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The Contemporary Avant-Grade: A Florentine Dialogue, Criteria for a Contemporary Era and the Evolving Readymade

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Abstract

This thesis contextualizes the generally unclear field of Contemporary Art by proposing a refined scope of analysis in which specific artists, movements, curators, exhibitions and institutions from both Modernism and PostModernism are analyzed in relation to their connection to those of Contemporary Art. Firstly, the thesis approaches the city of Florence by analyzing three separate moments of artistic innovation in an effort to define Contemporary Art within the spectacle of an idealized history. Specific attention is paid to Florentine history beginning with the urban redesign in the second half of nineteenth century in addition to the Florentine avant-garde and Futurists, the Radical Architecture movement and lastly Contemporary exhibitions from the last two years. Following that critical look at Florence the thesis proposes four criteria for defining the existence of a Contemporary avant-garde, one that functions in a very different way from the traditional avant-garde groups of the twentieth century. Beginning with a discussion of Harald Szeemann and the changing role of the curator, the circuit of Contemporary art exhibition is defined and discussed with relation to elements of post-war and Contemporary Art. The work of the Danish artist Nina Beier is discussed in greater detail. Lastly, the thesis expands on one of the four criteria stipulated for the existence of a Contemporary avant-garde, rooted in an embrace of twentieth-century artistic practices and traditions. The use of the evolving readymade is tracked through the work of Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Broodthaers and Nina Beier, with references to other artists as well.
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This work is dedicated to all the people mentioned above and to the memory of Renata Gross-Horowitz (1994 - 2016), my friend who will always continue to teach me.
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Introduction

But in its application as a de facto standard, this watery signifier has through accumulation nevertheless assumed such a scale that it certainly must mean something.

— Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle, “What is Contemporary Art?”

Beginning in the 1980s certain art critics began to lament a supposed end to art; they claimed that in the face of a nonexistent radical avant-garde, art history had ceased in its steadfast trend of productivity. This absurd notion coincided with many different developments in the art world: the growth of gigantic institutional players, the explosion of global biennials and art fairs and the continually more profuse use of the term and classifier “contemporary art.” This term has lost its use as a signifier of an art historical moment, and has instead morphed into an overarching and all-encompassing fixture to contextualize and historicize all the art created beginning at a certain point that is not fixed. Different institutions, academics, galleries and other groups tasked with producing Contemporary art history ascribe a different start date to the beginnings of Contemporary art and in doing so the term continues to grow in its significance but not in its clarity.

As the epigraph to this introduction claims, the signifier “Contemporary,” is surely ill-defined and unclear, but the term’s weighty ubiquitousness is indicative of its importance. Since the disappearance of both a radical avant-garde and clearly defined artistic movements (discussed in Chapter Two), great art continues to be made and exhibited, but does not fit snugly into the historicized groups as it had done in the past. This thesis contextualizes the term Contemporary, through analysis of specific artists, curators, institutions and trends within “high” modernism and postmodernism and the current Contemporary sphere; it also proposes criteria for
a Contemporary avant-garde that exists within the overarching term mentioned here, and discusses the ways in which Contemporary trends and artists fit into this current avant-garde.

The initial point of reasoning in the thesis is a case-study that reduces both the scope and the analytic approach to the question of how we might define Contemporary Art. Chapter One focuses on the modern history of Florence continuing through to the Contemporary sphere in an analysis of three different moments of Florentine art history: the early avant-garde during the first decades of the 1900s along with the emergence of Futurism, the radical architects of the 1960s and recent pioneering examples of Contemporary art exhibition in the city. In doing so commonalities between the different artists and eras become apparent which attest to a somewhat broad, but workable definition for the Contemporary of Florence: one that is predicated upon a conversation with the city’s storied and often quasi-idealized past.

Chapter Two begins in Florence with a critical examination of a recent Contemporary exhibition, but moves to propose four criteria to define a global Contemporary avant-garde. In doing so I argue that after the radical avant-garde became a tradition and spectacle, Contemporary Art moved to envelop it. The present avant-garde is no longer distinct from Contemporary Art, but is instead within it; the Contemporary vanguard is characterized by elements that isolate it from the totality of art produced. The chapter introduces certain key terms such as the Contemporary art circuit and the elaborate system of art exhibition that exists today. I also describe the growth of the role of the curator since the landmark exhibitions by Harald Szeemann in the 1960s and 1970s. In laying out a detailed model for how we might isolate a Contemporary avant-garde, which I correlate to examples from the past, I compare Contemporary artworks and exhibitions recently exhibited in Florence.
In the last chapter I elaborate on one of the four criteria I outline in Chapter Two by mapping a trend line of the evolving use of the readymade in art production beginning with its invention and use by Marcel Duchamp. I look at the use of readymade and how it is adjusted from the original Duchampian approach in the work of the Conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers and later by the Contemporary artist Nina Beier (whose work is discussed in all three chapters). In doing so, I describe the embrace and application of Conceptual Art practices in the work of Contemporary artists to describe the former’s influence on the latter. I also discuss the institution’s role in classifying and reifying an artwork which fueled Duchamp and the Conceptual artists that engaged in institutional critique. In discussing the opinions of Duchamp and Boris Groys, a contemporary critic, it becomes clear that there is a paradox governing the growth of the Contemporary art institution in recent decades: that institutional critique cedes power to the institution as it consecrates and governs art history. It becomes obvious that the gestures, approaches and tools of both modernism and postmodernism are consciously embraced as well as reformatted by the Contemporary avant-garde.

Taken as a whole the three chapters approach the ambiguous nature of “contemporary art,” a term that was only proposed as a placeholder for any discernible classification of art produced in the decades following the end of modernism. In doing so, the term grew in meaning as it referred to more and more, but was itself insufficiently defined to properly analyze Contemporary Art history; this text is an attempt to minimize the scope of analysis for a Contemporary avant-garde to better understand Contemporary artistic practices and trends.
Chapter One

A Contemporary of the Past: Florence and its Fruitful Dialogue with History

We have always acted with a savage delight in destruction but above all with a zeal for reconstruction.

—Umberto Boccioni, 1916

Strolling in Florence between dense medieval streets one passes gigli (lilies) after gigli embossed under signs that indicate “made in Italy” or “Authentic.” Florentine lilies — the fleur-de-lis — appear in different incarnations like breadcrumbs for a touristic consumerist version of Hansel and Gretel leading the tourist to either Piazza Duomo or Piazza della Signoria. Near the Duomo, the great Brunelleschi Cathedral which emits geographic axes through the historic center, one spots the queue forming for the Galleria dell’Accademia. There, the towering Michelangelo David stands in a permanent photo flash; this is the real version of the David, while other great copies stand outdoors in other major landmarks. In Piazza Della Signoria the rusticated walls of the Palazzo Vecchio and the adjacent Galleria dei Uffizi together hold, with a stone fist, some of the great treasures Italy promises to Art History pilgrims, large hoarded tour groups and plentiful international students alike. A remarkable percentage of the world’s cultural heritage is within reach for the relatively small cost of time required to wait in the crowded queue. In the fall of 2015 I stood in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, in between the great Poseidon fountain on my left and the David manifestation on my right, and noticed a gold glimmer breaking the Renaissance façade. Pluto and Prosperina by the brand-name artist Jeff Koons, a work done in his typically fluent but shallow postmodernist approach, copies imagery from a

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Bernini sculpture. It stands three meters tall, made from the assemblage of mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent color coating and live flowering plants, in the midst of Renaissance marbles (fig. 1). The postmodern appropriation of imagery is clear. Artists of Koons’ generation “were fascinated by the reversal between reality and its representation,” and this sculpture attests to the postmodern belief that representations “now precede and construct reality.” Its purpose according to Mus.e, an association that works in partnership with state museums in organizing large scale events, was to open a dialogue between the old and the new: Florence’s charmed past and its inconspicuous present. Confronted with this glowing, golden quasi-parody of the past, I asked how loudly both the past and present speak in the dialogue? Even more importantly, I ask now whether or not both parties exist in Piazza Signoria and in Florence?

Florence is a huge Western art capital, and does not shy away from this title. In the small and dense urban center, Brunelleschi’s dome is a hundred steps from sculptures by Michelangelo and Donatello, another hundred from paintings by Caravaggio and just a leisurely stroll from frescoes by Giotto. Almost every building in the town, including something as mundanely bureaucratic as the post office in Piazza della Repubblica, will surprise one with a frescoed ceiling. At the same time, Florence is a town of only 350,000 people, the majority of whom live

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outside of District I, or the Historic Center.⁵ According to a 2015 article in the Daily Mail, the town attracts more than sixteen million tourists every year, and we can safely assume that those tourists are spending their time in the historic center.⁶ In a city with such a small population where the majority live in the periferia (the periphery of the city) and with so many visitors, one can imagine that the city center seems more like the reproductions of Italy found in Las Vegas than what those tourists are searching for: the authentic Italy, as almost every bar or cafe in the city center brands itself. There is little distinction between reality and its representation; the city is another clear example of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra, “in which reality is replaced by its representation,” as the facade of History overtakes the reality of the present.⁷

To problematize this notion of Florence as a “Renaissance Disney Land” in the present, we should note the city’s recent past as home in the twentieth century to many important avant-garde art groups and some radical movements. These movements are valuable references to moments when the city embraced the present, even though the contemporary of Florence “is a contemporary of the past” as defined by Martino Margheri who works for the Education department at the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, one of the few major institutions to exhibit contemporary art in Florence.⁸ The problems of modern and contemporary art institutions in Italy have recently come to a climax with sweeping changes made in 2015 to the administration and

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⁵ I refer to Florence as a town and not a city because of a close-to-direct translation of paesino, meaning small country village, that many Florentines use to mockingly describe their city.


⁸ Martino Margheri in discussion with the author, October 16, 2015.
framework of Italian state museums, which Italy’s culture minster called “a giant leap ahead.”

This leap towards larger independence for newly privatized museums was, however, described to me as a “mitigated autonomy” by James Bradburne, the former director of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and the current director of the Pinacoteca Brera in Milan, conceived as the Louvre of Milan.

Florence is not a contemporary hub. It is not a city that promotes or fosters experimentation in artistic exhibition. At least, this is how it would seem and how the city presents itself to any of the different visitors mentioned above that the city welcomes by the thousand every hour. However, there were times, after the Renaissance, when art of the present flourished and partly overshadowed what came before. In this chapter I will refer to this apparent disregard of the present as the *myth of non-contemporary*.

Florence is irreducibly unique and synthesizes the scope of how one might define the contemporary to a small microcosm of artistic production and exhibition. We might ask whether the Florentine mindset that stifles contemporary art exhibition and profligates the fetishization of an idealized history into a spectacle is observable or a myth? In this chapter I will look closely at the history of Florence from 1865 to the present, and the different art movements that either emerged there or passed through the city walls beginning with the early avant-garde poets and artists in the first decade of the twentieth century. Whether or not the reputation that Florence holds in common discourse as an old city with only an old story to tell is true, the institutional

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10 Dr. James Bradburne in discussion with the author, October 16, 2015.
problems of Contemporary exhibition are remarkably clear and observable. We can use the city as a case study to question how Contemporary art thrives or lies dormant under the influence of institutional and cultural tendencies.

While it might seem a little hyperbolized that such a heavily visited urban center might be so out of touch with the present, there are remarkable historical instances that exemplify the city’s attachment with the past. In 1865, after the country unified, Florence became the capital; it would stay the capital for only five years. As capital, stark functional inadequacies became apparent, and quick urban redesign ensued. In post-Haussmann Europe, many city centers took to rapid industrialization and redesign to quickly modernize, but while Milan began to build tramways to provide transport for its growing population in between expanding city limits, Florence largely just remodeled and upgraded. Giuseppe Poggi was the architect tasked with modernizing Florence, who had garnered fame for “his ability to merge a Neo-Renaissance style, fitting for Florence’s history, with new trends.”

Medieval quarters of the city center were torn down, new neighborhoods were created and large viale (boulevard) rings were constructed in place of the old city walls. In addition, Poggi destroyed the old market and nearby ghettos to usher in the new Piazza Vittorio Emmanuelle II (now Piazza della Repubblica). Surrounding this serious redesign of the piazza are many examples of the false facade of Florence: new buildings were constructed in the Neo-Renaissance style that Poggi was famous for, constructed to look as if they were built during the times of Botticelli and Michelangelo. Those new buildings are


12 Ibid.
photographed by tourists as staples of the Renaissance, but many of those buildings are younger than some Post-Impressionists.

Regardless of the fact that Florence’s redesign echoed elements of its past, it had at least begun to move past its dense medieval structure. According to the biography of Giuseppe Poggi from the State Archive accompanying a 2015 exhibition on his work, Florence’s Medieval walls in the mid-nineteenth century had become “an obstacle to growth,” which had long lost their necessity as physical defense of the city. Poggi tore them down, and notwithstanding the fact that much of the center was rebuilt to resemble the past, it is important to note that change had been seriously attempted and accomplished to a large degree. The walls came down and around forty years later we see the rise of one of the only avant-garde art movements in Florence’s twentieth century history to have a worldwide impact and name-recognition in the western canon: the Florentine avant-garde and Futurists. Particularly in Piazza Repubblica, born out of Poggi’s redesign, stands the Caffè le Giubbe Rosse, where the most important Florentine artists met and printed their newspapers in the early twentieth century. Poggi’s destruction of the past gave the Futurists a modern center in which they could lament the culture surrounding their new piazza inside the Florentine facade.

Futurism, an art movement intricately tied to its own ideology and social critique, began with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who coined the term in his Futurist Manifesto published in the French newspaper Le Figaro in 1909. The movement grew out of a dual feeling of pride and

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13 "Percorso, Giuseppe Poggi Un Architetto per Una Capitale." Archipedia.it, accessed on 08 Apr. 2015.

14 The caffè is now more of a tourist trap than a relic of art history.

15 It was first published in the Bolognese newspaper Gazzetta dell’Emilia 15 days earlier than in Le Figaro, but the French exposure was a much more important one. For full text among other Futurist writing see Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, Futurism: An Anthology.
heightened patriotism for Italy, contrasted with a complete rejection and distaste for the past that same country praised. Willard Bohn, an art and literature historian, writes, “As long as Italy continued to venerate the Renaissance and ancient Rome, [the Futurists] believed, neither modern art nor modern society could ever develop freely.”\(^1^6\) It was founded on the beauty of speed, industrialization, war — which Marinetti somewhat infamously proclaimed “the only hygiene of the world,” in article nine of the Manifesto — and called for “a violent assault” as the proper approach to poetry and art.\(^1^7\)

The art movement “was not confined to aesthetics but entered the arena of politics and morals.”\(^1^8\) This close relationship to politics often complicated serious discourse on Futurism, and it stunted academic insight into the group in the past because of the intermingling of the movement’s ideologies with those of Fascism. It is outside of the scope of this paper to analyze the intricate relationship between the Fascist party and the Futurist movement, however, it is important to see the political and cultural motivations that stoked the fire of both groups’ ideologies. It is not hard to imagine that the Futurists at first looked optimistically to the party, tied to one another by an idealistic patriotism, but Bohn writes, “their aesthetic and poetical positions were actually quite distinct.”\(^1^9\) The Florentine section of the group — Futurism was born in Milan but quickly spread through Italy and later to other countries such as Russia where

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\(^{1^7}\) Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 51. Futurism encompasses many paradoxes, one of which is the overt misogyny in the manifesto coupled with the later acceptance of female members.


\(^{1^9}\) Bohn, 4.
it would merge with other styles and movements — shows the birth of a new contemporary avant-garde out of their frustration with archaic cultural values and stunted industrial growth in relation to other European powers, which are frustrations that the Fascist party utilized to mobilize sentiment. In fact the Futurists supported the Italian Fascist party “more in principle than in deed.” But, the formally asserted synthesis between the two groups’ ideologies led to what Willard Bohn calls an “ignoble fate” for the Futurist group. The movement was long overlooked, but is now regaining academic notice, as is evident in the added scholarship and large recent exhibitions outside of Italy — especially the monumental *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe* in 2014 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Even more overlooked than the movement as a whole, however, are the Florentines.

To turn to their movement and origins I enlist Walter L. Adamson’s description of the proclamations from the opening manifesto of the Florentine newspaper, *Leonardo*, in 1903. He labels the manifesto’s agenda as one of “promethean daring,” outlining the group by describing their synthesis of political thought, artistic creation, cultural commentary and philosophical contemplation to be “at once cosmopolitan and self-consciously Florentine.” But what is this categorically Florentine mentality that separates them from the other Futurists, specifically the Milanese? To look at the birth of this Florentine movement, that only later came into serious contact with the self-proclaimed Futurists based in Milan, we can look at three main newspapers of the avant-garde voice of Florence: *Leonardo* followed by *La Voce* and then even more

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20 Bohn, 3.


http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00462.0001.001.
importantly, the seminal Futurist repository of avant-garde and Futurist exploration, *La Lacerba*. The newspaper was the principle vehicle for the dissemination of Futurism:

The variety of opinions expressed in *Lacerba*, as well as the ups and downs in the relationship between its main Florentine contributors, Giovanni Papini and Ardengo Soffici, and the Futurism of Marinetti, are a reminder that the Milanese group were not the only advocates of change in Italy.\(^{22}\)

With both *La Voce* and *La Lacerba* it is evident that a contemporary spirit, a resolute purposefulness to change the status quo in art but also in cultural mindsets was alive. Guido Ballo quotes Papini who stated in the first *La Voce*: “‘Our task is twofold: to bring Italy into contact with Europe, and to reawaken her sense of her own heritage as a vital contribution to European culture.’”\(^{23}\) These journals were the beginnings of a reactionary movement in Florence. Giovanni Papini, principle writer of the group was “perhaps the most widely read Italian writer of his generation.”\(^{24}\) Apart from Papini, the two main Florentine figures were the artist and poet Ardengo Soffici and the brilliant poet Aldo Palazzeschi; it was in fact Palazzeschi who sent his early poems to Marinetti and thus created the first link between the Futurist leader and the Florentines.\(^{25}\)

When Marinetti settled in Milan in 1894, “despite the general backwardness of Italy,” a “new civilization” was starting to form.\(^{26}\) The intricate growth of Futurist ideology was born


\(^{23}\) Ballo, 26.

\(^{24}\) Adamson, 2.

\(^{25}\) For a detailed documentation of the tumultuous relationship between the two groups beginning with two fistfights, see Tisdall, Caroline, and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism*, 166 - 167.

from intellectual reactions to modernization and a newly prevalent urbanized attitude. Gino Severini, a major Milanese Futurist painter, is paraphrased to have said that “Futurism was not a painter’s movement in the strict sense but an intellectual attitude that aimed at bringing new life to a cultural climate that had become narrowed by cliches and provincial compromises.”

_Provincial_ is an important term here; it refers not only to aging ideals of function, but largely to the predominantly languishing state of cities that Italian artists of the late nineteenth century were born into. Italy’s relatively late unification in the 1860s, compared to other European countries, “had left its fragmented and provincial nature relatively untouched.” It is not a coincidence that the term _provincial_ appears again in another examination of the group; it is indicative of the relative stagnation of both Italian industry and art academies that educated, well-travelled and well-off people like the Futurists were aware of and responded to. The Florentines looked to Paris and the burgeoning avant-garde. In fact, when first confronted with Milanese Futurist art, Soffici deemed the Futurists to be “vastly inferior to the Cubists” in his article “Free Art, Futurist Painting” in _La Voce_ from 1911. Even more indicative of the reverence of industrialized and artistically experimental Paris is the publication of the Futurist Manifesto in French in a French newspaper. As the Futurists were well aware, “When Paris spoke, the rest of the world listened.”

Italy’s provinciality, however, was beginning to change, especially in the north, when the Florentines first got together to form _Leonardo_ in 1903. The

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27 Ballo, 17.


29 Tisdall and Bozzolla, 167.

30 Davies, 65.
city, an urbanized center in its cacophony, seen as a blur in newly developed high speed, was the principle fuel for the Florentines’ intellectual and visual production.

Before we continue with the past, we must acknowledge something from the present; the Museo Novecento of Florence, which was first discussed and planned in 1966 after the disastrous flood of the city, and is one of only three major exhibition spaces in Florence to exhibit twentieth century and contemporary art. It is indicative of the city’s institutional discrimination against modernity and contemporaneity that the museum dedicated to the twentieth century only opened in 2014, almost fifty years after it was initially conceived. One of the great examples of Florentine Futurism that hangs on the Novecento’s walls is Baccio Maria Bacci’s *Il Tram di Fiesole* (fig. 2). While Bacci was not himself largely affiliated with the Futurist movement in Milan, this painting’s style is decidedly Futurist. It was after a trip to Paris that Bacci became acquainted with the current major avant-gardes: Futurism and Cubism. Decades after he painted the work, it was included in the exhibition *Marinetti e il Futurismo a Firenze: Qui non si canta al modo delle rane* (*Marinetti and Futurism in Florence: Here One Does not Sing in the Manner of Frogs*). However, it is interesting to see that in the catalogue for the exhibition from 1994, it is not listed as part of any museum’s collection, but is instead property of the *commune di Firenze* (local Florentine government). For decades after the call for the Novecento came, but before the city could finally arrange for its creation, hundreds of artworks sat in repositories away from public view. This blatant disregard of so many artworks,

31 The other two are the prominent Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and the not so prominent Museo Marino Marini.


33 Stefania Rispoli in discussion with the author, 29 January 2015.
relegated to invisibility, was due to bureaucratic inefficacy. The Novecento is located in the heart of the historic center in the Piazza di Santa Maria Novella, and in the eyes of Stefania Rispoli, a curator of contemporary art in the city, is indicative of change in the city. She argues that it has been proven that once a museum dedicated to the contemporary opens in a city, interest in the contemporary grows. The problem, however, as she was quick to point out as well, is that much of the collection was of the present day in 1966, but is no longer as current. It is the hope of many that the Novecento, as a cultural space, will continue to help the growth of a contemporary mentality in Florence, as the Strozzi and Museo Marino Marini have been doing very well. There have recently been many great installations, exhibitions and events at the Strozzi and young Novecento which I will return to later in the chapter, specifically Alfredo Pirri’s temporary installation.

Returning to the formerly unavailable painting, *Il Tram di Fiesole*, we see a hallmark of Futurism in Florence. Bacci’s work shows the movement of a tram car in Fiesole carrying tranquil commuters with veiled identities. The artist deconstructs the scene in a typically Futurist way, using blocks of dark tones which stream across the canvas in motion with the speeding tram. The seated figures look down at the floor of the tramcar, symbolic of the Futurists’ beloved industry and speed, and look away from the brighter and more colorful Tuscan cityscape callously subservient in its association with archaic romanticisms. Light from the windows illuminates blasé faces under top hats looking like drafts of mannequins. The Futurist tenet of embrace for the modern is strongly tied to shedding older ornamental features of

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34 Fiesole is little city on a hill just north of Florence with spectacular views where the nobility often built their villas. Fiesole was an Etruscan city at the same time that the Romans settled Florence; the history of the city is remarkably palpable.
everything from poetry to architectural design. Romanticism, and the imagery associated with it, were symbolic of an obsolete past that the Futurists put to death. Similar to Bacci’s work, Milanese Futurist Giacomo Balla’s *Streetlight* shows a similar condemnation for the past, and for the imagery indicative of that past (fig. 3). Light from a streetlamp in the night sky erupts in bursts of colorful wisps, and overpowers the comparatively weaker crescent moon in the background. Balla’s scene depicts the same trumping of Romanticism and its tropes by technology and the future in a much more overt way than Balla’s.

We may look at “Crocicchio” (“Cross-road”), a poem by Ardengo Soffici, which elicits similar imagery to that of Bacci’s piece, and reads like a love poem to the industrial city as he describes a city-scene at the intersection of two busy streets. He sits in a streetcar enamored with the city, as he races past “acetylene and other lights/ Blossoming in the shop windows.” The movement in *Il Tram di Fiesole* depicted in the air between the passengers conveys a sense of space giving way under the steadfast direction of the tram car, as it tramples over the scattered remains of horse-drawn carriages and Romantic crescent moons no longer visible over the “clamor of electricity gas” and to the sound of “Royal carriages and streetcars chirping like/machine-gunned birds,” as in Soffici’s poem. The Futurist interpretation of the city was not only a conviction that “modern art should concern itself with only modern subjects”, but in the invention of a “language capable of expressing peculiarly modern sensations.” This language of

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36 Soffici, 83.

expression and representation is a vehicle through which theory and ideology are both presented and argued.

Florence’s cultural mindset has remained largely the same since the early twentieth century: an often closed-mindedness to Modernity with periodic moments of support of modern, and later postmodern innovation; the necessity for creating new languages of expression repeats itself throughout the history of the city. However, just as spoken tongues evolve from past traditions, the artistic languages of avant-garde and radical groups in Italy did the same. Returning to the Novecento we can look at the spectacular part of their collection that follows the radical architecture and design groups of Florence in the 1960s and 70s: most notably Archizoom and Superstudio. There were many other groups that also manifested similar reactions to the sharp cultural stimuli of the time: namely the growth of consumerism and pop culture coinciding with Italy’s economic boom. Other groups included collectives like UFO and Zziggurat, which were also both active in Florence. The groups — “specifically Archizoom” — were concerned with creating “a nonfigurative architectural language; that is, an architecture essentially reduced to a public grammar for inhabitable space.”38 This new language erupted in Florence as the birthplace of Architettura Radicale (Radical Architecture), a term that was proposed by many people but ultimately granted to the great art historian Germano Celant.

Both Archizoom and Superstudio were born in Florence and created different idealized forms of theoretical and radical architecture and design. The collectives responded to then-current Marxist perspectives in analysis of modern architecture — specifically “Toward a

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Critique of Architectural Ideology,” an essay by architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri.\(^{39}\) While Tafuri famously dismissed the work of Archizoom, his influence on the group’s work is indisputable.\(^{40}\) The group was also largely influenced by the emergence of Pop Art; they indulged — often times in a manner of purposefully extreme kitsch — in a very literal criticism and simultaneous embrace of contemporary pop culture and mass-market consumerism which reached Italy in the boom of the 1960s. Like the Futurists, they also responded to growing technological development, progressing even faster than in the early twentieth century; they were, however, displeased with Modernist options of utopia ushered in via technological advancement. They were also largely forgotten by academics, similar to the Florentines of the early twentieth century. They were exiled from contemporary academia and art exhibition after the 1970s, but saw critical attention return in the mid-1990s.

The Radical Architect groups criticized elements of contemporary culture by creating their own aesthetic language. In the designs from Archizoom’s first exhibition, shown together with Superstudio, “Archizoom embraced the aesthetic of consumerist culture as a radical critique of welfare state capitalism.”\(^{41}\) This first exhibit was a turning point in the Florentine art scene of the sixties, and proposed a pop ambience in Italy.\(^{42}\) The groups, consisting mostly of young architecture students, responded against the influx of mainstream architectural ideology that was imported into Italy. Their avant-garde response was one of ideological critique and semi-absurd


\(^{40}\) Ibid., 148.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 154.

\(^{42}\) Laura Chiesa, “Superstudio Double-Take,” in *Neoavanguardia: Italian Experimental Literature and Arts in the 1960s*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2010), 287.
design theory. They took the foundational blocks of contemporary architecture and extrapolated them to their extremes, as is often the best form of criticism. The poster for the exhibit hangs in the Novecento (fig. 4). Its bold printed text embraces and critiques pop culture in a sardonic and mocking tone of contemporary utopian rhetoric. The text reads, “la superarchitettura è l’architettura della superproduzione, del superconsumo, della superinduzione al superconsumo, del supermarket, del superman e della benzina super” (“The superarchitecture is the architecture of superproduction, of superconsumption, of the superinduction for superconsumption, of the supermarket, of the superman and of the super gasoline”).43

In their project Continuous Monument, Superstudio worked to reduce architecture “to a single architectural gesture,” in which the industrial forms of 1960s architecture were simplified to an extreme form and intertwined with references to ancient monuments.44 They created an architecturally surreal object that engulfs pieces of the world as it travels through it. The isometric monument is drawn into cityscapes, landscapes and other scenes, devoid of architectural form other than its gridded nature, surreally attacking any notions of utopian urban architecture and urban planning. Everything is absorbed by the monumentality of the gridded object.

Archizoom’s project No-Stop City (1969-1971) grew out of emulation and competition with Superstudio’s project.45 In a No-Stop City drawing at the Museo Novecento by Gilberto Corretti, of the Archizoom group, it seems as if a picturesque, polychrome landscape is receding

43 All translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.
45 Ibid.
into a small space shaped by two architectural grids (fig. 5). Scenic hills and a sunset are framed above and below by sparsely delineated grids with silhouettes of civilians situated throughout the space. Behind the frames and the scene, is the backdrop to the whole construction: a geometric tangle of steel scaffolding, a schematic foundation. The size of the space delineated by the rough architectural forms is undecipherable, but is also unimportant. The insistence of the drawing is instead a creation of a new language of design; it is one part ironic statement, another part mocking contemporary critique, but most importantly an elucidation of ideological critique in a new aesthetic language.

*No-Stop City* designs lack any sort of architectural structures or representations, instead resting on only the most basic infrastructural support. They are reduced so far that they, in theory, would begin to cover the entire Earth. *No-Stop City* is Archizoom’s “seminal project for the total urbanization of the world,” in which their dismantled city designs create a “critique of capitalism as it was embodied by the city and its architecture, but also a critique of the reformist and utopian aspirations of ‘progressive culture.’”46 The fundamental premise of *No-Stop City* and their other projects “was the critique of utopian architecture and its blind faith towards the improvement of the city through technological development.”47 Similar to the Futurist response to the predominant cultural mentality and development of technology, the radical architects of Florence during this time sought to translate ideas through an avant-garde translation of rhetoric and action. The Futurists responded to stagnation while the radical architects instead cautioned against a growing embrace of consumption and utopianism, both within in a similar urban and

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47 Ibid.
cultural setting, but decades apart. The element of ideological translation and creation in both
groups’ methodologies is the critique of the then predominant contemporary mentality and the
attempt to sway popular sensibilities, both observable necessities to fostering the inception and
growth of an avant-garde.

With this I return to Martino Margheri’s description of Florence’s contemporary as a
“contemporary of the past.” Upon my return to Florence in the fall of 2015 I noticed the same
rusticated walls guarding the same Renaissance heritage. I noticed the same mentality pervading
the air that smelled of historical pilgrimage and exploration. It became clear, however, that
Margheri’s point was not intended to deride the city, but was instead indicative of the very
definition of “contemporary.” The avant-garde groups discussed in this chapter indicate eras of
Florence’s history during which the present began to overshadow the past. The then-
contemporary movements responded to their present stimuli and were largely forgotten until the
books were opened again to find their critique poignant and not cliché, and their experimentation
novel rather than passé. These eras, however, are not any different from Florence in the present.
Margheri defines the essence of contemporary scenes to be relative obscurity and small size. It is
fair for us to classify Florence as a Renaissance “theme park”, but is it categorically unfair to
label its contemporary as nonexistent, as many do. The unbridled embrace of the past and a
thriving contemporary art world are not mutually exclusive in Florence; in fact, the former is
perpetually fueling the latter. Within the cloisters and basements of the Renaissance palazzos of
Florence we find the contemporary speaking with the past, both parties audible.

The Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is a cultural foundation founded in 2006 that holds both
historic and contemporary exhibitions in the heart of Florence’s center. It is just past the
triumphal arch of Piazza della Repubblica: the Florentine Futurists’ stomping ground which
echoes the urban reconstructions of the late 1800s. The Strozzi was, from its inception, a novel
entity for Italy, and especially for Florence, not specifically for its chosen periods of exhibited
art, but for its funding structure. The Strozzi combines public, private and sponsor support to
create a more autonomous institution and has been a leader in Florence of Contemporary art
exhibition.

In the spring of 2015 the Fondazione opened two exhibitions that are pertinent to this
discussion: *Potere e pathos, bronzi del mondo ellenistico* (*Power and Pathos, Bronzes of the
Hellenistic World*) upstairs in the main exhibition space and *Anche le sculture muoiono*
(*Sculptures Also Die*) in the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzina, the contemporary
partner of the Strozzi underneath the palazzo. The two exhibits together echoed the same
dialogue with the city center of Florence that the Koons sculpture attempted as well. Hellenistic
bronzes gathered from many different corners of the world, viewed alongside the sculpture and
installation of twelve contemporary artists, created a conversation between masterpieces that
have become beacons of classical grandeur and sculptures by artists working with contemporary
stimuli. In the catalogue for *Anche le sculture muoiono*, the director of the museum comments
that “Placing contemporary art in a Renaissance architectural setting poses a challenge that the
Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi takes as a stimulus to consider every project as a constant quest for
new forms of communication and artistic presentation.”

48 This new form of communication is continuously executed by the Strozzina, regardless of the content of an exhibition. The

48 Arturo Galansino, “Introduzione,” in *Anche le Sculture Muoiono*, exh. cat. (Florence: Centro di Cultura
juxtaposition in Florence between past and present is the elucidation of the city’s contemporary. The contemporary is a dialogue and a perpetual call and response between the past and present.

A major element of *Anche le sculture muoiono* is the impermanence of an artwork. The work of two artists in particular, Nina Beier and Oliver Laric, specifically tackle this theme but in different ways. Nina Beier, in her sculpture *Perfect Duty* (2014), echoes impermanence through the media she uses: bronze statues, Persian carpets and banknotes, all borrowed temporarily for the duration of the exhibit (fig. 6). The statues come from the Galleria d’Arte Moderna di Palazzo Pitti, the Persian rugs from a wholesaler in Florence and the money from the Strozzi itself. The sculptures lay on stacks of the rugs, frozen as they crush the banknotes beneath them. After the exhibition closes, all the components of the work will return to their lenders. Beier’s sculpture discusses the appropriation of diverse forms and objects based on exchange and contemplates the lifespan of an artwork. Oliver Laric makes the connection between the two floors of the Strozzi even more apparent with his works in the exhibit. Laric’s body of work features the consistent portrayal of history in its appropriation through contemporary technology. He questions ideas of the past by recreating archaic figures and ideas in modern forms. For this exhibit he printed his trademark three-dimensional scans of Hellenistic bronzes found upstairs to surround printed to-scale polyurethane copies of classical heads, colored in striations of bold colors. A stark contrast is created between the old and the new, as the classical faces lie decapitated on the ground. Laric questions our perceptions of history; his work addresses the common misconception that Ancient Greek and Roman marble sculptures were stoic monochrome figures, which were in reality painted in bright colors. In his combination of

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49 *Perfect Duty* will be discussed in much greater length in the following chapter. Nine Beier will also be discussed in chapter three with regards to her Contemporary use of the readymade.
iconographic elements of the past with its implementation through modern techniques he questions the strength of the image and the idea in reproduction. Laric’s works, as well as the exhibition as a whole, comment on much more than they perhaps intended to. The city of Florence is an arbiter for the cultural heritage and history of Italy during the Renaissance, and the exhibit of the soon to be dead sculptures — in reference to the title of the exhibition — asks whether the art of the present will be similarly remembered and protected as is the art of the past. Beier’s work interestingly refutes this question altogether by giving her work an expiration date. Once again, we see the distinction of Florence’s contemporary as one which responds to the past.

In the fall of 2015 the work of Alfredo Pirri, a Calabrian artist who lives and works in Rome, made its way to Florence. In addition to a solo show at a small gallery on the other side of the river, Pirri put up an installation exhibit in the cloister of the Museo Novecento. His installation specifically calls to mind the past of the city and confronts it, in a space that is saturated with both distant history and the recent past. The installation is part of a new program for the Novecento cortile (courtyard or Renaissance cloister) in which they will install new contemporary exhibits every six months. Pirri’s work is titled Passi (Steps) and originates from different installations of the piece that he begun in 2003. The cortile of the Novecento is a typical Renaissance cloister which Pirri blanketed in paths made of mirrored glass. At the opening Alfredo Pirri and an assistant walked across the glass, to a live music piece performed by Alvin Curran, as the walkways shattered below their feet. The sounds of the cracking and breaking mirrors were only augmented by the engineered singing voice and synthesized music. After Pirri had his go at the glass, the people in the crowd of onlookers were then invited to traverse the paths to further destroy the mirrors with their own steps. The Novecento writes that “the straight
paths will be broken under the weight of the bodies traversing them, reflecting a grieving, shattered image of a place and an epoch that once attempted to fuse logical reasoning with religious and symbolic aspects.”

Pirri’s work confronts the different eras of Florence’s history, allegorically shattering the insistence on the past and electrifying the present. It does not intend to be so aggressive, however, the gravity of a contemporary installation in the Novecento cloister is unmistakable. While the Renaissance cloister buffers the noise and contains the entire experiment, it is evident that the contemporary is alive to the noise of shattering glass. The call and response of Laric’s work at the Strozzina is again evident here. The space of the installation, a museum of modern art in a Renaissance courtyard, collides with the gesture of the artist which stomps his Contemporary presence into a loud existence.

The blockbuster sculpture by Jeff Koons in the midst of a heavy marble history attempts to show a gold glimmer of contemporaneity, but fails quite visibly. By plopping a Koons in Piazza Signoria there was the hope that the dialogue described above would show itself. It is impossible, however, to find contemporaneity in a work by an artist that has no relation to the space in which it stands, other than Koons’ languid copying of classical content through a lethargically postmodern appropriation. While the Koons is unsuccessful, the Strozzina exhibition, the Alfredo Pirri installation and the various small contemporary scenes around Florence all succeed in creating a contemporary of the present, one rooted in Florence’s history, but realized by and for the present.

The contemporary of a city is not framed necessarily by appearances of bestseller works and exhibitions, but rather by the art produced and the mentalities either held or critiqued. Florence is associated with Donatello and Brunelleschi, not with Soffici, Papini, Archizoom or Superstudio, but this is not so disconcerting. Regardless of how long the line outside the Uffizi remains, and how empty the cortile of the Novecento might be after the opening night events, Florence’s contemporary exists in the perpetual dialogue between what happened then and what is happening now.
Chapter Two

Criteria for the Global Contemporary Vanguard: Between the Exhibition-Maker and the Institutional Circuit

The Museo Marino Marini is situated on a convenient stretch of street in Florence. Exiting its large glass doors, one stands in a small piazza which manages to hold a small bar and a few scooters. Out the piazza and to the right is the Strozzi, while to the left is the Museo Novecento and the large Piazza Santa Maria Novella. Apart from its institutional credo and charming collection, the architecture of the Museo Marino Marini is in itself a traversable experience. The building was repurposed from the Renaissance church of San Pancrazio, which had a number of other applications before and during the wars of the twentieth century. The museum retains a large glass window and apse from the old religious functions of the space. Upon entering through the nave, one has a familiar sensation of attraction to the apse and to the large explosion of light at the end of the first floor, where the collection begins. The new modern space is a labyrinth of stairs and passageways that house the collection of the Italian Modernist Marino Marini — from the nearby city of Pistoia — work that was gifted to the city in 1980. The crypt of the former spiritual house was repurposed to become the section of the museum dedicated to temporary exhibitions of contemporary art; it still carries elements of a spiritualistic weight a la Rothko Chapel perhaps. Instead of housing art from the past century, the underground series of rooms, under the heavy stone that comprises the groined vaults floating low to the ground, is a center for contemporary international art in Florence; in between the Novecento and Strozzi, it asserts itself quietly as an important institutional landmark.
Like other touristic centers with an economy built on an exhibitionism of its own institutionalized cultural richness, Florence has something of a museum mile. The stretch begins with *David* at the Galleria dell’Accademia, and continues through the Piazza Duomo, Piazza Signoria and the Palazzo Vecchio, culminating with the Ponte Vecchio. During a recent conference which focused on the infrastructure of Contemporary art in Florence, Ricardo Lami of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi pointed out that there is something of an alternate mile in Florence’s small center. This alternate cultural path, almost perpendicular to the other, begins with the Stazione Santa Maria Novella, both an entrance to the city and a staple of early modernist Italian architecture, continuing to the Museo Novecento, Museo Marino Marini and the Strozzi itself. These three institutions, of various ages, differing institutional models and diverse collections — or lack thereof in the case of the Strozzi — are the major players that deal with modern and contemporary art in the city of Florence, and they are all within a five minute walk from one another. In pointing to this fact, it is evident that an alternative axis of tourism could and does exist in Florence — one that operates on a remarkably different plane than the stretch of Fifth Avenue from the Guggenheim Museum to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

In Florence, this alternate mile attests to major changes to the landscape of contemporary art in Florence that have occurred in the past decade. New museological practices, spearheaded by the exhibitions created at the Palazzo Strozzi, and a newly developed interest among the

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1 The conference was organized by La Pietra Dialogues at New York University in Florence; it was titled “Contemporary Art in Florence,” and featured a panel of important Florentine protagonists for Contemporary art exhibition and myself as the moderator. For video of the entirety of the conference see: “NYU Florence - Contemporary Art in Florence Dialogue,” YouTube video, posted by NYU Florence, 16 February 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adkhJSD3Aqk.
cognoscenti in mapping the contemporary field of Florence have caused a shift. In the conference from which I quote Lami above, the contemporary stage of Florence was discussed by the panel through recent site specific installations and exhibitions of giants of post-war and Contemporary art such as Mimmo Paladino, Anthony Gormley, Giuseppe Penone and Jeff Koons. The growth of the appearance of superstar Contemporary artists will culminate with the Palazzo Strozzi’s forthcoming 2016 exhibition of Ai Wei Wei — a definitive and monumental figure in Contemporary art. The changes in Florence on the micro-level should be analyzed within the context of the radical macro-level changes to Italian museum policy in 2015. Institutions throughout the country were privatized and given a small level of autonomy to confront stagnation in the national museums, specifically with regards to the way these institutions fell behind foreign museums. Twenty new directors were nominated, including “7 foreigners and 4 Italians returning from abroad. Half are women, and the average age is 50.”

While Florence served as a convenient case-study in the previous chapter in outlining the place of contemporary art within the scope of a small city, in this chapter I would like to explore the place of the avant-garde in the Contemporary. The term “Contemporary” is capitalized here to avoid its muddled and ill-defined use as a placeholder for any discernible artistic movement in the present; it is no longer purely indicative of a temporal definition, and as such may be analyzed in the same way that we might analyze a movement from Modernity. There must be a distinction made between artists that produce art within a temporal marker, which is loosely and not uniformly defined, and artists that produce Contemporary art. The latter term is contained within the over-arching sphere of postmodernism, but Contemporary art should be qualified and

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re-examined with the same tools of Modern art history, albeit with tools that are both expanded and adapted. The lower-case expression of “contemporary” is purely a reference to time; it refers to art produced now and acknowledges that the art objects stem from traditions of Modernism or the post-war movements — namely that process of artistic renovation and vanguardist one-upmanship that create both trends and movements — but is not part of a current artistic tradition.

Rather than an attempt to both pigeon-hole and place Contemporary art within a current tradition or overarching compositional, relational or auto-historicizing methodology, I will instead propose four criteria, which, in their interrelated and somewhat classifying nature will reveal a duality in what is labeled “contemporary.” Contemporary art is exemplified by some combination of the following: either participation in or the rejection of the Contemporary art market, potentially for the sake of critique; the embrace of traditions from Conceptualism or post-Minimalism — often characterized as “difficult” art — in art production; participation in the Contemporary circuit (to be more precisely defined later) of the art world; and lastly, the tangible use of twentieth-century artistic practices such as the readymade often amended through a post-modern lens or approach.

Unlike artistic movements and vanguards from the beginning of Modernism to the post-war period, which responded to critical shifts in theory and practice, Contemporary art restricts itself, not for lack of other attempts, to these four characteristics. While the classifiers outlined here can create only a loose definition, it can be described as such to mitigate the rather small field of content that permeates Contemporary artistic concerns. Much of important Contemporary art makes use of similar elements of content, akin to the compositional motifs employed by Romantic painters as tropes, such as the moon, rather than elements of
methodology, such as the abandonment of the indoor studio by the Impressionists or structural tools such as the indeterminacy in the artistic production of John Cage. It is for this reason that I propose a reexamination of Contemporary art similar to that of Heinrich Wölfflin’s reexamination of the Baroque in the late nineteenth century. The Swiss art historian, whose work was hugely impactful in the development of Formalistic readings in art history, proposed to return to periods in art history that had been largely mistaken as inferior with new criteria and methods of observation. In his re-discovery, “Wöfflin endeavored to show that Baroque art had to be judged by criteria that were not only different from already held standards, “but resolutely opposed to those [standards] of classical art.”

I would like to engage in a similar reexamination of Contemporary art in this chapter, but rather than increasing our scope or amending our criteria for “high art,” I would like to analyze Contemporary art from the position of curators and the museum-as-institution. If we are to analyze the disappearance of the radical avant-garde and its reappearance as a staple of contemporary mass-culture, we must reformulate the lens of analysis to look at the way art is organized and discussed. Contemporary art history must be qualified by art institutions — both mega-institutions and smaller organizations — as well as the foundational differences between current art and Contemporary art. Cuauhtémoc Medina, an art critic, historian and curator, stipulates that the “question of the death of the avant-garde ought to be reformulated to account

for this institutionalization of the contemporary,” but we must also account for the disappearance
of aesthetic vanguard revolutions in the contemporary sphere.4

The avant-garde, as it existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has ceased to function in the same way. We must confine the scope of our definition of the Contemporary avant-garde in the same way that we did to loosely define the Florentine “contemporary” in the previous chapter: within parameters that contextualize it within the art world’s functioning model. For this reason, in this chapter I propose an examination of artistic practices as well as the changing role of the curator that can be found within the Contemporary art world, to better understand how the avant-garde’s function transitioned from obscure aesthetic and political radicalism to “advanced entertainment.”5 In 1945, the dealer and critic John Bernard Myers asked Marcel Duchamp “how many people he thought really liked avant-garde art, and Duchamp replied, ‘Oh, maybe ten in New York and one or two in New Jersey.’”6 When the critic Suzi Gablick cited Duchamp’s response in 1984, it was already obvious that four decades later this view had changed dramatically, and today the avant-garde is even more ingrained within mass culture than ever before. The artistic vanguard today is not outside of mainstream art; it is not outside of the circuit of Contemporary art, but deeply ingrained within it and it must be mapped by the curators working today.


Harold Szeemann, a monumental Swiss curator, proclaimed himself an *Ausstellungsmacher* (a maker of exhibitions) after “resigning his directorship at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969.” This declaration had more influence than just “a designation of semantics. Szeemann is more conjurer than curator — simultaneously archivist, conservator, art handler, press officer, accountant, and above all, accomplice of the artists.” Major curators working today, such as Jens Hoffman, the director of the Jewish Museum in New York, refer to themselves as “exhibition makers,” marking the shift in the curator’s role from museum profession to a crucial element of the Contemporary art world. Szeemann’s landmark exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information* (1969), heralded in Conceptual art, the Italian Arte Povera (later promoted by the writing of critic and curator Germano Celant), Land Art and post-Minimalism, introducing them to the world stage. His work on the fifth iteration of the peripatetic — once every five years — exhibition *Documenta V* was also instrumental in reframing the way art is exhibited, including installation, performances, happenings and events that lasted the full hundred days of the major art world event. This shift in curatorial practices shaped the Contemporary art world today. It is for this reason that I acknowledge the huge importance of the curator, or exhibition maker, in mapping today’s avant-garde creating Contemporary art, since Contemporary artists are informed by Conceptual and Post-Conceptual practices. The megastar Contemporary curator Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed Harold Szeemann, and when Szeemann describes his first

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8 Ibid.
exhibition he remarked that “the intensity of the work made me realize this was my medium.”

He refers to the curation of exhibitions as medium, as if he is an artist creating an artwork. This close proximity between artist and curator begins with Szeemann but continues into Contemporary art. Hans Ulrich Obrist, for example, owes the inventiveness of the Contemporary curating field to the new approach Szeemann and other curators of that era created and sustained as they exhibited Minimalism, Conceptualism and the important anti-institution artists of the same period. Szeemann’s lasting effect on the role of the curator might be summed up by Hoffman’s reverence for him; in a short book in which Hoffman maps Contemporary curating from A to Z, acronymically following the alphabet for a summation of the role, he finishes the book with “Z > sZEEMANN.”

He describes Szeemann as “largely responsible for the fundamental shift in curating from the models of centuries past to the role we know today,” and describes his comprehension of the “theatrical potential of the exhibition environment.”

Beginning in December 2015, the contemporary space of the Museo Marino Marino opened the first solo exhibition in an Italian institution of the Argentine artist Pablo Bronstein. The site-specific exhibition, organized by Florentine curators Alberto Salvadori and Leonardo Bigazzi, Studies in Mannerist Decomposition, is an array of works in different mediums including installation, refined drawing as well as video pieces. Bronstein, “has focused on the re-elaboration of the stylistic and decorative elements of European architecture and theatre from the

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9 Obrist, “Harald Szeemann,” 81.

10 Jens Hoffman, Curating from A to Z, (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2014), 75.

11 Ibid.
Renaissance onwards,” in which the artist creates a meta-history of architecture. The works of the exhibit articulate quite wonderfully various eras of architecture, both in reality and in jest, by stipulating hypothetical arrangements of motifs and histories that culminate in Bronstein’s field drawings that grow less embellished and more conceptual as the exhibition moves on.

The subject of the exhibition follows a hypothesized meta-history of a church that stands adjacent to the museum. Bronstein, while not a major player on the Contemporary circuit of biennales, is a contemporary artist — that is, one who is creating work today and has a long CV that even includes a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In *Studies in Mannerist Decomposition* Bronstein’s work is spread throughout the crypt of the repurposed space in a traversable way, first as installation and then as a collection of many drawings interspersed with some films. The installation objects are prisms, some small and on pedestals, others large and reaching almost to the ceiling from the floor (fig. 7). The objects are covered with photographs of the church, digitally altered to include gaudy architectural motifs for the purpose of rewriting architectural history. While the exhibition curators attempted to make Bronstein’s work Contemporary in its installation, the exhibition lacks qualities that make it utterly vanguard. This fact that Bronstein’s exhibition is not avant-garde — in the Contemporary sense of the word — or provocative in its approach, content or form does not make the art worse or less aesthetically consequential. However, it does exemplify the differences between the exhibition, and something else that we might consider part of a Contemporary vanguard.

The tradition of installation has become a popular one in the last decades, but Bronstein’s works do not use this to engage in any social critique or anti-market sensibilities. In this way

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Bronstein engages in the artistic traditions of the twentieth century, but only superficially. His prisms, for example, are informed by the minimalist structures of the 1960s, such as the structures created by Robert Morris for his exhibition at the Green Gallery in New York in 1964 (fig. 8). At the time, the works were revolutionary in that they heralded in a completely new approach to artistic creation. Morris created structures, neither paintings nor sculptures, that were not intended to be analyzed or rationalized; “a new model of meaning was put in place by this sense that everything in the work existed only on its surface, a surface itself constantly vulnerable to the play of light and of the viewer’s perspective.” While Bronstein’s installation echoes this Minimalist composition, it also withdraws from the anti-meaning prevalent in the work of the Minimalists. The work of Bronstein is instead imbued with narrative; in fact the progression of the work tells a meta-narrative history. Bronstein’s historical path is framed by the field drawings of the church as it devolves from absolute and spiritual beauty to repurposed kitsch in its use as parade float assemblage and front yard decoration. It is a cunning stab at postmodern appropriation of artistic elements, but the work itself utilizes artistic approaches — such as the installation of Minimalist structure — as motif in its creation and superficially exploits a model of exhibition organization as well.

Before discussing another artistic approach and tradition from the twentieth century which informs Contemporary art, it will be useful to define the principles for what I have outlined earlier in this chapter as the Contemporary circuit. To understand important Contemporary artists and exhibitions that rally against institutional hegemony and homogenization, it is first imperative to understand the consistently more homogenous nature of

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art exhibition beginning in the post-war landscape and promulgated until this day. Later in this chapter I will discuss the work of Nina Beier, a Contemporary Danish artist, whose work engages in a tradition left behind by the Conceptual artists of institutional critique, in part by creating works that are impermanent. But those same works also confound the nature of the circuit, by being unsellable and un-showable after a certain point. She creates works that mobilize anti-market sentiments in a novel way, while embracing the artistic traditions of the readymade and anti-institutional critique pioneered in the twentieth century. The Contemporary circuit, as I am using it here, can be defined as the organized network of institutions — including museums, galleries and private art foundations — that exhibit and organize art, thereby creating a self-perpetuating catalogue of Contemporary art history. It is inherently hierarchical, hegemonic and based in the institutional model. However, it is also paradoxical, in that it promotes and is concerned with many artists and approaches — like Nina Beier’s — that are opposed to the circuit. This inter-woven system of white-cube galleries, biennales — sprouting up in every corner of the world — and mega-institutions is the product of a globalized art world.

The “white cube” is an idealized format set forth for art exhibition during the post-war gallery-dominated art circuit. Four white walls “which might be considered a blank slate, typically a gallery and sometimes a museum,” became the norm for presenting art to the public, in the hope of increasing “the aura around an object” separating the “object from its ‘real world’ context.”14 It might be said that the idea for the white cube model began with an exhibition by the French artist, Yves Klein who was a part of the loosely-grouped movement *Nouveau*

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14 Hoffman, 66.
Realisme. In *Le Vide* (The Void), Klein removed everything from the gallery space at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris, and painted the walls a stark white (fig. 9). The emptiness contrasted starkly with the gallery walls, as the artist exhibited space, using nothingness as medium. Jens Hoffman explains in another part of his almanac for curating that exhibition-making is moving away from this ideal, after it was exposed in critical writing to in fact be non-neutral space, “posturing an environment that could let art speak for itself, and even worse, of erasing notions of difference and specificity in favor of a hegemonic system of visual control.” While many institutions, museums and galleries alike, have begun to move away from this idealized mode of presentation, it is still utterly prevalent when experiencing Contemporary exhibitions. Despite large anti-institutional critique, and the cries of anti-homogenization, the white cube remains the foremost form of exhibition, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. In the same exploration of its merits and critical failings, Hoffman writes that:

> While most of the works in a white cube exhibition, remain static, viewers travel within the space. Their paths, however, can be loosely guided through the display of objects but never definitively choreographed or over-determined.

This positioning of work in a static format has become a staple of Contemporary art exhibition, however, many great artists, and curators, rebel against this presentation. This is indicative of a component of the Contemporary avant-garde.

We must also briefly look at the institution of the Biennial, related to its early ancestors like the World Fairs and Universal Expositions of the nineteenth century. The Contemporary

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15 The full title of the exhibition is, *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l’état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée, Le Vide* (*The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void*).

16 Hoffman, 66.

17 Ibid, 68.
biennial has the “grand” goal to “assess the developments of the past 24 months within the vast field of international contemporary art and encapsulate them in one exhibition.”  

In recent decades, more precisely the last two, this Western tradition has been absorbed by many other parts of the world to “create a plurality of centers,” ranging from Tehran and Mumbai to Shanghai and Guangzhou, all with their own contributions to the globalized Contemporary circuit. Contemporary art cannot be defined just temporally; rather it has to do with the current global tradition as it is catalogued and mapped consistently by its own exhibition, and is thus “spatiotemporal through and through.”

This discussion refers mostly to large contemporary art centers, and Florence is different, not just because there is less Contemporary art exhibition; Ricardo Lami points out: “We don’t have white cubes in Florence.” The contemporary portion of the Museo Marino Marini is neither a white-cube gallery participating in the current commodity-driven art market, nor an exhibition giant like the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. It is somewhere in between a small and large institution, and in between an archaic exhibiter and established center. It is the potential symbol of the way Florence avoids participating in the contemporary art spectacle, by exhibiting contemporary art when defined temporally, and with Contemporary motifs as defined by organizational methodologies. It avoids the so-theorized plight of the Contemporary art museum: “forced, by the imperative for growth,

18 Hoffman, 6.


20 Ibid.

21 From the same NYU Florence conference discussed on page 2 of this chapter.
to compromise their commitment to the new and difficult by embracing the entertaining and profitable.”

In a short stay at a Contemporary art museum, the anthropologist-by-trade Matti Bunzl decided to observe the structural environment of the Contemporary institution through the perspective of a debate in Contemporary art history concerning the apparent disappearance of a radical — not necessarily politically — avant-garde. His anthropological approach, although informed by his position as knowledgable collector of Contemporary art, is an interesting way to broach the question of the missing Contemporary avant-garde, if one is to acknowledge that this is the case. During his six month internal observation of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago as they prepared to mount a blockbuster exhibition of Jeff Koons, Bunzl offers a fairly pessimistic view of the Contemporary art institution. He does state, however, just before providing brief summary of the critical debate on the disappearance of the avant-garde that “if the avant-garde is dead, the museum is not to blame for killing it.” He describes the cycle of growth that forced Western museums of Contemporary art to descend into a more corporate model in the second half of the twentieth century. In tandem with the success and popularity of post-war art, museums developed marketing, fundraising and other new departments dedicated to increasing viewership to support costs of growth. Bunzl makes the claim that marketing is a fairly new development for Contemporary museums; today it is a standard part of museum organization. The institutions, he observes, once catered towards “small groups of cognoscenti and worried little about attracting the general public,” whereas in the face of the Contemporary

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23 Ibid, 7.
art museum’s “reinvention as major civic players,” this changed quite dramatically.\textsuperscript{24} What Bunzl neglects to mention and consider, however, is the origin of this imperative for growth and reinvention.

The \textit{New Yorker} art critic Peter Schjeldahl has somewhat famously been cited to say “that the ritual anti-commercialism of the late ‘60s and 70s has had ‘roughly the impact on capitalism of a beanbag hurled against cement.’”\textsuperscript{25} This is not because their artistic output was misread, but because the fundamental structure of the exhibition of art catered towards the art-object-as-commodity. The anti-institutional artists in the 1960s and 1970, who critiqued the commodity status that was imbued into art objects, gained popularity in tandem with the absorption of the avant-garde into mass-culture. The avant-garde became “a tradition,” and it is after this paradigmatic shift — after the avant-garde was no longer an element of fringe-culture operating outside of the mainstream — that the Contemporary institution became interested in increasing viewership.\textsuperscript{26} This shift into tradition was described by the poet John Ashbery in 1968; he explained that the avant-garde had “come full circle,” to the point that the experimenting artist was no longer “creating in a vacuum,” but instead “at the center of a cheering mob.”\textsuperscript{27} Bruce Altshuler stipulates that at this time, “vanguardism ultimately become little more than a stylistic matter, the development of a new look.”\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Bunzl, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Gablick, 55.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 137.
\end{enumerate}
The argument that the avant-garde disappeared towards the end of modernism has been around for decades. Even the monumental critic of Modern art Harold Rosenberg, who coined the term “action painting,” proposed in 1968 that “art today, whatever its merit, is not avant-garde,” after outlining that an avant-garde must be centered around a group ideology as well as characterized by something new.29 He reminds the reader that after the 1920s, when the “political and esthetic vanguard split apart for the first time,” artistic revolts became purely aesthetic ones, and were “welcomed by the middle class as solace.”30 While movements in the beginning of Modernism relied on shocking the middle class (the mass public), and destroying what came before it in a move of renovation, Rosenberg claimed that it was already impossible to shock when the avant-garde became a tradition. It is not a coincidence that both Ashbery and Rosenberg’s essays cited here were published in the same year, and that both define the avant-garde in similar ways. The consensus, held then, that the avant-garde was fading at the hands of exacting commodity-driven art institutions, was in the air. In May of the same year, students throughout the West protested the Vietnam War at college campuses and museums all over the world. Artists were beginning to arm themselves with the same feeling of protest and institutional critique that informed much of the Conceptual art that was unfolding.

During and after the post-war decades, we can map the birth of the term “Contemporary” in the way we implement it today, which appeared “as a result of the need to find a replacement” for Modern, “rather than as a matter of legitimate theorizing.”31 Medina characterizes the

30 Ibid.
31 Medina, 11.
assertion that the avant-garde died at the hands of “cultural subversion,” as a “ridiculous argument.”\textsuperscript{32} He instead casts a partially-damning shadow on the postmodern world in which the observer is perpetually barraged by images, and says quite astutely that “the new’ could no longer be considered foreign” in this contemporary subjectivity.\textsuperscript{33} In fact, the critic Suzi Gablick cited Irving Howe’s idea of the “decline of the new,” as early as 1984, and argued that “it has become harder and harder to believe in the possibility of yet another stylistic breakthrough, yet another leap into radial form.”\textsuperscript{34} Gablick’s essay should be read with many grains of salt, as it “was written at a moment of irrational exuberance,” making her arguments sound more like pure denunciation for the sake of fading principles, rather than sound critique.\textsuperscript{35}

Medina’s points are more optimistic — and similarly rooted in a post-Marxian dialectic — than Gablick’s as they point to the strength of Contemporary art. Contemporary art has the task of “protecting cultural critique and social radicalism from the banality of the present,” and with this inherited responsibility, we begin to see that avant-garde art is not dead, but has instead changed its cause, as well as shed its radical nature.\textsuperscript{36} Through Medina’s somewhat reserved and unenthusiastic optimism, we can begin to understand that decrying the absent avant-garde is in many ways a rejection of the Contemporary, and with that, a rejection of the present. The art historian, critic and curator Pepe Karmel writes:

\textsuperscript{32} Medina, 13.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{34} Gablick, 11.
\textsuperscript{35} Bunzl, 4.
\textsuperscript{36} Medina, 21.
There have been few—or no—significant formal innovations since 1970. Not in the US, not elsewhere. Some critics and scholars take this to mean that the history of art came to an end in 1970, and that everything since then is an epiphenomenon. That seems absurd. Much terrific art has been made since 1970. It is distinguished, not by formal innovation, but by the way it crystallizes and expresses important experiences of life in our contemporary world.37

On the same note, Obrist claims:

We live in a time that is more atomized and has far fewer cohesive artistic movements. And yet there seems to be an urgent desire for a radical change that may allow us to propose a new situation, to name the beginning of the next possibility rather than just look backwards.38

So who are the artists that are part of this beginning, and how do we identify them? This question exemplifies the importance of the modern exhibition maker. Jackson Pollock was still relatively obscure in 1949, not yet “discovered by the mass magazines” like Life and Time, or by mass culture, although some of his famous drip paintings did make it into Life that year under the mocking pretenses which asked whether he was the greatest painter in America.39 It took important critics and historians, revered at the time as the arbiters of contemporary art history, to parse the art world and analyze it. That is not to say that the critics and historians did not take liberties with their histories to focus on certain movements and forget others. Within a few years of the aforementioned Life article, Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists were world famous, and the artists of the following decades revolted against the critical theory surrounding Abstract Expressionism: the notion of Modernist “flatness” perpetuated by the critic Clement Greenberg


39 Ashbery, 133.
especially. Today curators, participating in the circuit of Contemporary art history create the texts — which are exhibitions, whether in a white cube, gallery, biennial or large institution — to map the Contemporary field.

To bring an artist whose work both exemplifies and accentuates the definition of the Contemporary vanguard in how I have laid it out here, we should return to an exhibition discussed in greater length in the previous chapter: *Anche le Sculture Muoiono* from the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzina. Nina Beier, whose work *Perfect Duty* (2015) was discussed briefly with regards to Beier’s embrace of the impermanence of the art object, stands in exemplary contrast to Bronstein and his installation works (fig. 6). To briefly re-examine the compositional structure of the sculpture, Beier’s work was constructed from temporarily borrowed found objects: Persian carpets, Neo-classical sculptures and banknotes. After the close of the exhibition the objects were returned to their lenders, the carpets to an online merchant, the sculptures to the Palazzo Pitti and the money to the Strozzi.

Beier’s work embraces all four elements outlined above that comprise Contemporary works of art. It engages in the circuit of Contemporary exhibition, in a show organized by Lorenzo Benedetti, a young curator. *Anche le Sculture Muoiono* is a prefect example of the power of Contemporary art exhibition as it engaged in serious dialogue with the contemporaneous exhibition of Hellenistic bronzes on the main floor of the museum. The strength of Contemporary art was matched by the weight of history as the two exhibits conversed between themselves. In addition to participating in the Contemporary circuit, the work is easily placeable within the Contemporary tradition of creating anti-market work. While the critique is less visible in Beier’s work than in traditional anti-institutional works, such as those of Hans
Haacke, the sculpture is inherently critiquing the institution and art market commodity system by ceasing to exist after the end of the exhibition; one cannot market or sell something after it is taken apart and the parts are returned to their owners. Beier is also using a renovated form of the Duchampian readymade, but only for the duration of the exhibition. She does nullify the functionality of the money and the carpets, employing them as mass produced found objects, and she also interestingly negates the aesthetic value of the sculptures; all three types of objects are used as readymades, but their functional or aesthetic value is returned once the objects are returned to their lenders.\(^{40}\) Beier is engaging in an implicit dialectic with the use of the Duchampian readymade. In addition, the work directly admonishes the art object as commodity by showing the “money, art, and the carpet as symbols of commercial exchange.”\(^{41}\) Perfect Duty also embraces the traditions of Conceptualism from the 1960s and 1970s within which the concept of the work is assigned more importance than the work itself. Again, the assembled object’s impermanence is indicative of this Neo-Conceptual approach. Lastly, the sculpture participates in the tangible use of twentieth-century artistic practices and approaches in that Beier uses the readymade — to a degree — in assembling the work. Beier’s work is profoundly avant-garde in the Contemorary sense. She engages in the use of Contemporary traditions assumed from the early twentieth-century and post-war period, as well as mounts this work within the space of the Contemporary exhibition.

\(^{40}\) See the following chapter for the discussion of Marcel Broodthaers’ work who engages in a very similar, albeit more prolonged and critical way, negation of both profane and artistic objects so that he may use them as readymades.

The Western art world changed quite drastically in the post-war climate. The moment saw the birth of galleries as major players, as well as the beginnings of large museum institutions as social and civic players. Movements such as Abstract Expressionism in New York, Gutai in Japan, Nouveau Realisme in France, the beginnings of Pop in London and a large number of others either responded or critiqued the trends that empowered them. However, it was then, precisely after the war that the cogs of the institutionalized machine of Contemporary art began to turn in synchronous and ever-faster motion. At first artists used this as kindling to fuel ever-more-potent critique, but the avant-garde could only “maintain its oppositional stance just so long as it kept a decent distance from the dominant cultural and economic institutions,” but with the growth a culture of the avant-garde “that gap began inevitably to close.”42 As Altshuler makes clear in the sentences following this statement, it is ironic that “this period of growth generated a profusion of avant-garde activity at the same time as it developed the cultural system that would quell the disorder,” referring to the categorically avant-garde movements listed above as well as many others.43 The post-war landscape gave rise to the consumerist and materialist model that allowed for both serious artistic reaction and the creation of the system of art that exists today.

I have shown here that the avant-garde is not missing from the Contemporary art movement. The Contemporary vanguard is instead within the movement itself, operating under loose parameters of importance, but with a resolute purposefulness. The Contemporary vanguard does not revolt aesthetically or politically, however, it does embrace the approaches and practices

42 Altshuler, 9.
43 Ibid.
of artists and movements from the twentieth century. While some critics, such as Suzi Gablick and Donald Kuspit have lamented this change as the death of the avant-garde or even more absurdly, the end of art, it becomes clear that their points are framed by an out-of-date cynicism and the use of inappropriate criteria. The renovation of art is not crucial for artistic production, and the lack of it is not indicative of artistic death. The only assumption reasonable to make is that catalogued movements have been lost, and with that we see a continuous stream of art addressing vast collections of differing themes. This does not mean that art production, criticism and curation are lost in a void, but is only to say that Contemporary art history and the Contemporary avant-garde do not function in the same way as they had in the past. Contemporary art history is in the hands of curators who are informed by the major exhibition-makers born of the 1960s and 1970s, and in the hands of curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, Jens Hoffman and the less-famous Lorenzo Benedetti, that Contemporary history is safely catalogued for our viewing pleasure.
Chapter Three

The Evolving Readymade: Marcel Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel, Marcel Broodthaers’ Eagle Eggs and Nina Beier’s Dogs

In the previous chapter I proposed a loose set of criteria and parameters for Contemporary art, and re-examined the traditional twentieth century definitions of the avant-garde. One of the four classifiers I maintained is crucial for art to be Contemporary, in terms of its definition as an artistic movement or epoch, is the participation and embrace of approaches and traditions of artistic practice from the twentieth century vanguards. The example of the readymade, first implemented by Marcel Duchamp with a series of found objects — for example Bicycle Wheel (1913), a dislodged bicycle wheel mounted onto a wooden stool — created art that was not — in the language of Duchamp — “retinal” work, or aesthetic objects for the eyes (fig. 10). The implementation of a readymade nullifies the functionality of a found object and reactivates it as an art object; this marks the change from “artist-as-maker to artist-as-chooser,” as the artist’s choice of an object is itself a creative act.¹ Benjamin Buchloh, a leading art historian and critic on Conceptual Art, refers to Duchamp’s readymade as a “strategy,” which implies that its implementation in 1913 had a goal: in Buchloh’s words, this was a response to “Duchamp’s concern for the destruction of the aura and the abolition of the hieratic individual object.”²

¹ Tate Modern, “Readymade,” Tate.org.uk, http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/r/readymade#introduction

Contemporary sphere has left a purposeful mark on art history. In this final chapter, I would like to explore the changing applications and uses of the readymade as a critique of object representation and the institution, referencing artists discussed in the previous chapters as well as other artists implementing differing structures and concepts as readymades in the Contemporary sphere. In analysis of institutional critique throughout the twentieth century through to Contemporary art, there is traceable trend line that leads to the current artistic tradition of re-implementing artistic structures and gestures under the auspices of post-modern critiques of the art object and its place within an artistic institution or circuit. In the years since Duchamp’s first instantiation of a found object as readymade, other objects, groups of objects and concepts have been used as readymades by different artists. The evolving implementations create important markers along a trend line which elucidate differing artwork-as-commodity critiques throughout the past century, leading up to an endpoint which informs us of a particular illumination pertaining to the sphere of Contemporary art: that Contemporary artistic production’s apparent plurality is instead characterized by a poignant singularity in production. The singularity I refer to is not categorized by artistic intent or the artwork’s content necessarily, but is instead characterized by the appropriation and evolution of artistic gestures in postmodernity. In a different essay, Buchloh asks whether the strategy of Duchamp’s readymade “seems to have lost its viability in contemporary art,” although his essay was originally published in 1985, so he refers to a different set of artists and a different era of “contemporary.” It seems that for the then-contemporary figures, such as the artists of the pictures generation for example, and the present Contemporary figures as well, the readymade was not just appropriated for postmodern

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use, but instead mutated in application and strategy to accept different approaches and gestures — and it has done so steadily throughout the last century. In any case, “the history of the readymade,” in its continually adapted implementation, “can illustrate the degree to which discursive formations are subjected to a multiplicity of forces and interests, latent and manifest, external and internal, during the varying moments of social reception.”4 The history of the readymade, specifically in its critique of the institution and art object commoditization, informs Contemporary artistic practice both directly and indirectly, and is a crucial criterion within artistic production in the sphere of Contemporary art.

Liam Gillick is a Contemporary English artist, whom Matti Bunzl considers “about as avant-garde as it gets.”5 Gillick’s work, as defined in a recent press release, has concerned itself since the 1990s with “notions of functional and aesthetic exchange,” and often deals with the relationship “between contemplation and theory in tension with the foundational logic established by his physical structures.”6 His career is akin to that of Marcel Broodthaers, who will be discussed at length later in this chapter. Both artists make use of an over-arching meta-gesture that is not medium-specific or contained specifically in visual art.

Gillick’s film, *Hamilton: A Film by Liam Gillick* (2014), is an analytic tribute to the British artist Richard Hamilton, whose work with the Independent group — an avant-garde group centered around the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in the 1950s and 1960s —

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4 Ibid.

5 Matti Bunzl, *In Search of a Lost Avant-Garde: An Anthropologist Investigates the Contemporary Art Museum*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 84. Although, Bunzl’s point should be taken lightly, as his criteria for the Contemporary avant-garde rest upon the art object’s difficulty: meaning that the work is highly intellectual and not necessarily attractive to the general public.

pioneered early concepts of Pop Art and whom Gillick considers “without a doubt the most important British postwar artist.” The film was created to coincide with a major retrospective of Hamilton’s work at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Gillick parades the viewer through the exhibit in a slue of disorienting techniques. In the most compelling segment, Gillick moves the camera through the retrospective while overlaying the swaying and spasming portrayal of the exhibition with the audio of Hamilton himself interviewing Marcel Duchamp in 1959. In the interview the artists discuss the life-span of an artwork, renouncing the concept of masterpieces and their immortal influence, “their deification in museums” as Hamilton questions. Duchamp asks whether or not an Impressionist painting continues to be an Impressionist painting twenty years after its creation? His answer, an emphatic “no,” derives from his assertion that art objects have a lifespan of approximately two decades and have a close-to-direct correlation to cultural frameworks that are necessary in the creation of the artwork, and which are imperative to keeping the work alive. Duchamp stipulates in his conversation with Hamilton that as artworks “die,” their aura fades, in the language of Walter Benjamin. Particularly relevant for the discussion here is Duchamp’s claim - albeit a somewhat roundabout one - that posterity, embodied by the museum and the spectator, consecrates a work of art. The museum, according to Duchamp, is just a receptacle of artworks that survive, and does not


9 Ibid.

10 This idea can also be related to Duchamp’s claim that the spectator completes a work of art in his famous speech “The Creative Act” (1957).
necessarily house the masterpieces of a catalogued art history that we acknowledge the artworks to be. The important point, which undoubtably informed his earlier artistic use of the readymade and his continued critique of the institutionalization of the art object, is that the museum is the ultimate authority on art history.

The institution — whether the museum, gallery, biennial, art fair or other organized system for exhibiting art — creates art history and the “historian elevates works of art to the status of cultural objects, saving them from oblivion by transforming their historical function into an aesthetic one.” This transformation was in a sense the format appropriated by Duchamp in his development of the readymade, as he instead took traditionally non-aesthetic objects and repurposed them into art objects. Duchamp himself claims, in response to Hamilton’s question on the consecration of Duchamp’s own works in museums, that artworks only survive “because there are curators of art history. And art history is not art.” The distinction that Duchamp makes between art and art history is important as it ideologically separates the art object from art history as well as from the institution. Museums not only choose which works to collect, but also create art history by deciding which works to display, maintain, restore and support materially; in this way, museums avoid the short lifespan of an artwork proposed by Duchamp by keeping the work physically animate, by separating it not only from reality, but from the contemporary culture that was necessary to create the work. The anti-institutional gestures that fueled much of the work of Conceptual Artists in the 1960s and 1970s were already apparent in the proto-Conceptual work of Duchamp. It is also apparent that those same gestures grow and mutate throughout the

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12 Duchamp, interview by Richard Hamilton.
movements and artistic approaches of the twentieth century through to the era of Contemporary art. The phenomenon that artworks are reduced to their presentation and commoditization as objects within the museum — separated from reality within the walls of the institution — was already critiqued by Duchamp’s readymades. This critique continues along the trend line of the readymade that I am outlining here, as the artistic technique and strategy changes in its form and implementation.

To better understand the anti-institutional gestures that followed Duchamp it will be useful to acknowledge another perspective on the museum’s hand within and upon art history. In an essay on the concept of the “new,” written six decades after Duchamp’s conversation with Hamilton, the art critic and thinker Boris Groys speculates that when one moves a profane object — acting as readymade — into a museum, the form of the object is not altered, but the life expectancy is as it is reified by its institutionalization. Changing the life expectancy of “an ordinary thing,” into an immortal art object changes “everything without, in a way changing anything.”

This view is somewhat opposed to Duchamp’s theory, in that Groys speculates that the museum has the power to change the lifespan of an artwork without desecrating it; for Duchamp, this is not possible as the work’s aura itself decays, regardless of how well it is maintained and historicized. Duchamp’s ideas, however, exist in the time before the mega-institutions that govern art history in the present, and definitely before the Contemporary art institution which has grown dramatically in the latter part of the twentieth century with the institutionalization of the avant-garde that I discussed in the previous chapter. The point of agreement between the two is that the art institution changes the work of art, and endows the

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work with a historical importance that may have been otherwise absent. The important inter-
connection for Groys is “the spatial relationship between the museum space and its outside.”

The museum is not only the institution that consecrates the artwork and resuscitates the work
from death, but also the “machine that produces and stages the new art of today — in other
words, produces ‘today’ as such.” He not only agrees with Duchamp’s claim that the art
institution paves the course of the past in its presentation and collection of art, but goes further to
argue that — particularly with the Contemporary art institution — museums construct the
present, by creating the new, as well. The Contemporary institution has grown dramatically in the
last decades since the beginnings of Conceptual Art, in large part, according to Groys, to
contextualize and protect that same anti-institutional art. Pertinent to the discussion here, is that
the readymade is the fundamental tool for both critiquing the institution’s commoditization of the
art object as well as perpetuating the same trend. Through critique and through the creation of
anti-art, the artist in fact creates more art that necessitates the contextualization of the
Contemporary art museum. Additionally, Buchloh points out that before the object within the
institution is both historicized and institutionalized, it is imbued with “the power of the fetish
object.” It then seems “worthy to be collected, conserved, and only then is its attraction and
success as a commodity guaranteed, and only then can it become an object of discourse and an
object of institutionalization.” The reification of the art object in the museum justifies the
grounds for institutional critique in art that begins with the Duchampian readymade. Conceptual

14 Groys, 34.
15 Ibid., 30.
Art, which emerged only half a century later in the work of artists in New York — most prominently but by no means exclusively — centered around the dealer and critic Seth Siegelaub — artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Hans Haacke and many others — confronted “the full range of the implications of Marcel Duchamp’s legacies,” and “redefined the conditions of receivership and the role of the spectator.”\textsuperscript{17} Contemporary artists have redefined — or perhaps more appropriately elaborated upon — those same conditions in the present.

While the term “Concept Art” was purportedly, and perhaps likely, first used by Henry Flynt in 1961, it is more pertinent for this discussion to look at the artist Sol LeWitt’s now more-than-famous statement that “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”\textsuperscript{18} Evidenced here is the understanding that “Conceptual Art is about the production of ideas that in turn produce the art,” or that the idea is the art, in fact.\textsuperscript{19} Conceptual Art serves as a median point between the artistic practices pioneered by the avant-garde artists of the first decades of the twentieth century, and the Contemporary traditions and uses of the readymade implemented today, in the re-use of Duchampian proto-Conceptual gestures. The readymade can act as a critical bridge in its renovated but pronounced use by Conceptual artists and its implementation by Contemporary artists; in fact, it is a methodological tradition that is carried on, and “conceptual methodology


remains silently present in a great deal of art made today.”²⁰ LeWitt denied this influence somewhat, claiming in an interview that he was “not interested,” in the scoring of chance of John Cage, which itself derived from Duchamp, and instead responded to Minimalism’s seriality, adding that his work was “a repudiation of Duchampian aesthetics.”²¹ However, Duchamp’s influence is clear when LeWitt asserts that he emphasized “the primacy of the idea in making art,” which can be easily traced back to a Duchampian approach rooted in aesthetics of the anti-retinal, and in the importance of the gesture and idea of the artist above all.²²

In a very important and formative essay by Buchloh, in which he traces the critical influences and strategies of the Conceptual Artists from 1962 until 1969, he describes the parallels between Duchamp’s readymade and the macro-gestures within Conceptual Art:

Just as the readymade had negated not only figurative representation, authenticity, and authorship while introducing repetition and the series (i.e., the law of industrial production) to replace the studio aesthetic of the handcrafted original, Conceptual Art came to displace even that image of the mass-produced object and its aestheticized forms in Pop Art, replacing an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization and institutional validation.²³

The influence and importance of Conceptual practices are clear, and will be shown in the further discussion of the Conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers and Contemporary artist Nina Beier.

It is no coincidence that in every step along the trend line, the readymade is a tool that is modified, repurposed and re-implemented to address differing forms of critique. The readymade continues to influence artistic production; Buchloh calls it the “single most important and

²⁰ Heiser, 95.
²² Ibid.
consequential aesthetic strategy of the twentieth century.”24 This aesthetic strategy can address all the “object relations of the twentieth century (those of production, consumption, and possession),” and can do so “in a single lapidary gesture.”25 This malleability carries the readymade through the different movements and artistic practices of the twentieth century, perpetually changing in implementation to address differing perspectives on the artwork: firstly as an object within the complex of industrial mass production by Duchamp — and later by Pop artists as well — and in the 1960s as an object that is fetishized within the institution. Major Conceptual artists such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren and Michael Asher engaged in institutional critique.

Featuring prominently among the latter group is the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, who in his relatively short artistic career (1963 - 1976) often used an adjusted form of the Duchampian assisted readymade to critique the institution and the art object’s presentation within it. While Duchamp utilized the found object as readymade, Broodthaers reworked its implementation and also used groups of objects and often entire exhibitions as readymades. Rather than just nullifying the functionality of a found object and reactivating it as an art object, Broodthaers engaged in the creation of a determined dialogue between the art object and its representation — as well as its reification — within the institution and commoditization beyond. Broodthaers, as opposed to other artists associated with Conceptual Art, continually used and re-appropriated the found object into differing implementations of the readymade. While his critique of the institution and of object representation clearly stems from Duchamp’s work,


25 Ibid.
Broodthaers’ critique is not only more pronounced, but is also a more overt attack on the museum and the systemic commodification of the artwork.

Broodthaers’ artistic career from 1963 to 1976 can be divided into three main phases, each marked by a specific methodology. Broodthaers’s career starts with the production of smaller-scale works in which he arranges artworks from found objects. They are not assembled so much as they are composed from different objects within his vocabulary. Most often, these early works were made from or referenced mussel shells and french fries — alluding to his Belgian nationality through typical cuisine in a critique of nationalism. The difference in phases is not to say that he did not continue to utilize a form of assemblage as format in his later work, but only to point out that after 1967, his approach differs. His second phase is characterized by a pointedly more serious critique of the museum as a cultural institution and of the art-object-as-commodity. Most indicative of this is his creation of a fictional museum, with which he organized temporary exhibitions beginning in his Brussels apartment. The third phase “is devoted to a series of retrospective exhibitions under the concept of décor.”

Before declaring himself an artist in 1963, Broodthaers wrote poetry, influenced by the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, whom he regarded - albeit in a causal letter - to be the “‘father of contemporary art.’” When Broodthaers announced his move to the visual arts, a somewhat dramatic proclamation, the intent was not to end his career in poetry and start anew, but rather to continue his work with new means. It is not surprising that one of his first artworks was informed, quite literally, by his poetry: *Pense-Bête* (1964) is a sculpture that clearly illustrates

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27 Rainer Borgemeister and Chris Cullens, “‘Section des Figures:’ The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present,” *October* vol. 42 (Autumn 1987), 140.
Broodthaers’ distinct use of the found object, which differs in approach from that of Duchamp (fig. 11). The sculpture was created by taking the remaining unsold copies of his book *Pense-Bête*, the original wrapping paper still visible, and embedding them into a plaster base, with plastic objects fused into the plaster as well. Broodthaers uses his book of poetry to create an “economic and social reflection,” linking the object to himself “both biographically and economically.”\(^{28}\) By inserting his unsold copies of the book, thereby making the copies unreadable, the art work’s existence is intrinsically linked to the nullified function of the book; if one were to rip a book from the sculpture in attempt to read it, the artwork would cease to exist.

In this way the work questions the status of art object as commodity, which “implicitly asks the spectator why he or she refused to be a reader and wished to become a viewer instead.”\(^{29}\) Buchloch described the sculpture in its negation of discourse by making the book unreadable. In this negation, Broodthaers questions the relationship between the art object and language, as well as between the art object and the spectator or reader. Buchloch writes:

> The transition from language to object, the object-language of art and art’s capitulation to the status of language are the critical points of Broodthaers’ investigation. If material concretion, objectivation within the discourse of art, has become impossible without being simultaneously appropriated by the ideology of the culture industry, and thereby made to support and affirm the very same socio-political conditions that it originally set out to negate, then that discourse itself has to be critically negated.\(^{30}\)

With his very first artistic work, Broodthaers engages in a “strategy of inscribing the work into the institutional form,” which appears “as a dialectical approach toward the conditions of

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 63.


contemporary object production.”³¹ Pense-Bête is a perfect example of Broodthaers’ critique of how avant-garde works attain commodity status after their institutionalization: “Broodthaers perceives the various processes that lead into plastic material concretion as processes of reification, commodification, and ideological appropriation.”³²

Broodthaers’ critique of the institutionalization of the art object, and the institution itself, grows even stronger during the second phase of his work. He often used his own writing and previously exhibited art objects as the components of his work, by assembling the materials as well as curating exhibits that echoed this similar approach. As early as 1967, Broodthaers had already begun to assemble the work he had created up to that point into, what can be called, small retrospectives. In 1968 Broodthaers opened the Musée d’Art Moderne, Départment des Aigles (The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles) (1968-1972), a fictitious museum under the auspices of which he staged multiple temporary presentations in European capitals — which he called “sections.” Broodthaers took the exhibition, or the museum itself, as an artwork and as a critical framework.³³ With that move he essentially makes use of the exhibition as readymade, moving past the Duchampian found object. The fictitious museum has “an autonomous existence as an artwork,” founded with the intent to avoid the traditional classification of artworks.³⁴

Section des Figures (1972), a section exhibited in Germany by the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, was comprised by many different objects; some were borrowed from

³³ Wall text, Marcel Broodthaers: A Retrospective, 2016, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.
³⁴ Borgemeister and Cullens, 137.
different international institutions including recognized art objects (paintings) while other objects were a mundane assortment of champagne corks and similarly banal examples. All objects represented an eagle in some way, which unified the diverse arrangement of objects into a critique of the image, and contained an implicitly clever reference to the eagle's symbolic representation of power throughout history, most recently in Fascist-era Germany, now shown in a post-war context. Among the traditionally recognizable works of art, were works by famous artists such as Gerhard Richter — who was commissioned by Broodthaers for the section — and René Magritte. Next to each object there was a tag that stated, in French, German and English, that “This is not a work of art.” Each object previously defined as an artwork might be considered something of a “reciprocal readymade,” which Duchamp defined as using a Rembrandt painting as an ironing board. Broodthaers’ positioning of the works, however, goes a step further than Duchamp by negating “the identity of these artifacts as works of art” altogether, thereby reversing the readymade process, making all the objects in the section “appear as simple objects.” In reverting the traditional painterly artworks to non-art objects, Broodthaers allows himself the opportunity to now use the negated artworks grouped together with the other objects exhibited as a singular object: the exhibition of objects that are not works

35 Magritte was a huge influence on Broodthaers, evidenced by Broodthaers’ appropriation of the image of the pipe, consistently utilized during his career.

36 Borgemeister and Cullens, 149. This is partly in reference to Magritte’s famous painting La trahison des images (The Treachery of Images) (1928-1929), in which he paints a pipe and writes below: “ceci n’est pas une pipe” (“this is not a pipe”).


38 Borgemesiter and Cullens, 143.
of art. The *Section des Figures* is thus itself an autonomous work of art, taking a group of nullified objects as one assembled readymade.

Another skillfully critical move within the section is Broodthaers’ questioning of the presentation of an art object, and the inherent value given to an object, when exhibited within the context of a museum. He “concentrated on the relation between cultural artifacts and their negation through art and myth,” by subtlety negating the value of an object through its image.\(^39\) In *Section des Figures*, three eagle eggs were presented along with corresponding scientific labels; the eggs and labels were, however, shown together with a picture of those same three eggs and labels within the same vitrine (fig. 12). In the catalogue for the section, how does one differentiate between the image of the eggs and the image of the image of the eggs? The two photographs in the catalogue “appear to be identical, an example of the gradual distantiation from the original within the exhibition itself, the very principle upon which it is based.”\(^40\) Within this strategy, falling within Broodthaers’ meta-gesture of critique, he also outlines the museum’s role in presenting the object, and in dictating a commentary on that object. The production of the catalogue, which then equates an object to its image in the impossibility of distinguishing between their photographic representations, evaluates the objects within the museum’s institutionalization of the object: “the museum transforms its objects into components of a metalanguage by appropriating their meaning, that is, by depriving them of the specificity of their own value systems, such as their history, geography, morality, and so forth.”\(^41\) Broodthaers himself explained that “the exhibition is only a proposition,” and within his exhibition, this

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 151.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 145.

\(^{41}\) Borgemesiter and Cullens, 147.
proposition and the institution’s “principle of classification” is “exposed as a fiction,” as the hundreds of objects maintain no hierarchical position and no contextualization.

The ideas of both Duchamp and Groys, discussed earlier in the chapter, are apparent in the motivation for the *Section des Figures*; Broodthaers is not only aware of the commodification of the art object within the museum, but he uses an adapted version of Duchamp’s readymade to critique that system. He is also incorporating ideas about the sign and the image that post-structuralist thought was addressing at the time of this work. Lastly, it is important to state that Broodthaers’ criticism “consistently entails” an even stronger “skepticism towards the development of artistic practices once they have left the traditional museum behind and have made the museum into that institution of the production of contemporary art instead.” This is reminiscent of Groys’ assertion that the institution produces past art history, but also “the new,” and in doing so catalogues Contemporary art history as well. The “‘historical,’ museum,” as defined by Buchloh and mourned by Broodthaers, “was relatively free from commercial interests,” and was often just a bourgeois public space. It is clear that Broodthaers’ sections by his fictitious museum “are suspended in a dialectic between, on the one hand, historical mourning over the destruction of this institutional site and, on the other, critical analysis of the museum as an institution of power, ideological interest, and external determinacy.” The Museum of Modern Art in New York opened a huge retrospective of Broodthaers’ work in 2016. It is somewhat ironic to see a detailed collection of the artist’s oeuvre within the MoMA’s walls,


43 Ibid.

as it not only critiques the institution imposing contextualization upon it, but also critiques the concept of the mega-institution of Contemporary art which MoMA can be said to exemplify. The curators of the exhibition were, however, acutely aware of this irony and presented Broodthaers’ work in a powerful way, displaying his meta-gesture of institutional critique. We might again recall Groys’ paradoxical assertion that the work of Conceptual artists often requires the contextualization of the institution that it critiques; in Broodthaers’ case, however, the contextualization is part of what he attacks.

Broodthaers’ unique artistic output points to a common sentiment during the politically-tumultuous era at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1968 students and artists in the West protested the Vietnam War in huge numbers, just months before Broodthaers created his museum in his Brussels apartment surrounded by postcard reproductions of famous artworks, crates, lamps and a large shipping truck outside to denote the common objects associated with the art institution apart from physical art. Broodthaers’ re-interpretation of the Duchampian readymade is evidence of an evolving artistic approach. Under Broodthaers’ meta-gesture of quasi-absurdist experimentation and perpetual critique of art’s commodification and representation within the institution, a new era of the readymade was ushered in. Now, the found object was able to move under that same meta-gesture to encompass entire groups of artworks and exhibitions. Rather than the Duchampian move from functional object to art object, Broodthaers had gone further to de-aestheticize the art object back to a profane object; in doing so Broodthaers was able to move from single objects to groups, as he created each section with the Musée d’Art Moderne as autonomous artworks, themselves acting as one artwork.
Moving to the Contemporary sphere, the approach of Danish artist Nina Beier, whose work was discussed in the previous chapter as evidence for the existence of an overarching Contemporary movement and Contemporary vanguard, is another example of the evolving use of the readymade from the twentieth century to the Contemporary era. Buchloh described the importance of Conceptual Art from the late 1960s and 1970s as a major “point of departure,” for the artists of the 1980s; his examples for the latter artists include, among others, Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine, artists of the Pictures generation who, especially Lawler, responded to the industry of culture, specifically advertising and the spectacle.\textsuperscript{45} He writes that the work of the artists from the 1980s is obviously “indebted in many respects to the generation of the 1960s.”\textsuperscript{46} In my proposed criteria for Contemporary art in the previous chapter, I enlist the same embrace of Conceptual practices for Contemporary artists, and Nina Beier is no exception. Her work \textit{Perfect Duty}, discussed at greater length in the previous chapter, implements the readymade in that she uses different borrowed found objects as medium components in her work for their monetary and commodity value to address elements of commodity exchange. Beier, however, also uses a different approach to the structure of the readymade in her career, which again elucidates the growth and elemental changes from Duchamp through to the present Contemporary art world.

Nina Beier’s career is difficult to reduce to single series of works or over-arching approaches and gestures, however, the artist herself defines her work as “conceptually based,”

\textsuperscript{45} Buchloh, “Readymade,” 329.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
and this Contemporary concept-driven approach is largely present in her work. She works with materials as diverse as Hermes ties purchased secondhand on eBay to living dogs invited to an site-specific installation. I propose to look at two works that characteristically describe her Contemporary use of re-purposed readymades to produce exceptionally stimulating and original artworks. The first is *On the Uses and Disadvantages of Wet Paint* (2010), that not only negates the impermanence of *Perfect Duty* by proposing a work that can go on indefinitely, but also addresses the concept of the art object commodity in the Contemporary circuit (fig. 13). During the length of her 2010 exhibition *What Follows Will Follow II*, at the Yerba Buena Center for Contemporary Art in San Francisco, Beier repainted a spot on a wall outside the exhibition every few days with a roller. Beier said in an interview on the exhibition that the work is “never-ending and will continue even long after [she has] a claim for it, because that wall will be painted now, but also will be painted for subsequent exhibitions.” The work is supposed to remain in place long after the exhibition ends, and for as long as the exhibition space and the institution continues to exists. With the work, Beier challenges structures within and conceptions of the art market and the Contemporary circuit; one cannot sell a work that exists under layers of paint in a permanent exhibition space. She has not only removed the creator’s hand from the work as first seen in Duchamp’s found and mass-produced objects; she has also removed the artist’s will from the artwork’s existence in flux, starting a work that continues to change apart from the artist’s hand. In some way Beier incorporates chance into the work, as Duchamp had similarly done with his famous *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913-1914), however, the randomness of the applied paint,


48 Ibid.
during and after her exhibition, is not entirely free but is instead mediated by the museum; she cedes her creative power to the administrative power of the institution.\footnote{3 Standard Stoppages is one of the first — if not first — work to consciously employ the use of chance in the creation of an artwork. In a cleverly mocking display of the beloved French meter, Duchamp dropped three strings, each a meter long, onto a canvas allowing them to land as they pleased. He then traced their curved forms and cut the canvas, calling them each a standard stoppage in the title of the work.} The paradoxical nature of this work, one that is both anti-institutional but simultaneously perpetuated by the institution, is an integral part of Beier’s experimental works. It is both iterative and reflexive, fundamentally driven by post-Conceptual traditions and approaches. While the there is no use of found objects or readymades in this particular work, what is clear from Beier’s approach is that she continues in the line of Conceptual critique, and does so in relinquishing her artistic will. When Duchamp presented his readymade objects they were still chosen by him, the artist; when Broodthaers nullified entire groups of objects to act as one whole artwork, it was all under the auspices of an all-encompassing artwork under his control: the fictitious museum; in this particular work by Beier, however, the artist’s hand is absent after proposing the concept, reminding us of LeWitt’s famous phrase cited above.

A more recent work by Beier, however, employs a very reflexively intriguing display of the readymade in addition to post-Conceptual practices; in her installation *Tragedy* (2012), Beier takes the Duchampian readymade further than Broodthaers by using a slue of living dogs as readymades, themselves nullified performers carrying out the work (fig. 14). When Allan Kaprow first used the term “happenings” in his famous text “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” he described how art after Pollock’s death would have to move to new media and new ideas beyond the canvas and beyond paint. He analyzes the work of Pollock, arguing that after him there is essentially no more to be done with paint and canvas. Within a long list of different objects and
media that he predicts artists will begin to use is “a dog.” Kaprow’s prophetic call comes to fruition with Beier’s work in which the artist invites dog owners to bring their pets and the commands the dogs to play dead on an over-sized persian carpet. The animals remain unaware of their own mortality or of the concept of death as a whole; meanwhile we attempt to cope with the tragedy of our own foreseeable imminent death. Beier’s work is a Contemporary memento mori of sorts, demonstrating a twenty-first century application of the reformatted readymade.

Chris Sharp describes the intention of Beier’s work to be “a specious reminder of death,” and parallels the work to a still life in terms of its composition. As a still life, or as the arrangement of various forms and objects which create a compositional scene, the piece seems static, but it is not so. Instead, the installation is animated, composed of the many dogs utilized as medium for the work. The dogs are, in fact, forms of the readymade; they are the performers of the piece, acting out a command. This, in part, parallels Fluxus works from the 1960s, in which artists “performed” based on written scores analogous here to the command to play dead, as the Fluxus artists ceded the execution of the work to the discretion of the artist carrying out the score. But, in the case of Beier’s work, the actors are unaware of their actions. In her use of ignorant actors, Beier is transferring human anxiety over their mortality to an objectified and unaware actor; in their use as objects performing a functional task, a vessel of sorts, Beier employs them as readymades approaching the rug one after another.

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In the previous chapter I argued for the existence of a Contemporary vanguard, in the place of the long gone radical Modernist avant-guard. In its place, the Contemporary vanguard engages in many twentieth-century traditions — such as the readymade — and participates in elements of Conceptual Art gestures and approaches as they at once critique the institution and thrive within the circuit. This understanding of methodological commonalities between artists working today attests to the fact that Contemporary art can function a signifier of an era of art making and not just as a placeholder. As artists critique the institution but simultaneously exhibit in the contextualizing circuit — a seeming paradox of Contemporary artistic production — the result is the continued creation of works that are similar in content but different in their reevaluation of Modern and Post-Modern artistic traditions.
Conclusion

When an overarching and ubiquitous term without a concrete definition or set of properties is given more and more credence in its continued and liberal use — such as what happened with the signifier “Contemporary Art” in the second half of the twentieth century — the term grows in the number of its referents, but loses clarity. Such is the history of the use of “Contemporary art.” I have tried to alleviate that problem here, not by providing a comprehensive term to define the entirety of contemporary artistic production, but instead by insisting on certain criteria that are common among artists I consider to be part of a global Contemporary avant-garde.

To combat the notion held by certain critics that art history died at the end of the 1970s, I argue that radical political and aesthetic notions are not the only elements necessary for cultivating a productive and meaningful avant-garde. In the present sphere of Contemporary artistic production, great artists appropriate and adjust traditions, gestures and approaches by the pioneering artists of the twentieth century to continue the progression of art history. Contemporary exhibition-makers catalogue the widening and growing field of Contemporary art in a contextualizing process that reveals the connections between the artists of the past avant-garde movements and the Contemporary artists working today.

Further research on this topic should look at the work of many different Contemporary artists such as Rachel Harrison, who often uses traditions of twentieth century artistic production such as assemblage and the readymade in a profoundly Contemporary way that engages in the critique of the institution as well the a critique of art systems. Furthermore, there are many artists working today that exemplify the points I outline in this thesis and their work should be
reconsidered and re-contextualized, if it has not been done already, in such a way as to describe Contemporary art as a thriving artistic movement and not the lack thereof.
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