

### **Is it possible to claim any sense of progress within contemporary art?**

Art history is often presented as a series of fragmentary stages, movements and schools with one arising out of, or in parallel with, or in reaction to others. In other descriptions, art is portrayed as the manifestation of individual emotional or conceptual drives. Alternatively art is presented as arising from changes in social, economic or political contexts; or linked to developments of available media out of which art can be constructed. Such descriptions rest on phraseology that has contested, varying meanings for different people.

Apart from settling on a notion of what constitutes 'contemporary' in relation to art (Art since 1960/70s? Recent Art? Art of now? Art produced by living artists? etc.) there are issues of identifying what it is that might separate contemporary art practices from previous ones. One might, for example, settle on four drivers: globalisation, post-colonialism, sexual identity, and commercialisation; and look at the interplay of these in establishing the contexts within which various examples of contemporary art have been/ are being/ might be produced. Another perspective may wish to identify local or international concerns that repeatedly tend to feed through into the thinking that wraps around contemporary art. Examples of such concerns may include: identity, history, time, place and so on.

Except possibly to 'insiders' within various groups or practices, none of this necessarily represents any formal sense of progress. Contemporary art can simply be, not as a development on previous art nor as a precursor to future practices, but simply existing in its own right and on its own terms. This, in turn, raises questions about what meanings can be ascribed to terms such as 'development' or 'progress'. We are then left having to make sense through three highly variable terms: progress; contemporary; art.

At the wider level, notions of 'progress' have been linked to Western, enlightenment-rooted, rationally-based ways of defining the world and our existence within it. Variants within this see progress as inevitable; or as the result of technical mastery over natural forces and the environment; or as a result of intellectual mastery over superstitions and irrationality of beliefs.

Counter to these runs a sense that progress somehow involves retrieving things that have been lost – a sense of connectedness, an appreciation of humanity, an acceptance of difference, and so on.

Art has variously been taken as representing the emerging, developing culture it sits within, or as independent of broader cultures with the artist acting as a free-wheeling creative individual, or as the creative front-runner of a society yet to be realised. Within two of these there are clear notions of progress through art/society interactions. Within the third there may (or may not) be the idea of an individual's art practices developing, maturing, progressing over time.

With the emergence of new art markets (eg in the 'new Russia') or the emergence of recognitions of different sources of contemporary art (eg Australian aboriginal art; Chinese art etc) people who manage art commercialisation and art markets may say that there has been a contemporary set of expansions to the market and to feel this to be progress, if not in the art itself then within the marketing of art.

Again in opposition to the idea that there is a natural, essential, beneficial sense of progress there are viewpoints that the world and our position in relation to it (including any notions of culture/art) are fragmentary, transient, contingent, and only having any meaning as we are willing to attribute to it at the time. One recent key idea about contemporary art is that there should be no precise ideas about it. This implies accepting multifaceted definitions around diverse and overlapping art worlds that are simply contemporaneous. Attempting to avoid grand narratives, however, doesn't necessarily preclude attempts to work out smaller scale agreements or clarifications of difference. There will always be views, even if different and fragmentary, about what art might be for (if anything) and it's relations to identity, place-making, language and social relationships.

Within all of this: Is there any sense within which there can be said to be a certain set of developments; a set of flows forward (from something to something else). Is there a feeling of progress and progression (or is there merely stasis); Is it possible to identify newly emerging themes and approaches?

**The above is being put into general circulation to mark out an area of further thought that is taking place and which may well lead to a more substantial article in the near future. It is also set out in this way in order to invite others to respond, by emailing [contemporaryart@thewordsthething.org.uk](mailto:contemporaryart@thewordsthething.org.uk) with views, extensions to the above 'starter', links to helpful articles etc. We will see where it all gets to .....**