To some, Terry Smith is an iconoclast determined to turn the contemporary art discourse on its head. To others, he’s simply saying what many are already thinking.
Written more or less to answer the question, “Who gets to say what counts as contemporary art?” *What is Contemporary Art* explores how we exhibit, interpret and collect contemporary art. Clearly a fan of conceptual art over more conventional and perhaps “comfortable” forms of contemporary art, Smith trains his eye — and his intellect — on a wide range of contemporary art targets, from the MOMA reboot in 2004 to post-colonial art in the developing world.

Smith is no shrinking violet when it comes to sharing his opinions. His disappointment in the traditional gallery approach to contemporary art is palpable; however, he is also quick to praise those who have gotten it right. As Smith himself readily admits, contemporary art is nearly impossible to categorize and quantify in a postmodern age, thus setting the bar quite high.

As an author and Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh, Smith knows whereof he speaks. Although he writes in a scholarly style that will reward those who enjoy ruminating on art’s big issues, he is also a pleasant literary companion, particularly when walking the reader through big-name contemporary art spaces. In essence, you see what he sees and, although he makes free with his own preferences, he also does readers the courtesy of describing things so well that they can ultimately make up their own minds.

Supporting his contention that contemporary art can more or less be anything and everything, Smith covers an immense range of artists and their works — from land-based art by Robert Smithson, to installations by Dan Flavin and Richard Serra, to film works by Shirin Neshat and Martin Sastre, to Matthew Barney’s bizarre *Cremaster* cycle, to conceptual works by “yBas” (young British artists) such as Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. Smith usually couples this with descriptions of the spaces devoted to their display, giving either a thumbs-up or thumbs-down on how effectively they’ve been presented.

Interestingly, Smith doesn’t limit himself to works of art and exhibitions alone. Physical spaces such as Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao are singled out as works of art in their own right. After pointing out that the atrium has no art on display, Smith notes that the Guggenheim essentially gave Gehry the atrium as a place to create his own architectural masterpiece.

Of equal interest to Smith are social trends, given that these impinge directly on the concerns expressed in the best contemporary art. Globalization, politics, and east-west/north-south divides are all addressed to a greater or lesser extent. Smith is clear that contemporary art is, by its very definition, innately in and of its time, and as such cannot help but reflect the concerns of its makers, who are in turn reflecting the world around them.

Illustrated with 75 black-and-white photographs, *What Is Contemporary Art?* offers a fascinating look at current trends, while also raising some important and thought-provoking questions on the very essence of contemporary art.

*Thinking Contemporary Curating*, on the other hand, is focused squarely on the challenges inherent in collecting and presenting contemporary art.

The first illustration in the book features words penned by English curator Nick Waterlow, describing curatorial must-haves. These include conventional qualities such as passion and a

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discerning eye, but also “Belief in the necessity of art and artists” and “Making possible the altering of perception.” Qualities such as the latter two are the types of curatorial functions that Smith is most interested in exploring here.

In addition to covering traditional topics such as how curators think about contemporary art, and how this influences the ways in which contemporary art is exhibited, Smith goes a step further, positing that curators, collectors and gallery owners often become artists themselves.

One of the examples he cites is Toronto foundation director Ydessa Hendeles. The exhibition *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, ongoing since 2001, features photographs of teddy bears from family albums, as well as artifact displays designed to influence the visitor experience. Her 2011–2012 exhibition, *The Wedding (Walker Evans Polaroid Project)* further acknowledges her pivotal role with the subtitle, *A curatorial composition by Ydessa Hendeles.*

Smith also looks at the ways in which contemporary art is collected and displayed. Curators must make tricky decisions on thematic continuity in an exhibition, as well as what to put with what, and where. They must also contend with challenging fiscal and political realities at their
home institutions. Should they create a controversial exhibition that might alienate donors? Should they make their institutions more populist with something that Smith pithily describes as “culturtainment (ugly word, awful phenomenon)”?

Like contemporary art, contemporary curating is fluid and wide-ranging. In his closing pages, Smith suggests that “The deinhibiting, perhaps we might say the outing, of works of art is what curators must do now.” A tall order, but one that Smith appears to think contemporary curators quite capable of executing.

Taken together, What Is Contemporary Art? and Thinking Contemporary Curating provide a fascinating overview of the challenges inherent in displaying, marketing and interpreting contemporary art, as well as a cogent look at the current discourse that surrounds it.


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