métiers* (painting, sculpture, graphic arts) and a contemporary inter- or cross-media model that like a contemporary business enterprise is structured in accordance with broadly defined activities or services, as with the tripartite budgetary division of the SCCA. Professionally speaking, we can distinguish between the Union artists who were provided with full and comprehensive working conditions, though at the price of control and censorship over their artistic product, and the contemporary art model that allows and even encourages artists to “do whatever,” but that provides only “outward preconditions,”<sup>15</sup> and only to a select few in accordance with capitalist criteria of success. Artistically, we can distinguish between the regulated craftsmanship practiced within historically established fine arts genres (these must remain “socialist in form and national in content”) and an “open work” modernist (or postmodernist) attitude that considers the aesthetic problematic of form and content somewhat outdated. The contemporary attitude looks instead for new means and media of individual expression, or aims for a constant construction and invention of artistic affects, percepts, and concepts (as Deleuze would have put it).

Institutionally, the arrival of the SCCA network in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s may bring to mind what happened in Western Europe after the French Revolution, when many craft guilds that had

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15 The expression “outward preconditions” comes from Ludwig von Mises’ best-known book, *Liberalism* (1927). Here he argues that liberals do not concern themselves with spiritual goods because they believe that the “highest and deepest in man cannot be touched by outward regulation.” Accordingly, a liberal position on supporting the arts would be to provide only “outward preconditions to the development of the inner life.” See Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: The Classical Tradition* (1927; repr., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), xx.

successfully operated under the ancien régime were abolished, considered impediments to liberalization and true market relations.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the postsocialist countries, the socialist craft guild–like model of the Unions was discredited and its influence over the field of art drastically reduced, as the new cultural elites considered it too regulated, egalitarian, monopolistic, and anachronistic—in short, an impediment to the development of contemporary capitalistic relations of artistic production. With the arrival of the SCCA network, the Unions lost their legitimating power; they ceased to be the exclusive mechanism for deciding who was or was not an artist.

## 5

*A contemporary artwork is a document.* The differences between contemporary and socialist art institutions are the result of divergent outlooks and approaches. Each model has its own specific agenda and organizational structure. Recall that administratively, an SCCA office differs from a Union in that it does not organize its activities in accordance with the internal logic of what, since the eighteenth century, has been known as beaux arts, which is to say a division into the historically established arts of painting, sculpture, or graphics—often hierarchically subdivided in turn using such terms as “fine” and “applied,” or “high” and “low.” In the spirit of democratic egalitarianism and the free market, the SCCA performed a deregulation of the field and a decentralization of artistic production by abandoning the rigid divisions among arts and media, insisting that in an open and enlightened society all artistic techniques must be treated equally. The contemporary, which implies temporal equality, does not bend down before any authority, be it a long-lasting tradition or history; it refuses to foster or privilege a particular technique, medium, or trend (even though—and let’s keep this between us—most of the SCCA offices implicitly and insistently promoted and favored the newest formats and media, especially those that relied on the latest Western gadgets and technologies, many of which were available for cash or credit in the department store next door). A postsocialist center for contemporary art does not direct its operations in accordance with the immanent logic of beaux arts, that is, in accordance with certain historically evolved *métiers* or crafts that

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16 On the history of craft guilds, see Maarten Praak et al., *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 231.

produce beautiful objects, as was the case with the Unions. Instead, it positioned itself above the entire field of cultural production with its multitude of means and forms of expressions in order to better manage it in accordance with certain general types of activity or project.

Budget-wise, the activities of a typical SCCA were divided along three main lines of spending: art documentation, annual exhibition, and artists' grants. Documentation lies at the origins of the SCCA network, from the moment that a small program by the name of Soros Fine Arts Documentation Center was launched in Budapest in 1985. The primary task of this program—established in cooperation between the newly inaugurated Soros Foundation Hungary and the Budapest Múcsarnok (Kunsthalle) in 1985—was “to support modern Hungarian culture which was banned or at least forced into the background by official cultural policies; in essence support Hungarian artists in ‘counter-cultural’ circles.”<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the roots of the postsocialist centers for contemporary art can be directly traced to the agency of documentation and the task of recording and preserving instances of countercultural modernism (or postmodernism). The historical transition to contemporary art took place in 1991, when the Soros Fine Arts Documentation Center was renamed the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Budapest. This first center can be regarded as the pilot of the SCCA network, whose mission, tripartite budgetary structure, and major activities were established throughout the 1990s in twenty cultural capitals of the former socialist bloc.

The SCCA network described the objectives of its documentation program in the following terms:

In most cases, little or no documented information exists on the artists selected by the SCCA. Therefore, the SCCA prepares a comprehensive account of the selected artist's work, including biographical details, bibliography, copies of relevant articles, published catalogues. . . . The documentation can be utilized by the artists themselves, curators, art historians, and any other visitors.<sup>18</sup>

In the postsocialist countries the SCCA network was the first official institution to document *living* (or recently deceased) artists. The fading

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.c3.hu/scca/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Description of the SCCA network activities (document intended for internal circulation within the offices of the SCCA network).

Unions had also, at one time, catalogued socialist artworks, especially those commemorating socialist heroes and events, but they did not keep systematic records of *current* events and artists. Documenting and cataloguing live events, in the way in which this has been done in the West since the emergence of ephemeral or immaterial art forms, took place only within the local “countercultural circles” of artists and critics who had launched unofficial archives (including the Artpool Research Center in Budapest and the Moscow Archive of New Art [MANI], to name only two).

Within the contemporary art model, documentation plays a key role; in the present case it explains why, for instance, most of the directors, staff, and board members within the SCCA network were art historians and critics (unlike the socialist Unions, which were run primarily by artists). The practice of gathering biographical and bibliographical data, of compiling lists of works, collections, exhibitions, slides, articles (all of which were then translated into English and made available to local and foreign artists, scholars, and collectors or, in some cases, digitized and sent to the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery in Washington),<sup>19</sup> seemed like a very novel activity in the early 1990s. Within the countries of the Soviet bloc, the gathering of specialized documentation had been the prerogative of various research institutions, academies, archives, and libraries, and, most often, these activities were directed at gathering documents on individuals and events from the past. Collecting information on certain living artists and current or contemporary events was performed either by the state security committees (the KGB) or within local dissident circles. With the collapse of the socialist state, the contemporary art institution took over this task and performed it on a professional art historical basis.

But what is art documentation? Art documentation may be regarded as a branch of *documentology*, a field that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century at the crossroads of library, archival, and information sciences. The emergence of this modern discipline has been regarded as another consequence of the Gutenberg revolution and, later, of the typographical explosion that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, prompting many Western countries in the early twentieth century to establish documenting agencies and

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19 Ibid.

institutes.<sup>20</sup> In the postwar period, specialists in this field regarded documentation as a cultural technique and as a tool for the diffusion of Western ideals of modernity within different cultural and geographical spaces.<sup>21</sup> There was also a conviction that documentation was to serve, above all, the humanities, and in this respect it was distinguished from information sciences oriented toward engineering and computing. As the French documentalist Suzanne Briet writes, “[D]ocumentation is to culture as the machine is to industry,”<sup>22</sup> while a document, simply defined, is “a proof in support of a fact,” or more abstractly “any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [*indice*], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon.”<sup>23</sup> The French Union of Documentation Organizations includes in its definition “all bases of materially fixed knowledge . . . capable of being used for consultation, study, and proof.”<sup>24</sup> Generally speaking the document is the trace of something that is not instantly available (for example, a zebra in an African savanna is a natural phenomenon, whereas a zebra in a European zoo is only a document), or it is a trace of something that has *ceased* to exist (for example, an endangered species that today can be seen only at the zoo).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, thinkers who have reflected upon modern practices of documentation often center their reflections around the fundamental concepts of life and death. Of course, most often documents take inorganic or even digital forms, especially with the proliferation of different techniques of representation when “documentary forms are increasingly taking the shape of ‘substitutes for lived experience’—that is, representational forms that assume the illusion of lived experience itself (film, photographs, etc.).”<sup>26</sup> Documentologists who consider the meaning of the document and its relation to reality have largely understood it within the same frame of reasoning that earlier twentieth-century critics such as Walter Benjamin employed to speak of the relationship between the modern artwork and new technologies of mechanical reproduction.<sup>27</sup>

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20 See Suzanne Briet et al., *What Is Documentation?* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

21 Ibid., 58.

22 Ibid., 17.

23 Ibid., 9–10.

24 Ibid., 10.

25 Briet et al. offer as an example of a document an antelope of a new kind caught by an explorer in Africa and brought to the Botanical Garden as proof (or document). Ibid.

26 Ibid., vii.

27 Ronald E. Day, in *ibid.*, vii.

Contemporary art documentation shares with documentology a similar historical background and set of concerns. Art critics have also argued (along the lines of Benjamin's theory of modern art's reproducibility) that art documentation is in fact a substitute for artistic experience. "Art documentation is by definition *not* art; it merely *refers* to art, and in precisely this way it makes it clear that art, in this case, is no longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden."<sup>28</sup> The absent and hidden aspect of art documentation is related to major changes that took place in post-1945 art, to cultural processes that unfolded under the sign of what Lucy Lippard theorized in the 1970s as the *dematerialization* of the art object. More recently, John Roberts used the concept of *intangibility* in order to analyze transformations that took place in the very nature of artistic labor, following the reception of Duchamp's ready-made in the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> (In passing, one can say that from the perspective of documentology Duchamp's infamous urinal itself appears as a document, that is, as an object that has lost its initial function and has become a sign, a trace, or an object of knowledge.) Art documentation begins to occupy a more prominent role especially following the transition from art understood primarily in terms of the production of tangible *objects* (paintings, sculptures, graphics) to intangible or ideatic artistic *experiences* (actions, performances, immaterial conceptualism). Such experiences are always in urgent need of proofs that underwrite their objectivity. Contemporary art criticism resorted to various traditions in order to explain the dramatic transformations that bestowed a new status upon the art document: from reading Hegelian portents of the "death of art" to tracing the effects of changes within the mode of economic production (the managerial revolution); from lamenting the rise of the "totally administered society" to detecting radical changes in the nature of human life made by contemporary biopolitical technologies of governance.<sup>30</sup>

But the rise of art documentation is also closely related to twentieth-century political processes, to the global advance of democracy and the market. Take the history (and the name) of *Documenta*—a, or perhaps *the*, major forum of international contemporary art. Its history is connected to the political processes that unfolded in the aftermath

28 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 60.

29 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).

30 For a biopolitical understanding of art documentation, see Groys, *Art Power*.

of World War II in West Germany, for its early artistic objectives were closely interwoven with the political agenda of the “transition to democracy” that unfolded within the so-called postwar transitional countries (Italy, Austria, Japan, and West Germany). In other words, one of the initial missions of *Documenta* was to “document” the advance of democracy and of the free market, offering cultural proof of West Germany’s break with its authoritarian past.<sup>31</sup>

The early history of SCCA’s documentation program can be regarded in similar terms, for one of its main tasks was to bring into the spotlight “degenerate” artistic experiences that had burgeoned in the shadow of state socialism. Aside from conceiving this program as an alternative space of knowledge—a space established in opposition to the library and the archive—the SCCA documentation program was also co-opted as a tool for the diffusion of Western ideals of modernity, serving the general process of democratization. One of its tasks was to assist in what during the transition was known as the “rewriting of history,” when local historiography strove to lift the ideological screen from distorted national history. A cleansed history was needed for the construction of new postsocialist identities, which would then tend to orbit around national categories.<sup>32</sup> Socialist history was declared “polluted” or “communist propaganda,” and the main task of the historian was the “renovation,” “reconstruction,” and “nationalization” of history.<sup>33</sup> In art the processes that unfolded around the new documentation programs established by the SCCA were similar in many respects within this network, as art historians resorted to documentation in order to bring to light artistic experiences hidden during socialism under the thick ideological cloak of official art history.<sup>34</sup>

The document, however, is not a favored tool only for the art historian and critic. To once again invoke the zebra, one might say that a contemporary piece of art is above all a document, given that

31 On the political mission of the first *Documenta* (1955) and the role it played in the processes of postwar democratization (for instance presenting artists who had been considered “degenerate” during the 1930s), see the first *Documenta* catalogue (Kassel, Germany: Druck Verlag, 1955).

32 See Ulf Brunnbauer, *(Re)Writing History—Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004).

33 Ibid., 21.

34 Many publications in recent decades have fallen within the boundaries of postsocialist art historical rewriting. One good example is the catalogue *Experiment*, produced by the SCCA Bucharest in 1997. See Magda Cârneci, ed., *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960* (Bucharest: SCCA Bucharest, 1997).



today it is difficult to imagine a legitimate artwork in the wilderness of the savanna—that is, outside of the confines of contemporary art institutions. This became apparent in Eastern Europe during the 1990s. Unlike Union artists, who spent most of their time in the studio perfecting skills and producing tangible artifacts, contemporary artists spent most of their time in offices, engaged in poststudio practices such as editing or recording videos, preparing technical drawings of objects that awaited their installation in various institutional settings (like the zebra on its way to the zoo), or negotiating new projects and opportunities with various institutions. In some countries it was within the SCCA offices during the 1990s that one could have witnessed the birth of a new type of artist: the artist-as-entrepreneur.<sup>35</sup> The latter operates within a complex division of labor, manipulating and working—for the most part—with documents.

## 6

*The plan and the project.* The business of art documentation popularized by the SCCA network brings us to another topic: the difference between contemporary and precontemporary artistic mentalities.

Under socialism, for an artist to receive benefits from the bureaucratized professional associations, he or she was expected to become a member of the Union and then to pledge allegiance to its statute and to the socialist plan. The socialist five-year plan was directed toward coordinating human efforts and material resources to attain higher productivity and standards of living. Like the representatives of other professions, artists were not absolved from participating in these formal procedures, a ritual that has since become the object of ridicule and contempt. When the SCCA network entered the Eastern European artistic scene, it introduced a new way of formulating artistic intentionality: the “project.” Each artist who collaborated with these institutions during the 1990s knew that in order to receive a grant for travel or for an exhibition, a catalogue, or any other activity, he or she had to submit a document or a project explaining, in minute detail, the proposed artistic activity, aims and objectives, time frame and budget, idea and realization. The “project” became a prerequisite for an artist to benefit from resources offered by the Soros centers as well as by many other Western cultural donors that operated in the postsocialist region.

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35 For a more detailed discussion of this term, see Roberts, *Intangibilities of Form*, 11–13.

What makes working according to a socialist plan (or ignoring it, as many did) so different from working within the logic of the project? Here is what, for example, Ilya Kabakov says:

The projects that contemporary artists are proposing today radically differ from the indefinite projects of the artists of the past. To the question: “What do you want to paint or to make?” the artist of the past could have calmly answered “I will start and then—I will see,” “And when are you going to finish?”—“Well, this is such a process. . . .” Today every sign of ambiguity in your project announces your defeat.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, what Kabakov above calls the “indefinite projects . . . of the past” are hardly comparable with those projects on which Russian and other Eastern European artists learned the ropes after 1989. In most of the Soviet Union, the Russian word *proyekt* (which entered the Russian language during Peter the Great’s first major pro-Western transition or modernization in the eighteenth century)<sup>37</sup> was used primarily among technical and scientific specialists. Within the Soviet art scene, both official and unofficial, the term “project” was used by architects, but not by artists.

Among all art-related professions, in fact, it is the contemporary architects and urban planners who have drawn the clearest distinctions between the “project” and the “plan” within the limits of their disciplines. The relationship between the two in urbanism, urban policies, and all those activities that involve the rational management of a territory concerns above all a distinction in scale. Planning involves large-scale decisions, a long-sighted gaze, a complex reconciliation of conflicting interests, a maximizing of compatibilities, and a need to account for an immense number of details and persons. A plan (as the terms “master plan” and “five-year plan” suggest) is a proposal that involves large-scale totalizing decisions made over great spans of time and space; it is a macro proposal that attempts to account for multiple variables and details. It is above all the scale of the future intention that

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36 Ilya Kabakov et al., *Dialogi: 1990–1994* (Moscow: Ad-Marginem, 1999), 157, translated by the author.

37 Russian etymological dictionaries trace the origins of the word *proyekt* to the German *projekt* and date its origins to the reign of Peter the Great. See, for example, Max Vasmer et al., *Etimologicheskii slovar russkogo iazyka*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress, 1987), 3:373.

distinguishes a plan from a project. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following entry for the word *plan*: “a general schema or programme for conducting a particular project or operation.”<sup>38</sup> The difference between a plan and a project can be understood as the relation between the general (or universal) and the particular, between the abstract and the concrete. A plan is a manifestation of universal intentionality, as in the deistic belief that God is the Supreme Architect or the Eternal Watchman who has a plan (not a project) for the entire universe. Similarly, the socialist plan is a universal form of projecting intentionality. The socialist subject submits to the five-year plan in order to receive material benefits in the same way in which the Christian consents in his or her faith to be part of God’s universal plan in order to gain access to salvation.

A project, on the other hand, is concerned with the secular and down-to-earth particular; it is (as one might say) God’s plan scaled down and adjusted to the reality of the individual believer, and is similar in this sense to Protestant personalism. It is a concrete programmed realization set in precise terms: “a project is a reality which, once it has completed, ceases to exist.”<sup>39</sup> “Project” bespeaks technical rationality, success, effectiveness, productivity, resources, means-end thinking, quantitative values, economic interests and instrumental execution, control and monitoring of performances, and carefully choreographed and staged processes (all epithets collected from architectural managerial literature). “All projects share common features: they are one-off, unique, finite, purposive, goal-oriented enterprises undertaken in real time.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, unlike a plan, which aims at a comprehensive totalization—and which the pragmatic critic of socialist or welfare-state macro planning, professing a nominalist disbelief in universals or pure ideas, would call utopian and unattainable—a project is a proposal that addresses only the here and now of a concrete subject acting within a concrete empirical reality in accordance with pre-established rules and constraints. A project is concerned only with that which is graspable and perceptible, tangible and attainable, with what is calculable, planable, or achievable. To have a project, in other words, is to be rational, pragmatic, and entrepreneurial. It is to be “smart.”

38 “Plan,” in *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://oed.com/view/Entry/145022>.

39 Roberto Gerundo, “Salerno: A Daring Approach to Town Planning,” *Urbanistica* 122 (December 2003): 35.

40 Kenneth Allinson, *Getting There by Design: An Architect’s Guide to Design and Project Management* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 1997), 7.

However, the project mentality made popular by the SCCA network is not only about scale. Prior to becoming an indispensable utensil of contemporary free market capitalism, projective thinking was associated with certain traditions of Western thought, in particular with those that made empirical objectivity, positivist and purposive thinking, or utilitarian goals their main objectives of study. What was known in the early twentieth century as the “project method” referred to an educational technique that spread from the philosophy of education of the American pragmatist John Dewey. The project method, which is today known as the “project approach,” was a popular method of institutionalized instruction that was frequently regarded as the most effective for democratic societies. Projects cultivate individual responsibility, entrepreneurial thinking, competition; they encourage students to devote less time to abstract and speculative theories and focus instead on the useful, the concrete, and the purposeful.<sup>41</sup> In the United States the roots of the project method have been traced back to the architects of the Italian Enlightenment who were the first to resort to *progetti* during the emergence of architecture as an independent profession from its former artisan state.<sup>42</sup> It was not only American pragmatism or instrumentalism that made use of the project method. The concept of “project” has also occupied a central position in certain Continental traditions of thought that have presented themselves as humanistic—as, for example, in Sartrean existentialism. Sartre uses the term “project” to express the relation of the modern subject to the world, his or her being-in-the-world, with the actions, deeds, behaviors, and choices that a person makes throughout his or her life all bound together in the “original” or “fundamental project.”<sup>43</sup> In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* and other writings, Sartre insists that the modern subject is a project (“But we *are* project”) for “man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so.”<sup>44</sup>

41 See for instance William Heard Kilpatrick, *The Project Method: The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1929).

42 See for instance Michael Knoll, “The Project Method: Its Vocational Education Origin and International Development,” *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education* 34, no. 3 (1997).

43 The “Key to Special Terminology” section in the appendix of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* defines the project in the following way: “**Project.** Both verb and noun. It refers to the For-itself’s choice of its way of being and is expressed by action in the light of a future end.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 776.

44 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 23. See also Sartre’s *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 187.

However, not everyone embraced such an understanding of modern subjectivity. Georges Bataille—one of the twentieth century’s most devoted defenders of unprojected and undirected action, of unrestrained, eroticized, ecstatic, transgressive, and irrational experience—also considers the contradictions involved in the project mentality and what this might entail for artistic comportments in general. Bataille deploys the term “project” as a critique of modern rationality, as a critique of calculated utilitarian reason that projects experience forward, postponing and delaying it, of a rationality that enslaves the present moment to the future. Bataille prefers painters to architects, for painting leads away from rationality toward “bestial monstrosity,” further away from the “architectural straightjacket” and from the rational architectural forms that tend most often to please official power.<sup>45</sup> Inner experience understood as “project” is nothing else than a delayed, prepared, or precooked experience that creates an abyss or disparity between the present and the future by subordinating the former to the latter (“the animal eats immediately, animals eat voraciously . . . the animal postpones nothing”).<sup>46</sup> Bataille’s *expérience intérieure* discredits, with Nietzschean pathos, the utility that Nietzsche once called the morality of the slaves, responding to the Sartrean project-subject (with Lacanian insight) that “man is not a project . . . but rather unrest, uneasiness . . . a being that is lacking.”<sup>47</sup>

The project-rationality of directed and calculated action became an intrinsic part of contemporary art mentality. After 1989, artists and cultural organizers (especially the younger ones) who collaborated with contemporary art centers had to adjust to this mode of thinking by sitting in workshops led by Western experts and learning how to make projects and portfolios, implement strategies, produce documents, or write grant proposals. From then on, for artists to be considered for grants (or highly leveraged investments), they had to learn how to provide precise details regarding their future artwork; to know in advance what they would produce, how, and why; to consider how and whether their projects agreed with the missions of the new institutions; and to

45 See Georges Bataille et al., *Encyclopædia Acephalica: Comprising the Critical Dictionary & Related Texts* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 36.

46 Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 126.

47 Peter Bürger, *The Thinking of the Master: Bataille between Hegel and Surrealism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 35.

constantly defend their artistic intentions before a bar of managers and curators.

The wave of institutional critique witnessed over the first decade of this century in the postsocialist countries had no doubt something to do with what these critics perceived to be the “soulless” instrumental technicality of postsocialist modernization. The implementation of the project method within the arts seemed to have altered certain essential aspects of the free professions. It has not always sat well with those, for example, who choose to be called artists in order to commit to an experience understood, ever since the Romantics, to be enigmatic, erratic, indefinite, individually spontaneous, unforeseeable, inexpedient, unknowable, and lacking. It now feels difficult if not impossible for an artist to live without a project, or without a head (as in André Masson’s infamous drawing on the cover of Bataille’s magazine *Acéphale*), or to remain (as with Kabakov above) in that innocent state of “creative loitering” and “idling” that the precontemporary artists, both official and unofficial, had too often taken for granted. Now, an aspiring van Gogh might be expected well in advance to submit a project proposal with a tentative schedule detailing when and how he would become insane, and how, when, and why he would slice off that ear.

Like other critics of the project mentality, Bataille regards it as an essential feature of capitalist activity.<sup>48</sup> His position resonates with those elaborated by an early generation of critical theorists who accused modern positivism and instrumental reason of impoverishing experience, of making the new predictable or old. When critical theory critiques the instrumentalization of thought, it usually implies the substitution of purposive systematic procedure for the imagination, of reason for feeling, of predictable reactions for active emotions.<sup>49</sup> However, one must not jump to conclusions and always see, behind the project method, conspiratorial forces and interests, though of course neither class contradictions nor the patronizing character of modernizer-modernized relations can be totally ignored. In fact the “new project rationality” points to broader social changes that follow the agenda of progress and the ideology of the Western European enlightenment. And of course, one can also approach the emerging “projective” experi-

48 Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 204.

49 For the critique of instrumental reason, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

ence that informs postsocialist contemporary art mentality from the perspective of the neoliberal spirit that manages Eastern European modernization. In this sense the concept “project” that entered the vocabulary of artists during the 1990s, thanks to institutions of transition such as the SCCA network, was indicative of the upsurge of a new mentality that was essentially *economic*.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Michel Foucault examines the evolution of modern governmental practices informed by the neoliberal tradition of thinking, suggesting that with the rise of the neoliberal art of governmentality, all of society is perceived as consisting of economic units: the person, the family, the group, the community, and even the sacred liberal notion of the civil society<sup>50</sup>—these are all judged, first and foremost, according to how successful they are in managing, bringing under control, or reifying one form of projected experience or another. The neoliberal art of governmentality rejects socialist (or for that matter any other form of state) interventionism and macro planning as utopian because, according to its logic, there cannot be a sovereign, a state, a seraph, an apparatchik (or a chairman of an Artists’ Union) who could hover above and grasp from a bird’s point of view the totality of the market, or of the cultural field.

## 7

*Postlude.* No one is excused from participating in this postsocialist economic theater, and the (contemporary) artist is no exception. He or she must, like everyone else, resort to an all-pervasive entrepreneurial logic and enter the free competition between projected cultural experiences.<sup>51</sup> In this theater the project mentality and the art document (in various media) becomes the favored technique of contemporary art. It is worth recalling that within certain art critical circles, Western contemporary art trends such as project art and conceptual art have often been offered as proof of recent economic transformations. Artistic conceptualism in particular has been understood as a consequence of post–World War II changes in the mode of capitalistic production, and

50 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

51 The impact of project rationality on specifically artistic and aesthetic comportments would require a lengthy discussion. For a more detailed consideration of the emergence of the term “project” in the vocabulary of Moscow conceptualism, see Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: “Collective Actions” Before and After 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, forthcoming).

as a cultural upshot of the managerial revolution—a conclusion many practitioners find hard to swallow.<sup>52</sup>

From a historical perspective (and seen through the prism of periodization), the emergence of contemporary art in the postsocialist countries echoes similar modernizing processes that took place in the West earlier in the second half of the last century. The logic of postmodernism—viewed as a reaction to utopian modernism and as a consequence of what critics have called the “institutionalization” (Eagleton) or the “domestication” (Huyssen) of modernism—at times draws very close to the missions of new art institutions. In the United States the managers of the first major institutions “for contemporary art” often framed their institutional missions in accordance with the central tenets of postwar liberalism. They sought, for instance, to forge a stronger alliance among art, commerce, and industry, or strove to distance themselves and the art they had promoted from the political radicalism of prewar “modern art.” In fact the very substitution of the term “contemporary” for “modern” was in some cases motivated by this neoliberal mission.<sup>53</sup> The appearance of contemporary art in Eastern Europe, similarly, signaled a deregulation of or an assault on the last bastion of historical modernism and its institutional, political, and aesthetic practices—the difference being that in this case what was at stake was an assault on the Soviet version of modernization and cultural modernism—based artistically on the outdated “fine arts” system of handcrafted or skilled production, ideologically mummified in the doctrine of Socialist Realism, and preserved institutionally within the anachronistic guild-like model of the Unions of Artists.

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52 See Benjamin Buchloh, “From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Conceptual Art 1962–1969),” in *L’Art Conceptuel, Une Perspective: 22 Novembre 1989–18 Février 1990* (Paris: Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1990). See also Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub, “Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub Reply to Benjamin Buchloh on Conceptual Art,” *October* 57 (1991).

53 One of the earliest *major* contemporary art institutions in the United States was the Boston Institute for Contemporary Art, which was renamed in 1947 (from “modern” to “contemporary”). The renaming led to a controversial debate within artistic circles known as the “Boston affair.” See Institute of Contemporary Art, *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985). For a short comparison of the SCCA network and the Boston ICA, see Octavian Esanu, *The Transition of the Soros Centers to Contemporary Art: The Managed Avant-Garde* (2008), <http://www.contemporary.org/project/view/10>.