



What Was Contemporary Art? (MIT Press)

By Richard Meyer

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Contemporary art in the early twenty-first century is often discussed as if the very idea of art that is contemporary is new. Yet all works of art were once contemporary. In *What Was Contemporary Art?* Richard Meyer reclaims the contemporary from historical amnesia, and gives the contemporary its own art history. By exploring episodes in the study, exhibition, and reception of early twentieth-century art and visual culture, Meyer retrieves moments in the history of once-current art and redefines "the contemporary" as a condition of being alive to and alongside other moments, artists, and objects.

A generous selection of images, many in color -- from works of fine art to museum brochures and magazine covers -- support and extend Meyer's narrative. These works were contemporary to their own moment. Now, in Meyer's account, they become contemporary to ours as well.

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Editorial Review

Review

In this deft and engaging account, Richard Meyer charts an entirely new path through the twentieth century to elucidate how 'the contemporary' has always been an anxious matter for art history. *What Was Contemporary Art?* is richly researched and persuasively argued, a book whose far-ranging theoretical implications are driven by an urgent attention to history. Whether looking to the past or speculating about the future, after reading Meyer's book we'll never think about contemporary art the same way again.

(Julia Bryan-Wilson, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, University of California, Berkeley)

At a time when we are intoxicated by instant access to the present and when history seems 'passé,' it is rewarding to encounter a book like Richard Meyer's *What Was Contemporary Art?*, which goes behind the cultural branding and flattening of terms like 'modern,' 'post-modern,' and 'post-post' to bring back the full complexity of the texture of those references. By analyzing several key figures and events of American cultural life in the late twentieth century, Meyer not only makes our past history exciting, complicated, and humorous, he also shows how linked -- often unconsciously -- our present is to our past, our history. This work should and will be discussed not only by the new generation who bank on the present, but also by older generations who often...forget.

(Serge Guilbaut, Professor of Art History, Visual Art and Theory, University of British Columbia)

Amidst the clamor over the increasingly disproportionate attention to contemporary art in the field of art history, Richard Meyer draws our attention to the *history* of contemporary art -- that is, to how the terms *modern* and *contemporary* were reckoned with in the past. In the process, he uncovers unexpected stories about a Wellesley College trip to a candy factory, Persian wall frescoes shown in watercolor copies at the Museum of Modern Art, and a manifesto issued by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston decrying modern art as chicanery. *What Was Contemporary Art?* implicitly asks, 'Just what *is* contemporary art?'

(Douglas Crimp, author of "*Our Kind of Movie*": *The Films of Andy Warhol*)

Hard-hitting critical concerns blend into the narrative, the minutia of historical debates providing an opportunity to broaden our own art-historical moment and consider its possibilities.

(*Publishers Weekly*)

If, in recent years, the notion of a 'contemporary art' has attained something approaching a stable definition, then Richard Meyer's new book... sets out to recall a time when such a consensus was not yet possible.... By harking back to debates in the US much earlier in the century, Meyer's important intervention sets out to disturb and destabilize such a neat periodization. Eschewing the more theoretical speculations of Alberro and Smith in favour of a series of engagingly written narratives drawn from the history of the contemporary in American art, Meyer follows a path that is broadly chronological but full of interesting diversions, teasing

out a series of provocative implications along the way in a tone at once warm and wry.

(Frieze)

About the Author

Richard Meyer is Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor in Art History at Stanford University. He is the author of *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* and *Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles*.

Users Review

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