

# Preface: The Untimely Experience of the Contemporary

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1

It is now a commonplace of Jamaican art historical discourse that, right around the time of political independence in 1962, three Jamaican artists—Barrington Watson (1931–2016), Karl Parboosingh (1923–75), and Eugene Hyde (1931–80)—returned to Jamaica after completing their art education abroad: Watson in London, Paris, and Amsterdam; Parboosingh in New York, Paris, and Mexico City; and Hyde in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> Together they would inaugurate a new chapter in the history of modern art in Jamaica—an assertively *avant-garde*, resolutely *cosmopolitan*, and willfully *professional* art modernism. Each, needless to say, articulated in his own canvas-oriented work a contrasting visual grammar now familiar to many: Watson, a painter of sensuous and poignant figurative realism; Parboosingh, a painter driven by a vividly militant expressionism; and Hyde, a painter of graphic figurations and reflective abstractions. But however contrasting they were in their visual styles, part of what shaped their motivations and commitments was a concerted intervention into a specific *conjuncture*, namely, the emerging space of political sovereignty. Challenging the formal and aesthetic assumptions of the earlier (and inaugural) generation of nationalist-modernists (led, of course, by Edna Manley), Watson, Parboosingh, and Hyde aggressively explored the contours of their experience.

Famously, in 1964 Watson, Parboosingh, and Hyde initiated an organization called the Contemporary Jamaican Artists Association in order to give coherence and direction to their effort to build an institutional space for the exhibition, reception, sale, and discussion of modern Jamaican

<sup>1</sup> For a very helpful account of these artists and the period, see Claudia Hucke, *Picturing the Postcolonial Nation: (Inter)Nationalism in the Art of Jamaica, 1962–1975* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2013).

art. But *why* “contemporary”? What exactly did they mean to evoke or summon up by calling our attention in this way to *their* time or the distinctive temporality of their experience? With whom were they contemporary, and with whom were they not? I do not know that these are questions to which there are self-evident answers. True, in a straightforward art historical sense, *contemporary* had come, since the Second World War, to be part of the name of organizations or institutions of modern art, as in, for example, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London founded in 1947. But still, is there something specific that one might want to read into this gesture of naming a Jamaican arts organization? Is there something about the experience of rupture, about, say, the *collision* of old and new temporalities in the moment of formal dissolution of the colonial order and the opening of sovereignty that rendered the question of living a distinctively shared present especially resonant? And if so, what of it?

So, how should we think the *time* of the contemporary? What *kind* of time is this? What *experience* of temporality marks it? Is the contemporary usefully thought of only as *now*-time, the shared or coexperienced present? What present is it that one can be copresent with? What is the duration of contemporariness? How do we know when one contemporary has been eclipsed by another?

## 2

In the now much-discussed essay “What Is the Contemporary?,” the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben offers a meditation on the paradoxical temporality of the contemporary—or, really, the paradoxical sense of *contemporariness*—that might usefully form a point of departure.<sup>2</sup> Agamben’s question is an existential one: What does it mean to be contemporary? Or, we might ask, What is the experience of contemporariness? For him, notably, the contemporary is not a matter of chronology; it is not necessarily a condition beyond the modern, what comes *after* the end of the modern.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is a *quality* of temporal experience, or a mode of being in time. Agamben was stimulated in this essay by Roland Barthes’s compact remark (in his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche) that “the contemporary is the untimely.”<sup>4</sup> The contemporary, then, is a special relation to time, to the experience of one’s own time; specifically, a relation of *untimely* experience with respect to one’s time. This untimeliness, the stamp of the contemporary, is a *paradoxical* relation to the temporality of one’s present. This was Nietzsche’s point, after all, in the *Untimely Meditations*: to evoke a mode of being “out of season” with oneself.<sup>5</sup> “Those who are untimely,” Agamben writes, “who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands.”<sup>6</sup> The one who is contemporary, then, lives an experience of time grasped as simultaneously “too soon” and “too late,” a time at once “already” and “not yet.”<sup>7</sup> Evidently, then, not all of us who are

2 Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?,” in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54.

3 This is the impression one sometimes gets from, say, Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

4 Roland Barthes, quoted in Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?,” 40.

5 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). One of Nietzsche’s seminal texts, the *Meditations*—thoughts “out of season,” as he described them—consists of four works written between 1873 and 1876.

6 Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?,” 40.

7 *Ibid.*, 47.

present *in* our time are presciently present *to* our time, and are, properly speaking, contemporaries of it: mere presentness is no index of contemporariness.

Contemporaries—the ones who are *lived by* a paradoxical barely articulable experience of time—are gifted with an uncommon “second sight” derived from their being out of season with themselves and noncoincident with their time. But what they are given to see of their time is not so much its “light” as its “darkness,” or sometimes the latter disguised as the former. They do not necessarily despise their time, but they are unable to simply celebrate its virtues without pointing to its deceptions. This is why Agamben says that to be contemporary is, first of all, a matter of *courage*.<sup>8</sup> It is the courage to speak truth to the silence of disavowal and complicity, to show the present to itself in a manner both unavoidable and indigestible. Contemporaries are Hannah Arendt’s “men in dark times.”<sup>9</sup> But alas, contemporaries do not, perhaps *cannot*, remain contemporaries forever. Agamben does not say this, but contemporaries are *human* after all. They are eventually reabsorbed by their time, or outstripped by it—passed by through the very enlightenment their insight made possible. No longer avant-garde with respect to their time, they come to be merely *representative* of a period or a style, encountered in reverential, sometimes reactionary, nostalgia.

Might we think of Watson, Parboosingh, and Hyde as contemporaries in this sense in the conjuncture of the Jamaican 1960s? Were they untimely, at once *of* their time and *at odds* with it? Did they, for a moment, hold up before us a mirror and enable us to see unbidden truths about ourselves? And is there a sense in which by the middle to late 1970s these very truths no longer had the same edge, the same contrast effect, the same capacity to show us who we might be but weren’t? Did a conjuncture arrive in which Watson, Parboosingh, and Hyde were no longer contemporary, in Agamben’s sense, but were now merely part of the past of Jamaican art history?

### 3

Okwui Enwezor is *one* name for a “postcolonial” *immanent* within the contemporary, the name, anyway, for an idea of the contemporary in which the postcolonial (as a condensation of rehistoricizing and dehistoricizing vectors of cultural-political intervention) is a kind of *caesura* fracturing the surface of global art discourse today. In the roughly two decades between his emergence on the art scene in the late 1990s (especially after the 1997 Johannesburg biennial) and his lamentable death in 2018, Enwezor had contributed hugely to prying open a discursive and, above all, *exhibitionary* space for a new engagement, *both* with the legacy of imperialism in the mainstream story of art modernism (its fascination with colonial otherness, its unacknowledged appropriation of so-called primitive forms) *and* with the agency of postcolonial art practice. Thinking through what he called the “postcolonial constellation” (a prismatic *site*, he said, “for the expansion of the definition of what constitutes contemporary culture and its affiliations in other domains of practice, the intersection of historical forces aligned against the hegemonic imperatives of imperial discourse”), sometimes invoking Édouard Glissant’s creole-theoretical deterritorializations, Enwezor offered a challenge to many of the shibboleths that continue to undergird and normalize the self-authorizing practices of

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968).

the institutions and *institution* of modern art—*l'art pour l'art* and its wider cognitive field of governing assumptions, regarding, for example, autonomy, image, originality, influence, tradition, and so on.<sup>10</sup> In Enwezor's major curatorial interventions, the very idea of a legitimate "art object" (surely a cliché since Marcel Duchamp) was subjected to unexpected subversions and rearticulations on a hitherto unseen scale. Nowhere was this more evident than in *The Short Century*, a 2002 multi-story restaging of the narrative of African decolonization; in the various "platforms" from the global South that animated documenta 11, also in 2002; and in the continuous reading of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* in the Arena, within the central pavilion of the Arsenale, at the Venice Biennale Arte 2015. "If I recommend the postcolonial prism as the lens that can illuminate our reading of the fraught historical context from which the discourses of modernism and contemporary art emerged," Enwezor summarized, "it is only to aim toward the maturity of the understanding of what art history and its supplementary practices can contribute today towards our knowledge of art."<sup>11</sup>

I had, only once, the pleasure of meeting Okwui Enwezor, when he invited me to participate in the symposium "The Sea Is History: Art and Black Atlantic Cultures," convened at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in October 2017 on the occasion of *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, the major retrospective of Bowling's large-scale paintings.<sup>12</sup> Enwezor was already ill, and quite visibly weak, but he carried out his curatorial function with the grace and self-assurance he had come to be known for. Curatorially, Bowling's map paintings became the *occasion* for a postcolonial constellation. What made the event an *event* was less anything specific that Enwezor *said* than the disruptive *situation* of the curated assembly within the space of one of the great monuments to Nazi architecture repurposed as a monument to contemporary art. Its paradoxical, decentering prescience made one aware of the subtle sense of Enwezor's contemporariness, his untimely *will* to enable the postcolonial experience, specifically that of postcolonial art, to belong to the present without being entirely coincident with it.

What did it mean for Barrington Watson, Karl Parboosingh, and Eugene Hyde to be contemporary? That, I think, remains a question. Whatever they self-consciously meant by calling themselves "contemporary" in the genesis of the Contemporary Jamaican Artists Association in 1964, they seem to me in effect to have opened the space for reflection on precisely the colliding temporalities of the modern they precariously embodied, the untimely visualization of—or *will* to visualize—an as-yet-nonexistent Jamaica. Perhaps, as we look to rewrite, as we should, the story of Jamaican modernism from the vantage of a postcolonial present vastly different from, and yet connected to, any they could have imagined, we will be compelled to ask, Who, today, are *our* contemporaries?

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10 Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Review of African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (2003): 77.

11 Ibid.

12 See Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi* (London: Prestel, 2017). The symposium can be found at [www.museumsfernsehen.de/symposium-the-sea-is-history-art-and-black-atlantic-cultures/](http://www.museumsfernsehen.de/symposium-the-sea-is-history-art-and-black-atlantic-cultures/).