Con-Temporary Art

What does the "con" in con-temporary art suggest? Saadi Nikro discusses the theme of con-temporaneity through the works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, MUVART and Walid Raad

Essay / Saadi Nikro April 20, 2016

I

When, in the summer of 1995, the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude were asked by politicians, the media, and a festive public to extend their wrapping of the Reichstag in Berlin beyond the designated two-week duration, they adamantly refused, saying that their projects were designed to be temporary: ‘Temporary, because it challenges our notion of art to challenge the immortality of art. We make art not out of gold, silver or marble and think it would stay forever. Non-permanent art will be missed.’1

It is a curious and compelling explanation, one that does not sit comfortably with the political fervour otherwise informing the public wrapping. As a constituent attribute of what they conceive and produce as art, the artists’ notion of time— ‘temporary’ — tends to brush against the grain of a more durable notion of temporality and history. According to them, their wrapping of the Reichstag did not represent a historical marker of time, despite what the politicians regarded as a grand gesture of (re)unification. The wrapping, rather, embodied temporality as an event defined by its uniqueness—‘a unique proposition that will never be built again,’ as they say.

Reichstagchristo010.jpg



[1]Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Wrapped Reichstag. 1995

For the artists, this uniqueness embodied temporality as a physical exercise of taking apart, in respect to both a perceptual expectation and, inevitably, the actuality of the Reichstag's unwrapping. In this instance, art constituted something like a physical exercise of what Giorgio Agamben calls the 'taking place' of an event. 'Singular' and 'inessential' (Agamben's terms), the wrapping/unwrapping exceeded generic and symbolic attributes, situated the building of the Reichstag as a less durable site of dwelling.2

Reichstagchristo001.jpg **[2]**



[3]Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Wrapped Reichstag. 1995

According to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's acutely physical sense of aesthetic production, what they refer to as ‘non-permanent art’ points to an art practice in which the work takes place as a transient momentum of constructing parts and the spatial/temporal intervals of their relational comportment. A significant aspect of this momentum is the dismantling of parts, leaving behind traces of bits and pieces that could never again be collected to form a whole, though nevertheless live on as physical instances or artefacts of the work of art itself. As such, the work is not defined nominally according to one genre or another, but rather exercised as a site of physical labour on the part of the artist and of a physical experience on the part of the viewers.

It is in this sense that con-temporary art can be understood as a temporal breach by which art transpires as a ‘unique proposition,’ initiating modalities (aesthetic, political, ethical) of physical and material application that challenge generic references and ideological repertoires. As the artists demonstrated with their wrapping of the Reichstag, the temporal breach is initiated as an art practice resonating as eruptive instances of address and response, forging terms by which art noisily flows into social, political, aesthetic, and ethical sensibilities.

II

Temporal breaches woven into and energising practices of contemporary art pose a challenge to expectations of how art should be answerable to the fervour of a temporal repertoire informing aesthetic judgements. Such expectations and their imperious temporal regimes tended to encompass mid-twentieth-century debates in North America over contemporary art, when the term contemporary was beginning to be institutionally applied as a nominal category of art. ‘At the present time,’ one prominent commentator wrote,3

"The criteria of value which seem to enjoy the highest prestige in the world
of art are originality and its corollaries, contemporaneity and irrationality.
They would be inadequate to define permanent aesthetic value,
unless their usual connotations are greatly altered."

Such a view tends to assume a sense of temporality as a cultural logic of periods and movements, underestimating how the 'con' of con-temporary suggests an alternative paratactic prism of temporal contiguity.

In a recent book-length study of the temporalising implications of aesthetic judgements, Peter Osborne refers to what he calls a ‘distinctive grammar of con-temporaneity,’ to articulate a paratactic notion of contemporary art. As he argues, with emphasis: ‘a coming together not simply “in time”, but of times.’ He goes to say that ‘the present is increasingly characterised by a coming together of different but equally “present” temporalities or “times,” a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times’.4

IMG_0417.JPG **[4]**



[5]Movimento de Arte Contemporânea de Moçambique (MUVART)
2012. photo: Vanessa Díaz Rivas

Before getting carried away by Osborne's assumption of the 'con' of contemporary as 'equally present temporalities' (a philosophical swindle, or con job, we can say, that conveniently confuses a sign of the times with the times of the sign), as well as his 'constructivist' approach that tends to underestimate the physicality of cultural production, I want to evoke two con-temporary instances of art practices attuned to paratactic impulses of temporality.

In an essay on art in Mozambique, Vanessa Díaz Rivas, a former colleague of mine, writes about the association MUVART—Movimento de Arte Contemporânea de Moçambique—that formed in the early years of the century in Maputo, Mozambique. Issuing a manifesto in 2003, the group drew on international developments to shake up the fine arts. For MUVART, the term contemporary, Díaz says, resonates as a number of site-specific instances in which art practices—works of art, museums and exhibitions, curatorial work, criticism and critique—addressed traditional and modernising notions of the value of art. According to the lingering force of these latter notions, Díaz points out, 'artists were presented with their work carrying an idealistic and a functional burden: to exalt both national and African identity, and link the "traditional" with the "modern."'5 Contemporary art emerged as a response to such expectations.

IMG_0465.JPG **[6]**



[7]Movimento de Arte Contemporânea de Moçambique (MUVART)
2012. photo: Vanessa Díaz Rivas

Accordingly, the very notion of contemporary art, Díaz notes, did not so much reflect a scheme of temporal succession, or else inform standards of aesthetic judgment. The term, rather, emerged as an entanglement of emerging art practices experimenting with new materials (such as aural and visual aspects of video and photography) and the intense debates such practices brought in their wake. As Díaz notes: 'The term Arte Contemporânea referred explicitly to an aesthetic rather than a temporal category, one that represented changes in art both inside and outside Mozambique' (165).

By rehabilitating aesthetic categories to direct conceptions and practices of art, MUVART challenged an idealistic socialist program of rendering art a servant of national identity and modernisation (162). Interestingly, for MUVART, 'aesthetic categories' do not bear the burden of undigested aesthetic references, but rather point to the physicality involved in working on and transforming tactile, aural, and visual materials into works of art and sites of art practices. In other words, the movement's experimental approach and interest in aesthetic categories was not so much formalistic, but rather concerned with the social life, materiality, and transformative capacities of artistic practices.

Aesthetic categories were confronted with the materiality of art production, exposed to a site-specific taking place by which such applications initiated art practices as subjects of critique, sites of

address and response. Neither stable standards of assessment, nor expressions of an underlying cultural logic, as far as MUVART was concerned aesthetic categories resonate according to physical exercises in the production of art. Concepts thus work to initiate a material application, not an ideal expression of one genre or another, or else one political, national identity or another: ‘In this sense,’ Díaz observes,

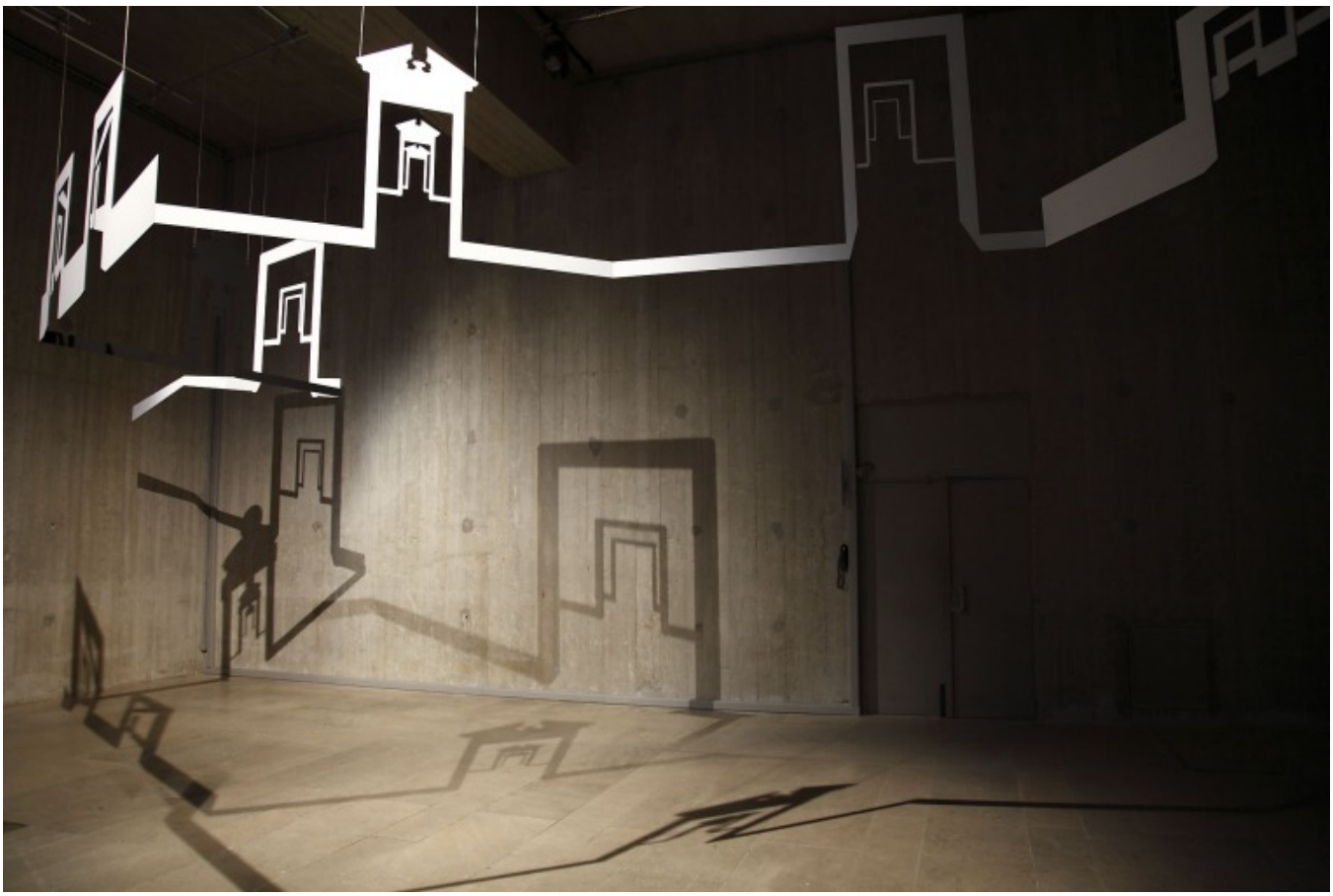
> "The material presence of the work is released, making it possible to use any type of material and technique, or even objects that initially are not directly related to artistic production. This aspect is intrinsically linked to the function of art. The manifesto thus states that the function of art lies in breaking existing paradigms, creating an environment of constant innovation both in the art aesthetic and in its function in society (166)."

III

My comments have somewhat abstracted and perhaps blunted the being-there resonance of my former colleague’s essay, steeped as it is in her field work, interviews, and consideration of the art scene in Mozambique, her inclusion and discussions of particular works of art. But one particular term she uses—an ‘environment’ that comes into being as ‘the material presence of the work is released’—leads me back to my theme of con-temporaneity as an art practice that encompasses the taking place of an event of art.

This informs a recent exhibition by Walid Raad. Titled “Preface to the First Edition”, the installation took place in the Louvre Museum in France in early 2013. Including sculpture, video, photography, and a written script, the occasion of Raad’s exhibition was the anticipated opening of a branch of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi—what some commentators unkindly called a ‘Louvre outpost.’6 Playing up to the designs of the commission, Raad concentrated his installation on 28 pieces of Islamic art that were to be transported from Paris to Abu Dhabi. He manufactured their semblance by presenting them as cardboard cutouts, set amidst suspended cutouts of doors or entrance-like openings and accompanying shadows.

_MG_7680.jpg **[8]**



[9]Walid Raad. Preface to the First Edition. Installation view, The Louvre
2013 © Walid Raad

By creating an art event in which the distinction between works of art and exhibition practices are blurred, Raad parodied not so much the works of art themselves, but the very media (video, photography, sculpture, written script) by which they are transfigured into modes of generic reference. His installation served to translate media into mediality—whereby media are phenomenologically inhabited as embodied modes of hermeneutic encounters.

The Kafkaesque cutouts presented a number of passageways and related inside-outside coordinates. To what extent—to configure a query that Raad seemed to be situating as a potential modality of address and response (an ethical resonance of his installation)—would the anticipated transportation of the pieces of Islamic art bring about changes in how the works themselves were to be viewed and addressed? To what extent would transportation amount to a transfiguration of the temporality of such an address?

It is instructive to reference a more or less representative blurb informing the still anticipated event of the opening of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, from the Saadiyat Cultural District website:

"The Louvre Abu Dhabi will display art, manuscripts and objects of historical, cultural and sociological significance. Spanning millennia, the items on display will originate from societies and cultures from over the world, but universal themes and common influences will be highlighted to illustrate similarities arising from shared human experience transcending geography, nationality and history."

Raad, it seems, designed his exhibition to foreground how such descriptions fail to consider temporal (and spatial, we can add) aspects of the physicality of art practices. In other words, the fervour of such universalising gestures—‘a shared universal memory,’ the Louvre Abu Dhabi website says7—underestimate not merely the significance of varying temporal contexts, but temporaneity as an immanent, constructive/destructive aspect of the work of art. The social and physical circumstances, the materials and tools, as well as imaginary conceptions of time woven into the pieces of Islamic art are far less significant than ‘a shared universal memory’ they somehow embody and represent.

_MG_7702.JPG **[10]**



[11]Walid Raad. Preface to the First Edition. Installation view, The Louvre
2013 © Walid Raad

Critically foregrounding and questioning well-worn inventories applied in assessments of art, Raad wants his viewers to consider how a work of cultural production comes to bear temporal associations. Not unlike Christo and Jeanne-Claude's (un)wrapping of the Reichstag, temporality becomes a physical texture of the work itself, comes to immanently inform the work and practice of art—and not merely the context, background, or else overarching ideals by which it can be judged and slotted into one allegorizing category or another.

In other words, we can ask, how will the proposed 28 pieces conform to the designation of Islamic Art once they are transported to the Abu Dhabi Louvre? Will they still conform to a temporal and geographical regime by which they are Islamic Art in and for a certain or uncertain Europe; or else a certain or uncertain United Arab Emirates? Will their 'universal' significance be confirmed, or will there yet be an occasion to experience the exhibitionary resonance of their physicality?

How will their transportation bring about a reengagement of the temporal imprints and traces of the works of art themselves, as well as the criteria by which they are judged? Such deliberations would foreground how their history, their apparent past, is delayed or else supplemented by its eventuating resonance in and for what in the process comes to be stabilised as the present, according to a designation of contemporary art.

More con-temporary than an expression of the contemporary, the mediated materiality of Raad's installation can be regarded as an interval between its construction and destruction, as its physical occupation of time and place, just like the wrapping of the Reichstag was short lived, its supplementary afterlife imprinted and phenomenally embodied in its mediatized transience between a bringing together and a taking apart.

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- 1. Quoted in Ursula Kolmstetter, "All Wrapped Up: Christo and Jeanne-Claude Conquer the Reichstag". NUVO Newsweekly, July 27, 1995: https://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/christo/kolmstetter.html [12]
- 2. Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 18,9.
- 3. Lester D. Longman, "Criteria in Criticism of Contemporary Art". In The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Vol. 18, No. 3 March, 1960, 286.
- 4. Peter Osborne, Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art. New York: Verso, 2013, 17.
- 5. Vanessa Díaz Rivas, "Contemporary Art in Mozambique: Reshaping Artistic National Canons". In Critical Interventions, 8:2, 2014, 164. See also Díaz's chapter "Movimento De Arte Contemporânea De Moçambique: Defining Borders, Creating New Spaces". In K. Pinther et. al. (eds) New Spaces for Negotiating Art and Histories in Africa. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015.
- 6. Ivo Bonacorsi, Domus, February 6, 2013. http://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2013/02/26/preface-to-the-first-edition.html [13]
- 7. http://louvreabudhabi.ae/en/about/Pages/a-universal-museum.aspx [14]

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