

SECOND EDITION

# Themes of Contemporary Art

*Visual Art after 1980*

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# The Art World Expands

In our travels and visits to exhibitions of contemporary art over the past several years, we've encountered many unusual and challenging works of art. Here is a sampling:

- *Inopportune: Stage One* (2004) [1-1] by Cai Guo-Qiang, an installation showing nine identical white cars suspended in midair and positioned to create the impression of successive stages of a car flipping over in an explosion from a car bombing, while long tubes radiating colored light burst out in all directions from the windows (seen in the midcareer survey of the artist's work shown at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2008).
- *The Eighth Day* (2001) [color plates 17 and 18], a "transgenic" artwork by Eduardo Kac, brought together living, bioengineered, glow-in-the-dark mice, plants, and fish and a biological robot ("biobot") in an environment housed under a clear four-foot-diameter Plexiglas dome (seen at the Institute for Studies in the Arts, Arizona State University, Tempe).<sup>1</sup>
- An impressively large painted triptych by Li Tian Yuan (2001), based on a satellite image, shows progressively closer views of the artist and his infant son on the Great Wall of China (included in an international exhibition of art dealing with the interface of art and science at the National Museum, Beijing, China).
- A re-creation of Gino de Dominicis's controversial 1972 *Second Solution of Immortality: The Universe Is Immobile*, staged by the Wrong Gallery, situated a woman with Down's syndrome in a nearly empty gallery, where she sat staring at a simple arrangement of symbolic objects (seen at the 2006 Frieze art fair in London, where the stillness of the performance piece stood in stark contrast to the frenetic sensory overload elsewhere at the fair).<sup>2</sup>

As these examples hint, the world of contemporary art is rich, diverse, and unpredictable. Although painting, photography, sculpture, drawing, and the crafts still attract a large number of practitioners, these familiar forms of art no longer subsume the field. Film, video, audio, installation, performance, texts, and computers are common media

today, and artists are often fluent in several media. Artists freely mix media or may practice a medium with a long lineage in an unconventional way, such as making paintings that look like pixilated computer images or drawing with unconventional materials, such as chocolate syrup.

Contemporary art is in flux. Old hierarchies and categories are fracturing; new technologies are offering different ways of conceptualizing, producing, and showing visual art; established art forms are under scrutiny and revision; an awareness of heritages from around the world is fostering cross-fertilizations; and everyday culture is providing both inspiration for art and competing visual stimulation. The diversity and rapid transformations are intriguing but can be daunting for those who want to understand contemporary art and actively participate in discussions about what is happening.

Along with the dynamic nature of contemporary art, content matters. Looking back at the history of modern art, it is debatable whether the idea of “art for art’s sake” truly took over the thinking of modernist theorists and artists. But certainly there were periods in the twentieth century, especially just after World War II, when critics (famously the American Clement Greenberg, who died in 1994) and some influential avant-garde artists advocated *formalism*, an emphasis on form, rather than content, when creating and interpreting art. Those who are invested in formalism were and are concerned mainly with investigating the properties of specific media and techniques, as well as the general language of aesthetics (the role of color or composition, for instance). But formalism is inadequate for interpreting art that expresses the inner visions of artists or art that refers to the world beyond art. When pop art appeared in the 1960s, with its references to cartoons, consumer products, and other elements of shared culture, the limitations of formalism became evident, and a broader range of theories surfaced, including postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism, as we discuss later in this chapter.

Throughout the period we discuss—1980 to the present—artists have engaged deeply with meaningful content. Artists who have been active since 1980 are motivated by a range of purposes and ideas beyond a desire to express personal emotions and visions or to display a mastery of media and techniques. Political events, social issues and relations, science, technology, mass media, popular culture, literature, the built environment, the flow of capital, the flow of ideas, and other forces and developments are propelling artists and providing content for their artworks.

## Overview of History and Art History: 1980–2008

The past three decades have been eventful in virtually every area of human activity, including politics, medicine, science, technology, culture, and art. In the 1980s, fax machines and compact-disc players entered widespread use, the first laptop computers were introduced, and cordless telephones became available. Also in the 1980s, for the first time in the United States, a woman was appointed to the Supreme Court, a woman traveled in space, and a woman headed a major party ticket as a candidate for vice president. The Berlin Wall was dismantled, and Germany reunified in 1989, presaging the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. In the 1990s, numerous controversies raged over threats of global warming and genetic engineering of plants and animals; a sheep was successfully cloned in 1997. Also in the 1990s, a brutal civil war led to the breakup of Yugoslavia into several independent republics, ethnic massacres devastated

the African state of Rwanda, and nationalist conflicts broke out in the new states of Georgia and Azerbaijan in the former Soviet Union. Early in the 1990s, apartheid officially ended in South Africa. By the mid-1990s, the Internet system linked millions of users. In 1995, the Federal Building in Oklahoma City was destroyed by American terrorists. The 2000s so far have been extremely violent. In September 2001, the World Trade Center in New York was destroyed and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., was attacked by Islamist terrorists. The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan commenced later that fall, and in 2003, the United States led an invasion of Iraq that toppled the government of Saddam Hussein. Years later, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continue. Civil unrest and even open warfare have plagued many regions, including the Darfur region of Sudan, Jewish and Palestinian settlements in the Middle East, and Chechnya, on the border of Russia. Food shortages and famines; new infectious diseases, such as bird flu; the rising costs of oil; and increasing evidence of climate change offer a bleak outlook to people worldwide, especially in the poorest nations. Meanwhile, new economic powerhouses, including China and India, are exerting influence on the global economy. Technological changes continue to have a social impact, including new medical and scientific discoveries, new forms of instant communication like text messaging and blogging, and other growing capabilities and influence of computer technologies.

The demographics of various parts of the world have changed dramatically since 1980. Just in the United States, “the US experienced a profound demographic shift in the 1980s, with an influx of over 7 million immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. By 1990, 25 per cent of Americans (population 247 million) claimed African, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American ancestry.”<sup>3</sup> Every year, across the globe, the relocation of vast numbers of people occurs in response to wars, famines, ethnic violence, and economic pressures and opportunities. Alterations in national boundaries and distributions of power are commonplace.

The art world itself underwent major changes during the period covered in this text. Major art centers lost some of their dominance as art activities became more decentralized. The changed artistic landscape led to a significant cross-fertilization of ideas among locations across the globe. While New York City remained a primary destination on the contemporary art world map, other urban centers—including London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Shanghai, Dubai, Mumbai, Istanbul, Berlin, São Paulo, and Johannesburg—ratcheted up their support and presentation of new art to such a degree that anyone who expected to remain knowledgeably informed felt pressured to research current activities in these locations.

The art scene exploded after 1980, with a marked increase in artists, dealers, collectors, publications, and exhibition spaces. The formation of new institutions, as well as new or revamped facilities at existing institutions, expanded the number, size, and quality of locations where the latest in visual art could be seen by a growing public, including tourists seeking entertainment. Of these projects, several are notable not only for offering intriguing possibilities for the exhibition of art, but because the architectural structures assert themselves as works of art in their own right. Topping the list in terms of publicity were the Guggenheim Museum’s new branch in Bilbao, Spain (1997), designed by architect Frank Gehry, and the spectacular transformation of an enormous power station along the Thames River in London into Tate Modern (2000).<sup>4</sup> Other notable new venues include MASS MoCA (1999), which offers a vast 100,000 square feet of exhibition space in a converted nineteenth-century factory building

in North Adams, Massachusetts, and the more modestly scaled but boldly designed Wexner Center (1989) on the campus of Ohio State University in Columbus, a project by Peter Eisenman.

The fortunes and misfortunes of contemporary artists take shape, to a large degree, within the sphere of the commercial galleries that present new art. Reputations are built by the support of prominent gallery dealers and the approval of the critics, curators, and collectors who carefully monitor and judge the quality of the art featured in highly publicized exhibitions. During the era, there were frequent shifts in the zones of concentrated art activity (such as the reduction of galleries located in New York's SoHo area and the dramatic influx of galleries into the historic meat-packing district known as Chelsea by the mid-1990s), as well as numerous gallery openings and closings, which reflected fluctuations in national economies. The rise of neo-expressionism in the early 1980s, for instance, was tied to a boom in the U.S. stock market, while an economic recession later in the decade was responsible, in part, for retrenchment and attention to more modestly scaled artistic projects. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the art market boomed again and grandiose projects were under way once more. All this, of course, is not without precedent. General forces at work in society, including politics, demographics, and economics, have always influenced the history of art.

In addition to an enormous range of activities, including exhibitions, performances, film and video screenings, and lectures, presented by public institutions within facilities devoted to contemporary art, the contemporary period witnessed a surge of *public art*—visual arts activities in public settings, such as city streets, plazas, parks, and commercial facilities. Public dollars funded many of these activities, a fact that turned out to be something of a double-edged sword. The support of contemporary art with government dollars was a crucial means of enlarging the funds available to artists and institutions; in the United States and Britain, such support was often a percentage of the amount budgeted for new government-funded public construction projects.

The use of public dollars increased attention to contemporary public art (taxpayers were interested to know how their money was being spent), but the increased attention also resulted in more controversy whenever a vocal core trumpeted their outrage over a specific project. Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1981–84), located on the Mall in Washington, D.C.; Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981), installed in a public plaza near a government office building in Manhattan; and Mark Quinn's *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), a monumental sculpture of the nude, pregnant body of disabled artist Lapper (born with no arms and shortened legs), displayed on the fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square, are examples of public art projects that galvanized public opinion, both pro and con. The *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* was ultimately embraced even by its original opponents. A more conservative outlook prevailed for *Tilted Arc*: Serra's work was removed in 1989 after a lengthy legal battle. Quinn's sculpture was always intended to be temporary (the fourth plinth is used for an ongoing series of contemporary sculptures), and was on view there for only eighteen months.

In the United States, art by feminists, queers, and artists perceived to be unpatriotic or sacrilegious were particular targets of public uproar, fueling the so-called culture wars that erupted in the late 1980s and early 1990s over public funding and freedom of expression. Highly publicized controversies accompanied a traveling exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe in the early 1990s that included some photos showing homosexual activities; the exhibition of *Piss Christ* (1987) by Andres Serrano,

a photographic image of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine, which was deemed blasphemous by some religious spokespersons; the offer in 1990 by feminist artist Judy Chicago to donate her monumental collaborative creation *The Dinner Party* (1979) to the University of the District of Columbia, a plan blocked by conservative members of Congress who called the work pornographic because some interpreted the imagery as representing female genitalia; and the exhibition *Sensation* showing works by young British artists, which caused a furor and media frenzy when it opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, with much of the attention centering on Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which featured a black Madonna decorated with resin-covered lumps of elephant dung. Also under pressure from Congress, the National Endowment for the Arts eliminated fellowships to individual artists in 1995.

Political considerations influenced some contemporary artists to engage in institutional critiques. Such critiques took aim at both art institutions, with artists attempting to reveal how museums, commercial galleries, and other organizations control how art is produced, displayed, and marketed, and institutions within the wider society; for example, feminists critiqued the social structures and hierarchies that limit female potential. Politically motivated art projects were particularly prevalent in the late 1980s and first half of the 1990s.

Activist art addressed social realities that were heard and seen in the news and experienced directly by the artists involved. Art about AIDS provides a key example. AIDS began its destructive growth in the early 1980s, when the disease was first recognized and named. In the 1980s, before treatments had been developed and refined, an AIDS diagnosis was like a death sentence. "Life was lived with that bell tolling all the time," recalls writer Stephen Koch.<sup>5</sup> The association of AIDS with homosexual men at that time brought forth a wave of virulent homophobia. In response to the crisis and to massive losses from AIDS within the arts community, numerous artists, including David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring, and the art collective known as Gran Fury, put their art in the service of AIDS activism. Other arenas that provided serious political content for contemporary art included feminist politics and issues of race, homelessness, corporate capitalism, consumerism, and militarism.

In the past decade, there has been something of a stalling of artistic political activism. Although survivors of the culture wars and occasional younger artists still court controversy (sometimes for shock value more than for ideological reasons), many more artists want to engage the public, rather than challenge social and political institutions and practices. A notable trend is the supersizing of art, found in the production of spectacular, often highly crafted and technically complex, works that require teams of assistants, specialist consultants, and big budgets to realize. For example, Kac's *The Eighth Day* [color plates 17 and 18] and Cai's *Inopportune: Stage One* [1-1] were made with the help of consultants and assistants.

The history of contemporary art is not entirely a story of young artists bursting onto the scene with new ideas. While many previously unknown artists emerged after 1980, the presence and influence of older artists was important as well. For example, Joseph Beuys died in 1986, Andy Warhol in 1987, Louise Nevelson in 1988, Roy Lichtenstein in 1997, Agnes Martin in 2004, Allan Kaprow and Nam June Paik in 2006, and Robert Rauschenberg in 2008. Most of these artists were making vital work up until their deaths, so that even an art movement, such as pop art, which we normally associate with the 1960s, was evolving within the ongoing production of the oeuvres.

of Warhol and Lichtenstein. A retrospective exhibition of work by Louise Bourgeois toured internationally in 2008–09, when the influential artist was 96 and still active.

*Themes of Contemporary Art* is not a traditional survey in the sense of providing an in-depth chronological history of art since 1980. The history of art over the past thirty years is fantastically rich and involves many diverse stories, motivations, influences, ideas, and approaches. Attempting to map recent art into a tight chronological structure of movements or even of collections of major artists would be premature and, in fact, would misrepresent the contemporary period. Whereas the art world before 1980 is distant enough that we can perceive some sequence of trends (really multiple intersecting and interacting trends), more recent art practices are much more pluralistic and amorphous in character. Many of the artists we discuss are in midcareer and still defining their practices. Many present tendencies are just commencing or are in midstream, and we cannot see their shape clearly or predict their future course and significance. The old-style linear narrative of one movement influencing and leading into the next is not adequate anymore. (It is debatable whether a linear model really was ever historically accurate.) As artist Haim Steinbach said (remembering the 1980s, although his statement applies to the entire contemporary period), “I see [the period] as an archipelago, in which different things were going on, on different islands. They were going on concurrently but not always moving in the same direction.”<sup>6</sup>

## Old Media Thrive, New Media Make Waves

If we cannot place contemporary art into neat compartments or a series of movements, we can still make a few broad observations about developments and tendencies in art since 1980.

Painting didn't die in contemporary art, despite predictions to the contrary made in the 1970s. Indeed, painting enjoyed something of a rebirth in the United States in the early 1980s, during the heyday of neo-expressionism, “an international movement dominated by oversized canvases and emotional gestures, and by a bustling commercial market.”<sup>7</sup> Young Americans making bold, gestural paintings, including Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Eric Fischl, were celebrated and compared to dramatic painters who had emerged in Europe in the 1970s, such as the German neo-expressionist Anselm Kiefer. While enormously popular, neo-expressionism had its detractors, who saw the artists as opportunists who simulated emotion in order to appeal to the market. By 1990, the neo-expressionist momentum had died down, but in its wake painting continued to attract critical attention, although with some rising and falling in its influence (especially when examined on a regional basis) and changes in the concerns of its practitioners. Neo Rauch, who was born in 1960 in Leipzig, East Germany, has gained great notoriety in the twenty-first century as an oil painter who continues the grand tradition of large-scale history painting. Rauch's ambiguous narratives, layered imagery, and appropriated styles conjure up a range of historical influences and references, from surrealism to Soviet-era social realism to the satires of Russian Sots Art to the neo-expressionism of the generation just before him [1-2]. In addition, like the work of many acclaimed current painters, Rauch's paintings critique the art of painting, cleverly manipulating painting's language of representation.

Like other traditional media, such as drawing and sculpture, the practice of painting saw its boundaries stretched and took on new life in the contemporary period. What



1-2 Neo Rauch | *Die Fuge*, 2007

Oil on canvas, 300 x 420 cm

Kunsthalle Hamburg

Photo by Uwe Walter

Courtesy of Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig/Berlin and David Zwirner, New York

defines a painting? Can we still recognize one when we see one? Thousands upon thousands of paintings are created each year in the familiar portable, rectangular, paint-on-canvas format. But exciting work has pushed painting into areas where it embraces unconventional materials and often overlaps with sculpture and installation art. For example, Fred Tomaselli makes “paintings” that are collages of plants, pills (over-the-counter and prescription), insect wings, and catalog clippings [color plate 19]. Kara Walker cuts silhouettes from paper to make large-scale murals [4-9]. Guillermo Kuitca and Fabian Marcaccio, two artists from Argentina, exemplify the push to open the venerable queen of the arts up to new possibilities that embrace the third dimension. Kuitca has painted maps on full-size mattresses, while Marcaccio trusses his paintings at odd angles between the walls and floor. Brazilian Adriana Varejão assembles wall-based reliefs using tiles, oil, and foam [color plate 5].

*Photography became a player.* Even as brushy neo-expressionist painting garnered headlines, the 1980s saw a rising tide of photo-based art. Artists had used photography as a medium from its officially announced invention in 1839, but it was in the 1980s that photography really escaped its secondary status and “moved to the very centre of avant-garde art practices . . . , rivalling painting and sculpture in size, spectacular effects, market appreciation, and critical importance.”<sup>8</sup> Large-scale color printing of photographs became feasible for the first time in the early 1980s, propelling the interest

of museums and collectors. Photography also exerted a noticeable influence on other forms of art, particularly some genres of painting, which sometimes seemed to be playing catch-up in striving to create a convincing illusion of the way the world "really" (i.e., photographically) looks.

Photography also expanded its own boundaries as artists gave free rein to experimentation, adopting new technologies, such as the computer, and hybridizing with other forms of art, including installation and performance. More and more photographers turned to elaborate fabrications, constructing staged scenes that they then photographed or manipulating and altering camera images after shooting. The widespread leap into digital photography in the twenty-first century facilitated and accelerated the manipulation of photographs, with computer programs, such as Photoshop, replacing the hands-on darkroom procedures needed to alter analog negatives. An example of photography's use as a tool for fabricating convincing portrayals of imaginary realms is Japanese photographer Yoshio Itagaki's intriguing concoction *Tourists on the Moon #2* (1998) [1-3].

*Sculpture as an art form widely expanded its sphere of influence, and the range of content and forms within the genre expanded as well.* In the 1970s, during the reign of minimalism, pared-down abstract sculpture predominated. Such minimalist sculpture emphasized simplified abstract volumes (what some critics referred to as "primary forms"). In the 1980s, and extending into the present, sculptors dramatically broadened the forms, techniques, and materials they selected. In addition to creating sculptures from traditional materials, such as bronze, marble, and wood, artists made sculptures from a wide array of materials as well as found objects. British sculptor Tony Cragg, for instance, became widely known in the 1980s for his wall-mounted, multipart sculptures created by arranging found plastic objects (e.g., packaging materials, throwaway plates, and plastic containers), often all of the same color, into pictographic patterns.



1-3 Yoshio Itagaki | *Tourists on the Moon #2*, 1998

Triptych, color photograph, 40 x 90 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Jack the Pelican Presents, New York

Furthermore, while sculptors continued to carve, cast, and construct discrete, unique objects, others expanded their practice so that sculpture overlapped with other art forms. Artists, such as Robert Gober in the United States and Dinos and Jake Chapman in England, produced works that incorporated multiple sculptural objects within their multimedia installations.

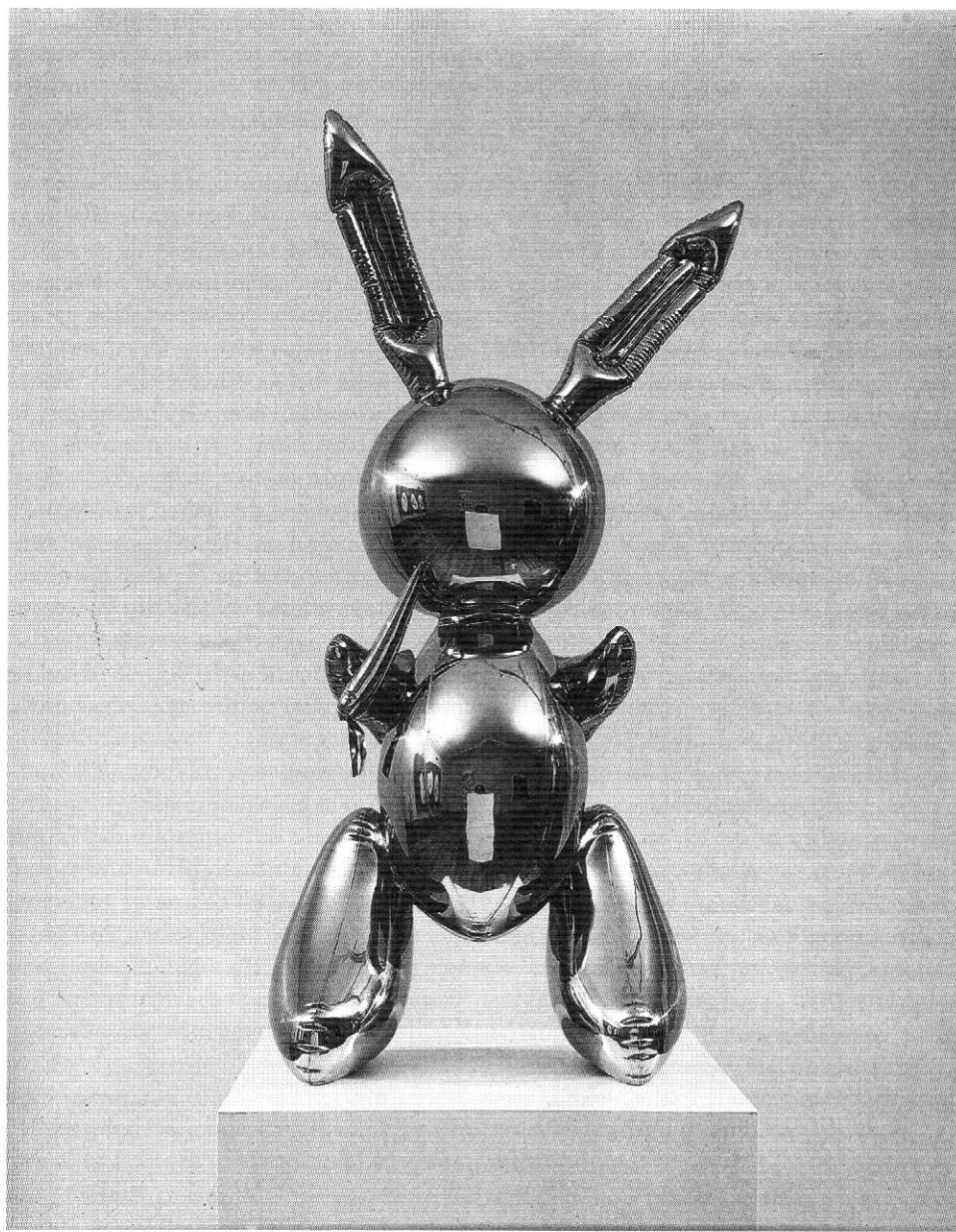
*The ready-made became the remix.* Early in the twentieth century, Dada artist Marcel Duchamp famously exhibited unaltered found objects, such as a urinal and a snow shovel, as what he called *ready-mades*, or found sculptures. Numerous artists since then have experimented with found objects and images, including other Dada artists, the surrealists, the so-called junk sculptors of the 1950s, pop artists, and a range of artists who are interested in techniques of assemblage or the conceptual implications of the ready-made. Performance artists likewise have mixed everyday movements, sounds, props, and behaviors with more conventionally theatrical elements.

In the 1980s, in line with then up-to-the-minute theories of postmodernism, visual artists adopted *appropriation* as an approach to using ready-made objects and images. Appropriation artists comb both art history and vernacular culture for found objects, styles, images, subjects, and compositions and recombine details borrowed here and there into eclectic visual pastiches. Schlock and kitsch borrowings are readily combined with details from high art, architecture, and design.<sup>9</sup>

American Jeff Koons references the slick refinement and packaging of mass-produced consumer products in the creation of his art. Koons's gleaming *Rabbit* (1986) [1-4] is an appropriation of a novelty Mylar balloon, which the artist had cast in polished stainless steel. Koons knowingly fuses and confuses commercial glitz with the polished forms of earlier modern art and the everyday subjects of pop art sculptures. Like many of his other sculptures, in which the artist appropriates actual consumer objects (e.g., kitsch statuary and toys) and remakes them in a new medium as highly crafted luxury objects for wealthy collectors, Koons's *Rabbit* appears to warmly embrace our consumer lifestyle while, at the same time, coolly appraise the shallowness of a civilization that is devoid of deeper meaning.

In the twenty-first century, new terminology has begun to emerge to capture expanded practices and ideas around the concept of the ready-made. Borrowed from hip-hop culture and the world of music, the terms *sampling* and *remixing* are sometimes substituted for the older terms *appropriation* and *collage*. The use of such terms recognizes that found-object practices now encompass the new media and data networks of the digital age, which give artists instant access to an endless supply of images, sounds, and data, as well as the tools to recombine and reconfigure them at will. What this all means for the future of artistic production and the value of old and new media is open to debate.

*New media attract artists.* Video technology attracted experimenters within the field of art, notably Nam June Paik, as soon as it became available in the 1960s. During the 1990s, video became a prominent medium, in part because its time-based character supports a renewed interest in telling stories in art and exploring narrative structures. Also in the 1990s, numerous artists adopted digital technologies as small, powerful computers became affordable and software programs facilitated sophisticated graphic manipulations. Artists used digital tools both in the service of traditional media, designing the structure for a sculpture on a computer, for instance, and as a new formal and conceptual arena in itself. With the widespread use of DVD recording technology in the early 2000s, artists, and the gallery system that derives its profits from the sale



1-4 | Jeff Koons | *Rabbit*, 1987

Stainless steel, 40 15/16 x 18 15/16 x 11 3/4 inches (104 x 48 x 30 cm)

Courtesy of Sornabend Gallery

of artworks, gained an important means of controlling the sale of video and computer artworks in limited editions to collectors. Of course, DVDs are easily copied, and in spite of copyright protection, bootleg versions of artists' original recordings are now traded and downloaded on the Internet and viewed on sites such as YouTube.

Meanwhile, fast-paced developments in digital video production and editing, holography, light art, and interactive computer sites have spawned new arenas for artistic exploration. These new media have also spilled over into the practice of other media; for example, new media are often incorporated into installation and performance art events.<sup>10</sup>

*New technologies produce new paradigms.* Today, digital technologies have the potential to alter images dramatically. Paradigms of the nature and structure of perception and conception are shifting. Particularly in the last half of the period this book covers, the availability of desktop computers and the increasing sophistication and ease of using computer graphics programs are bringing about “a transformation in the nature of visuality probably more profound than the break that separates mediaeval imagery from Renaissance perspective,” in the words of art historian Jonathan Crary.<sup>11</sup> We are experiencing an epochal shift from an analog world, a world of everyday perception, to a digital world rendered in binary code.

The computer stores vast quantities of detailed information that is digitalized into a binary code. It enables an image of any subject to be manipulated, duplicated, transformed, and transmitted to a degree that is unprecedented in human history. Digital images, of subjects both real and imaginary, can look so convincing that the distinction between the actual and the made-up is almost impossible to detect. At the same time, unlike early viewers of photographs, today’s audiences know that images are manipulated and manufactured all the time; they allow themselves to suspend disbelief in order to enjoy the illusion of reality. As a culture embracing and immersed in new media, we appear on the verge of a general willingness to suspend disbelief in the paradigm of a singular reality.

*Virtual reality blurs boundaries.* The blurring of the boundaries of fact and fabrication is epitomized by the development of *virtual reality* as a field of investigation. The term virtuality refers to “an image or space that is not real but appears to be. In our own time, these include cyberspace, the Internet, the telephone, television and virtual reality.”<sup>12</sup> Virtual reality proper generally refers to a simulated, computer-generated environment. A viewer wears special goggles and earphones and interacts with the environment by moving her or his head or manipulating controls. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the promise of virtual reality outstripped the actual achievement, but since then, advances in software and technology have made forays into virtual reality more satisfying for viewer and artist/designer alike. Experiments in virtual reality have been conducted mainly in the realm of computer gaming, but it is only a matter of time before designers/authors of interactive computer games create works in that medium that are embraced by an expanded definition of contemporary art.

*Visual culture is duplicated and shared worldwide.* In addition to enabling the rapid, radical manipulation of imagery, the computer now makes possible the almost instantaneous dissemination of images and data of all kinds. Since the mid-1990s, the growth of the Internet and World Wide Web has allowed users to transmit and receive images and other information within virtual space instantly all over the world. The digitalization of information is a powerful force in speeding up the sharing of artist-generated images in all media, as well as the appropriation by computer-savvy artists of information streams from other arenas of culture. In our role as viewers, we are no longer dependent on being in a specific place. We can plug into the Web or into our computer’s memory anywhere we have access. Acknowledging this trend, the Whitney Museum included Internet art for the first time in its Biennial Exhibition in 2000.<sup>13</sup>

Vast quantities of images and data are flowing from every source imaginable—science, art, advertising, news, entertainment, governments, and, increasingly, ordinary citizens (using personal digital cameras, cell phone cameras, scanners, and webcams). Enormous digital databases are replacing physical archives (the latter ranging from libraries to family photo albums). The creative exploration and manipulation of digital databases, as virtual structures, is now central to the practice of an increasing number of new media artists. The practice of these artists can resemble that of a virtual architect—reconfiguring an existing built structure (the database) to accentuate or reveal new properties and ideas.

In addition to the accelerated exchange of information and images, another significant quality of global visual culture is the uniformity of imagery that is disseminated by the mass media. Through this process, many people share an identical storehouse of mediated experiences. Such high uniformity of memory never occurred prior to the invention of the Internet, television, radio, cinema, and photography. With each new technological breakthrough, the capacity of pop culture to overwhelm the sphere of private experience expands. Today's mass media information culture is channeled into formats that tend to homogenize the presentation of information. Contemporary artists, however, have found ways to counteract this phenomenon. Christian Marclay combined snippets from over a hundred movies to create *Video Quartet* (2003), which is projected simultaneously on four oversized screens, and David Byrne, widely known as a musician, utilizes Microsoft's PowerPoint software to produce imaginative illustrations and animation that are a far cry from the staid sameness of most PowerPoint presentations seen in the business or academic world.<sup>14</sup>

Although the languages of digital media are in their infancy, they are bound to have a radical impact on visual art as the twenty-first century continues to unfold. Artists who are concentrating on this area are pioneers in helping us to confront what it means to live in a world of accelerated information flow from multiple channels and to find ourselves entranced by manufactured virtual worlds. Meanwhile, many of the most interesting critical theories of the twenty-first century—evolving from the emerging disciplines of new media and visual culture studies—take on the expanding varieties and sites of artistic practices as key areas of analysis. Already, the paradigm that advancing technologies produces a heightening of homogenization is challenged: when there were only three primary television stations in the United States, the commonality of television viewing among the population increased. Now, with the exponential increase in television stations, as well as the rise of alternative media, there is less likelihood that any of us is tuned in to the same programming as our neighbors.

## A Spectrum of Voices Emerges

In the United States in the period from the late 1960s to the start of the 1980s, the rebellions and successes of the women's movement and civil rights movement impacted art by opening up the stage to more voices. These newly visible participants brought new ideas to the field, as well as expanded ideas about means, media, and techniques for expressing those ideas. Since 1980, the highly visible activism of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) artists has added more voices to the mix. Although they have yet to achieve full equality, in terms of income, influence, prestige, and recognition, women and minority artists in the West have become empowered and have

had a major impact on who makes art, what art is about, and how art is viewed and interpreted. Artists of color, women artists, and LGBT artists have been at the heart of discussions about contemporary art in the 1980s, 1990s, and today. The collective imagination of what is possible in art has opened up to acknowledge diversity.

Over the past thirty years, artists have become more conscious of diversity internationally as well as in their midst. For example, beginning about 1980, the American art world in general turned its attention to artistic developments in Western Europe. Subsequently, as a result of shifts in national borders, regimes, and political and economic structures, artists from all over the world have become widely known in Western Europe and North America, often because they have emigrated, contributing to their visibility.

Artists and audiences outside the West likewise are paying attention to developments both within and far beyond their borders. New collectors and art dealers are emerging all over the world, pulling the focus from Europe and the United States as the centers of gravity. From 1980 onward, with increasing complications, artists in Africa, South America, Asia, and the Pacific have been gaining visibility on a world stage. We live in an internationalized world, where people with different cultural knowledge are meeting, mixing, and negotiating histories, definitions, and boundaries. Artists use visual means to convey positions or paradoxes about where cultures draw boundary lines and what belongs on one side or the other.

To cite just one example of a complicated path followed by a contemporary artist, Cai Guo-Qiang was born in Quanzhou City, China, in 1957 and grew up during the Cultural Revolution. He studied stage design in Shanghai before moving to Japan in 1986. In 1995, he relocated to New York City. His art production includes large-scale drawings, installations, and performance events and has involved gunpowder, fireworks, Chinese herbal medicines, computers, and vending machines among many other materials and means. Cai's elaborate installation *Cultural Melting Bath*, which has been installed in various locations, including the Queens Museum in New York in 1997 [1-5], provides a symbol of the therapeutic cultural mixing that Cai hopes his art fosters. The installation includes a Chinese rock garden, banyan tree roots, and a Western-style hot tub infused with Chinese medicinal herbs, in which a multicultural array of museum visitors are invited to bathe together. A controversial artist in China for many years, today Cai travels frequently back to China to work and served as the art director of visual and special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. His midcareer survey, which included his dramatic installation *Inopportune: Stage One* [1-1], toured internationally and was at the National Art Museum of China during the Olympics.

## Globalization

Awareness of international developments in art has made the art world more dynamic and complex. But internationalism is not an unequivocal good, particularly when art production comes under market pressure from international institutions and corporations that support the production and display of contemporary art. Increasingly, the world is becoming linked by a global economy, a development that is inevitably influencing the production and reception of art. Consumer capitalism, especially the approach developed most aggressively in the United States, made huge strides during

the contemporary period in extending its reach to global markets. The collapse of the communist system in the former Soviet Union and the economic rise of countries of the Pacific Rim, especially China with its steps toward a more capitalist-style economy, have opened up portions of the world that had been significantly insulated from capitalist business practices. Meanwhile, multinational corporations and supranational economic institutions, such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization, are engaged in activities that sometimes support and sometimes are in conflict with national interests. Systems of power are now a globalized network that is not centered in any one country (although the United States retains considerable power).

The emergence of a linked global society (linked both technologically and economically) has not resulted in international unity and worldwide equality; indeed, it is questionable whether any institution operating on a global scale can possibly represent the political, cultural, or aesthetic interests of the diverse individuals in all countries. According to Stuart Hall, "you see massive disparities of access, of visibility, huge yawning gaps between who can and can't be represented in any effective way."<sup>15</sup>

The global economy has impacted the entertainment and culture markets. International art fairs and biennial and triennial international contemporary art survey exhibitions have proliferated and are held in numerous cities on every continent (at least eighty-five locations by 2005), to the point where they are nearly impossible to keep up with.<sup>16</sup> Geographic mobility has become important, and artists, gallery dealers, critics, and collectors who have the resources to participate in international events increase their visibility and influence. The directors and curators who select artists and orchestrate the international events have remarkable status and power.

In addition to globalized markets, the emergence of new telecommunications technologies, specifically the continued spread of television throughout the world, and the rapid development of the computer and Internet for both personal and business use, has significantly promoted globalization. At the same time, not every person everywhere has access to a computer and the Internet, and new technologies reinforce privilege and power for those who are well connected to the flow of information.

Besides issues of access and visibility, another issue is the potential for homogenization of culture. One could argue that globalization is dehumanizing people and leveling out differences because it is bringing the same consumer products, images, and information to everyone all over the world. In terms of art, critic Julia A. Fenton asks, "Has the explosion of international art expositions around the world, and the mobility of artists from all cultures (either through the high art market or the internet) served to erase the particular in favor of the general—in style, content and theory? Do formal considerations again become primary when we have obliterated cultural boundaries and posited a new universality?"<sup>17</sup> Critics observe, for instance, that expensive but repetitive video and multimedia installations are ubiquitous in international surveys because they are eye-catching, as well as portable and reproducible.

At the same time, many artists continue to produce art whose materials, techniques, subjects, and forms appear to relate to local histories and identities. Such expressions of cultural difference often are genuine and can serve as a form of resistance to globalization by disrupting standardization. However, some of this kind of art is not sincere, but is a simulation of cultural difference, promoted by international capitalism because it is marketable. Fredric Jameson, an important Marxist theorist, pointed out the many contradictions in globalization, such as this argument about whether globalizing eco-

nomic forces prefer to market cultural sameness or difference. Jameson further pointed out the irony that nationalism, once seen as driving European colonialism, is espoused today as a model by formerly colonized people who want to resist the forces of globalization.<sup>18</sup> Gilane Tawadros stated, "The idea of nation continues to grip our collective imagination, equally in the art gallery as on the football pitch. Nationality remains an important vehicle for expressing a shared identity, whether real or imagined."<sup>19</sup>

## Theory Flexes Its Muscles

Numerous artists and critics active since 1980 have been heavily invested in theory and critical analysis. In the wake of conceptual art, art became increasingly theoretical and idea driven and began to sprout difficult and obscure branches. The direct embrace of theory seemed to crest midway through this period; by the early 1990s, influential art graduate schools in Europe and the United States were advocating the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and teaching analytical and interpretative skills. Discussing master of fine art degree programs in the United States, writer and curator Bennett Simpson maintained, "Employing conceptual, post-minimal, video and performance artists from the sixties and seventies, schools such as CalArts, UCLA, Art Center, Yale and the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Programme tended to privilege intellectual and critical study over the more traditional training in manual skills like drawing, figure painting and sculpture. 'Knowledge work' became detached from its antecedent, technical work."<sup>20</sup> (Although today technical skill and refined production values have become priorities again for many of the best-known artists' creations, often these works are made by assistants working for the artist or his institutional sponsor.)

Concepts from a range of theoretical perspectives, including postmodernism, semiotics, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism, to name several of the most influential, have shaped the creation and reception of art that has been produced since 1980. The theoretical critique of the period examined many arenas of visual culture, including the structure and biases of art history; the politics and practices of museums, galleries, and festivals; the nature and operation of art-market economics and how reputations are built; the visual means through which the mass media influence ideas and taste; and the representation in visual media of all kinds of identities revolving around gender, race, sexuality, age, religion, and nationality. We discuss theories in more depth as they become relevant in different thematic chapters. Here we just provide a brief overview.

*Postmodernism became a catch-all term.* The term *postmodernism* cropped up in art criticism in the 1970s, but became more commonly used in the 1980s. Writers and thinkers who engaged with postmodernism include Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, Charles Jencks, and Umberto Eco. The term is vague and open ended, initially implying an opposition to some of the tenets of modernism, including modernists' confidence in social and technological progress; faith that history unfolds in a rational, linear direction; and belief in individual self-determination. Postmodernists are skeptical about progress; tend to be anti-elitist (for example, embracing kitsch as readily as the art of museums); think that the forms of culture are hybrid, eclectic, and heterogeneous, rather than pure and easily defined and contained; and believe that individuals are inevitably molded by culture.<sup>21</sup> Postmodernists believe that we are all prisoners, to some degree, of identities that are constructed for us by the artistic and

popular media. Moreover, the contemporary world is becoming increasingly more artificial because secondhand images that are filtered through television, film, and other media now substitute for direct experiences and exert a powerful influence on how we perceive and understand the world. In addition, more and more mediated images and experiences are manufactured illusions with no basis in tangible reality—*simulacra*, to use Baudrillard's term. Baudrillard, according to art historian John Rajchman, "took the words 'simulation' and 'simulacrum' to describe the 'Beaubourg effect'—no longer able to distinguish model from copy, we had lost any sense of reality, leaving us only with 'irony,' hyperrealism, kitsch, quotation, appropriation."<sup>22</sup>

There is no single style associated with postmodernism; instead, any and all styles and visual vocabularies are valid, and pluralism rules. However, appropriation became a frequent strategy used by postmodernists. Most postmodern appropriationists mine the distant and recent past in a nostalgic fashion, usually with little true historical consciousness of what visual representations meant in their own past context. In addition to evoking nostalgia, postmodernists also quote from the past and vernacular culture with an attitude of irony or even parody.

Many artists use appropriation uncritically, simply adopting the approach as a contemporary artistic fashion. But some artists attend to the conceptual implications of the ready-made, using found objects and appropriated styles and images as a means to raise philosophical questions about whether it is possible for artists to be original or express authentic feelings and beliefs. Such artists include German Gerhard Richter, the Russian team Komar and Melamid, and American Cindy Sherman. The most politically motivated appropriationists, including American Sherrie Levine, also challenge as elitist the modernist identification and celebration of a handful of supposedly innovative artists. By appropriating, such artists imply that originality does not matter.

Although influential in the 1980s and 1990s, today the term *postmodernism* has become such a generalized catch-all term for so many different trends and ideas that it has lost nuance and functionality. Moreover, many people disavow the term as dualistic and as keeping Western aesthetics in the center by implying a dialectical relationship with modernism for all countertrends.

*Art is understood as a kind of language.* Influenced by the ideas of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, both active in the late nineteenth century, artists applied complex permutations of *semiotics* (the science of signs) to the visual arts in the late twentieth century. While linguists analyze the structure of (verbal) language, semioticians open up virtually any field of human activity as a potential subject for an analysis of the signs that function within that field. Clothing styles, rules of etiquette, codes of conduct for men and for women—all these and countless other realms of experience can be analyzed in terms of semiotics.

As scholars (and artists) surmised, all the arts also function on the basis of the conventional use of signs, so semiotics is a powerful tool for analyzing the practice of art. Art topics, such as styles of representation, the rules of linear perspective, and the metalanguage of various media (painting, for instance, signals "tradition" in a way that video does not), are ripe for analysis through the magnifying glass of semiotics. For example, Cal Lane developed a process of cutting industrial metal with a welding torch to create lace patterns in automobile fenders, garden shovels [1-6], dumpsters, and other found objects. Lace-making is understood as a feminine textile practice used for domestic purposes, while metal-cutting signals a traditionally masculine skill used to

make tools and machines. Lane, who is female, creates semiotic dissonance by mixing the two.

Theories associated with *poststructuralism* are closely identified with postmodernism and semiotics. What poststructuralism added to the mix was the concept that the underlying structure of a language or any other symbolic system is not fixed and permanent.<sup>23</sup> With individual variations, these poststructuralist thinkers argued that any symbolic system or cultural artifact (such as a language, a work of literature, a painting, or a social system)—what they called a *text*—can be shown to have internal contradictions and hidden ideologies. Poststructuralists use a strategy developed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, known as *deconstruction*, to analyze visual and verbal texts. Deconstruction looks at a text or symbolic system in terms of the underlying worldview that gave rise to it, exposing contradictions and hidden biases in order to challenge the validity of the worldview as well as the text. Derrida also argued that the meanings of texts are unstable because different readers (or viewers, in the case of visual texts) bring their own worldviews to their reading and looking, which skew interpretation. No text has any single, correct interpretation; meanings change with the reader, the time, and the context.<sup>24</sup>

According to postmodernists and poststructuralists, truth and reality are not as truthful and real as they may seem; in fact, there are many truths and many realities. All truths and realities are relative and contingent, constructed by culture, dependent on context, and subject to negotiation and change; none is inherent in the natural order of things. Moreover, today the contradictions are more apparent because the cultural landscape is filled with texts that express competing worldviews, simultaneously available and bleeding over into each other's domain because of the rapid flow of information from numerous sources constantly bombarding us. These texts interact and compete with one another (creating a condition of *intertextuality*, to use the term favored by Derrida and Roland Barthes, another influential French theorist). Poststructuralist thinkers believe that the onslaught of information in our media-saturated society has made it impossible for any single worldview to dominate. Instead, boundaries and divisions between categories of all kinds are eroding. In particular, the dualities, or binary pairs, that are so common in Western thinking and culture are no longer convincing as polar opposites. Male and female, gay and straight, white and black, public and private, painting and sculpture, high art and low art—distinctions between these and other categories dissolve in a postmodern world, and the elements merge into hybrids.

*Feminism and postcolonialism offer bolder, broader perspectives.* The perspectives of feminism and postcolonialism have profoundly affected contemporary visual culture. Feminists and postcolonialists challenge artists, art historians, critics, and audiences to consider politics and social issues. Feminists look at experience from the perspective of gender and are particularly concerned to ensure that women have the same rights and opportunities as men. Feminist theoretical critiques analyze hierarchical structures that contribute to male dominance, what feminists call *patriarchy*, that is, the cultural beliefs, rules, and structures that reinforce and sustain masculine values and male power. A key area of feminist analysis in the visual arts is the *gaze*, a term used to refer to how categories of people are stereotyped in visual representations by gender, race, sexuality, and other factors.

Postcolonialists are interested in cultural interactions of all kinds (in politics, economics, religion, the arts, philosophy, the mass media, and so on) among peoples of

different nations, regions, and communities. They examine how peoples' histories and identities demonstrate the economic, political, social, and psychological legacy of colonialism in particular locations, which oppressed indigenous peoples and resulted in *hybridity* and *syncretism*, or a mingling of peoples and cultures. They also analyze migrations and displacements of peoples (*diasporas* and *nomadism*, to use two of the current terms) and highlight the diversity of cultures that coexist in contemporary communities. Postcolonialists' attention to the visual cultures of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific has helped foster the internationalization of the contemporary art world.

Many different theories have influenced feminism and postcolonialism, and ideas and positions are constantly mutating.<sup>25</sup> The perspectives are usually multidisciplinary, drawing from literature, history, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines. Since 1980, critics and artists have used deconstructive strategies to analyze, or "decode," how power functions to limit the achievements and potential of women and postcolonial people around the world. Feminists and postcolonialists have applied other theories as well, including Marxism and psychoanalysis, and have contributed theories of their own. Postcolonialists have promoted the use of theoretical models that attempt to understand the visual arts of various cultures on their own terms, rather than in comparison to art traditions in Europe and the United States.<sup>26</sup>

The theories discussed here, as well as others that were not discussed, such as Marxist and psychoanalytic theories, permeate the production, reception, and interpretation of contemporary art. But the explicit embrace of theory has not been universal or constant over the past three decades, and its influence is often diffuse and unacknowledged, rather than systematic. For example, there has been a widespread cultural backlash against feminism; as a result, younger women artists are often reluctant to call themselves feminists, even when their art and ideas support feminist tenets.

Artists didn't seem to pay attention to theory as much after 1990, and the debates of the previous decade over modernism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism died down. According to curator Toby Kamps, in "an ideologically uncertain moment, artistic strategies of the 1980s—appropriation, critiques of commodification, deconstruction—seemed empty or calculating. Instead, artists took up accessibility, communication, humor, and play. As a style, Postmodernism, positing stylistic eclecticism, social criticism, and end-of-history irony, appeared bankrupt; as an attitude, however, it was the definitive zeitgeist. The art of the 1990s, with its interest in complexity, multivalency, and ambiguity, mirrored an uncertain, transitional period."<sup>27</sup>

Although in general over the past fifteen years artists have seemed less committed to strong political positions and not as well versed in academic theories, that does not mean that art has lacked meaningful content. To the contrary, a preoccupation with deep moral and ethical questions and resonant themes, such as political agency, spirituality, beauty, violence, sexuality, transience, extinction, memory, and healing, is a powerful current in the most recent art. The real world is treacherous and volatile. According to Richard Cork, the question posed by Joseph Beuys's 1985 work *The End of the Twentieth Century* still resonates: "Is [our era] about to terminate prematurely in a nuclear apocalypse, or will it be succeeded by an era which asserts a less destructive set of values?"<sup>28</sup> Or as Homi K. Bhabha wrote: "The '80s inaugurated a dream of difference which is now being haunted by horror and doubt: abhorrence of the 'deterritorialized flows' of global terror networks; doubts about the feasibility of global politics with the

increase in ‘homeland’ security and international surveillance; doubts about preemptive strikes; doubts about war; doubts about our rights and responsibilities for the world and ourselves. What happened to the dream?”<sup>29</sup>

We end this section with an extended example in which we unpack some of the complexities of how actual artists have engaged with theory in their creative practice. Our example addresses contemporary artists who knowingly engage with the language of abstract art in a semiotic manner.

Abstraction is intimately associated with the high Modernism of the twentieth century in Western art, which is often a target and devalued in contemporary theory. The “heroic” generation of post–World War II American abstract painters, including Abstract Expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, believed fervently in art as self-expression and maintained that artists should work intuitively as much as possible, relying on the subconscious to stimulate vital, uncensored gestures and marks. They believed that every artist has a unique, “authentic” touch, as identifiable as a person’s handwriting, which will emerge if the artist creates in a free process. They also believed that receptive viewers have a visceral response to the resulting paintings, echoing the passion of their creator. In contrast, many in our current age are skeptical that genuine self-expression is possible and argue that our “individual” expressions and responses are really just reflections of cultural conditioning. Maybe at one time a painter could make a fluid gesture that was truly spontaneous, but today’s painters must be self-consciously aware that a gestural style is supposed to be a sign of freedom, and thus they can no longer make gestures in a totally unself-conscious manner.

Artists today who engage with abstraction in a semiotic way may adopt characteristics of the abstract expressionists or minimalists precisely because they know that those devices have become conventions that a knowledgeable audience recognizes. One artist may make obviously contrived gestures to subvert the notion of painting as spontaneous expression; another artist may choose a grid or another convention of geometric abstraction to critique an earlier generation’s dreams of social utopia and “encode” a warning about ideological rigidity. For example, American painter Peter Halley has used rectangular motifs that are reminiscent of Piet Mondrian and other painters of geometric abstraction to design images that hint at diagrams for a network of passages, perhaps in a prison ward or underground bunker. American Rachel Lachowitz’s lipstick-coated copies of minimalist sculptures mock the supposed “masculine” objectivity and logic encoded in those impersonal, hard-edged structures. Lachowitz’s choice of lipstick as an art material signals, in semiotic terms, a conscious application of feminist theory to the arena of art world politics. Her choice is also inflected with humor and irony, a sign that, in the end, she realizes that her action will probably have little consequence.

Is abstract art a worn-out style from the past? Even in the face of skepticism, some contemporary artists choose to work abstractly with heartfelt commitment rather than irony. Those who argue that art is valuable when it provides a focus for perception and contemplation often prefer abstraction. The reductions of abstraction yield a strong contrast to the visual overload of mass-media images. And without recognizable images or narrative to occupy their thoughts, viewers are not distracted from the immediate sensory experience of looking. Today’s artists who are sincere about abstraction are not necessarily returning to the abstract expressionists’ notion of abstraction as self-expression. As painter Laurie Fendrich wrote, abstraction “is also about ideas—the complex struggle between order and chaos, for example, or how the flux of the organic

world modifies the rigor of geometry.”<sup>30</sup> Abstract painting can serve as an antidote to our hypermediated society.

## Art Meets Contemporary Culture

One of the leitmotifs of art over the past hundred years has been the blurring of distinctions between the realm of art and other categories of culture. In the contemporary period, the dissolution of boundaries between art and life has continued in a number of directions. There continues to be cross-fertilization between high and low art. The use of found objects and the ready-made, along with appropriation and remixing of images and styles, remains significant, frequently involving borrowings from consumer and popular culture. For example, the alternative use of comic-book and cartoon imagery and styles has become a thriving subculture of visual culture as a whole and inflects the art of Raymond Pettibon, Laylah Ali, Glen Baxter, and Christian Schumann, among numerous others. Japanese *anime* (animation films) and *manga* comics, with their supercute, superviolent, and supersexualized imagery done in an insistently flattened style, have exerted a particularly strong influence on the younger generation of Japanese visual artists. The painters Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, for instance, are known internationally for their characteristic approach to painting in the “superflat” style (a term coined by Murakami).

Distinctions between art and the larger visual culture are dissolving and even disappearing. Artists bring nonart experiences into the sphere of art; they also introduce art into the larger visual culture. Artists mingle their works with other products of visual culture by choosing not to limit their display opportunities to art venues only. Artists, according to curator Benjamin Weil, “have been exploring approaches akin to an ambient strategy, focusing on ways to insert their projects within the chaos of an overmediated public sphere. Billboards, usually designed to advertise commercial products, have been used by artists such as the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres to ‘sell’ ideas. Marquees of abandoned theaters are ideal surfaces for the placement of inconspicuous messages; stickers, posters, and other forms of street culture become compelling instruments in the hands of artists.”<sup>31</sup>

Popular culture, including television, films, rock music, and video games, has a powerful influence on artists. At the same time, art appears increasingly to be in competition with the bold graphics, seductive objects, and lively stories of commerce and entertainment. Some artists adapt by making art that has become more like entertainment, adopting strategies of display and production from popular culture; installing multimedia spectacles in exhibition sites; crossing over into the domains of film, music, and fashion; and serving professionally as consultants and even entrepreneurs in commercial enterprises, such as restaurants and magazines. Criticizing the trend, photographer Jeff Wall said, “I think a new kind of art has emerged since the ’70s, a kind that is easier to appreciate, more like entertainment, more attached to media attitudes.... It’s much closer to entertainment and depends on production value and on spectacle in a way that serious art never did before.”<sup>32</sup>

The pervasiveness of new information and communication technologies, which have been embraced enthusiastically by young people around the world, is a powerful influence on the production of contemporary art in countries from Korea to Brazil. Not only do we live in a new world of greatly expanded information, but the structure of

information has changed dramatically. The decentralized Internet of Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, MySpace, and blogs is vastly different from the world of physical library handwritten diaries; and printed books, newspapers, and encyclopedias. The Internet is bringing us closer to the concept of a universal library or marketplace where one can search for scholarly articles, news, recipes, past acquaintances, maps, weather reports, medical information, pornography, consumer products, and trivia or watch video clips on almost any subject imaginable, in formats from movies to television programs to live video footage from webcams that ordinary people have installed in their "private" living spaces. The creation of knowledge is social because anyone can add to the flow of information. Wikipedia, for instance, the online encyclopedia begun in 2001, now has more than 75,000 active contributors.

The term *rhizome* was used conceptually by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to describe nonhierarchical knowledge networks that allow for multiple entry and exit points.<sup>33</sup> They borrowed the term from the botanical rhizome, a category that includes ginger, some species of iris and ferns, and similar plants that send out horizontal stolons and shoots from their nodes. Deleuze and Guattari used the term to characterize research and thought that is interconnected but has no beginning and end, has no pathways through the system, resists rigid organization and dominating ideas, and has the capacity to link together heterogeneous elements. Cartography, which allows one to enter a map from any point, rather than follow a set path, is a long-standing example of a rhizomatic system. Rhizome theory has gained currency in cultural discourse because so many of today's systems of representing and interpreting knowledge are fluid, nonhierarchical, nonlinear, and decentered. Computer-based information technology, notably the World Wide Web, is a prime case of a rhizomatic model of knowledge. Any bit of information exists within an enormous network; anyone can enter an information stream anywhere and move among multiple pathways by links, creating synthesis of potentially unlike elements; anyone can search, duplicate, manipulate, or transmit information.

British artist Keith Tyson's monumental artwork *Large Field Array*<sup>34</sup> (2006–2011 [1–7]) is rhizomatic in structure and conception. The sculpture comprises three hundred modular units, most of which were formed from polystrene into implied two-cubes; the cubes are arranged into a grid occupying both the floor and walls of a gallery when installed. Each highly crafted unit is unique and references something recognizable from the natural world, science, popular culture, consumer products, art history, or a range of other sources. Individual sculptures include an airborne skateboarder, four stacked cans of beer, a volcano, a model of the Hoover dam, a man spanking a boy with a belt, a square patch of cornfield, a rainbow over a jackpot, and an elaborate house of cards, as well as appropriations from other artists, including Claes Oldenburg, the Chapman Brothers, and Yves Klein. A visitor can move through the cubes on the floor via multiple pathways of one's own choosing: forward, sideways, diagonally. Although Tyson fosters certain associations through his choices for juxtapositions of individual sculptures, each visitor is ultimately responsible for imagining his or her own visual, psychological, and philosophical connections and meanings among the disparate units. A kind of three-dimensional analog version of an online encyclopedia, *Large Field Array* proposes that everything can be linked without the control or singularity of a hierarchical structure. Tyson said that *Large Field Array* is a celebration of our tra-



1-7 Keith Tyson  
September 7-October 20, 2007  
Photo by Ellen Labenski  
courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York

Installation view of Keith Tyson: *Large Field Array*, PaceWildenstein, New York

tion from an industrial to an information age. “[We] embrace complexity as a positive force. We can trust the rhizome to look after itself.... The system will take care of itself. And I think we are more capable—this generation is more capable—of trusting the dynamic, than any other generation before us.”<sup>35</sup>

New rhizomatic artworks, such as Tyson’s, emphasize abrupt juxtapositions, linking, fragmentation, and multiplicity. They require new forms of visual literacy, asking their audiences to cross borders between genres and subjects and to make a leap of faith that connections exist even though the web of knowledge is too large and complex for anyone to master. Tyson’s artwork, assembling three hundred sculptures into one cohesive installation, embodies a reconnoitering of reality from the diverse perspectives represented (including pop culture, science, religion, history, politics, sexuality). Tyson’s *Large Field Array* implies that no one field of knowledge can provide all the information or answers or frame the most probing questions. In a similar spirit, *Themes of Contemporary Art* is a reconnoitering mission through the past thirty years of art. We end by reasserting this chapter’s initial premise: *content matters*, even if the meanings are open ended. It is with this fundamental idea in mind that we turn to an examination of contemporary artworks that embody seven resonating and interlinked themes: identity, the body, time, place, language, science, and spirituality.