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Today many art schools focus on contemporary art within their curriculum. However, the term contemporary art is rarely seen in the context of art history. In actuality, contemporary art history is just coming into being and substantial work is necessary for its development. In “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” Terry Smith (2010) sets out to introduce contemporary art as “a field of critical, theoretical, historical, and above all, art historical inquiry” (p. 366).

To begin, it is important to understand what contemporary art is. Within the art world, the term contemporary is most often used to define works of art that have recently been made, usually within the past ten to twenty years. If you are considered a contemporary artist, you are creating art now. This is true even if you are influenced by artwork of the past. Contemporary art can include a variety of materials and use a variety of techniques including new technologies in photography and computers.

Smith explains that contemporary artists express art history in their work. Two examples he provides to describe this are Jeff Wall’s “Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona” and Josephine Meckseper’s “The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art.” According to Smith, these examples represent how artists can use art historical reflection to signify concerns about what it is to live in the present.

A problem that arises is distinguishing the difference between modern art and contemporary art. Modern art started with the painting of concrete tangible “of today” art and includes styles such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism,

Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, Pop Art and other styles that appeared during that time. Suggestions of contemporary began to appear as art institutions elected to exhibit practicing artists over deceased or traditional forerunners. While some areas of the world took hold of the term contemporary, other areas linked the concept of modern with that of contemporary. Smith goes on to explain that contemporary art invites the viewer to experience an understanding that the kind of art they are observing was made for this specific time. As Smith indicates, the history of contemporary is rich and complex.

Smith has made the complexity surrounding the understanding of what is considered contemporary art evident. He explains that the term “contemporary” was included in only one textbook before 2008. Most textbooks referred to it as “post-modern.” Museum curators have also been unable to agree. Nonetheless, as time progressed, art historians began showing interest and studying the shift from modern to contemporary art. With their study have come many questions regarding changes that need to be made in the development of contemporary art.

Smith believes that since the 1950’s art historians’ interests have created a shift within art from modern to contemporary. This shift has occurred throughout the world but has varied depending on what has taken place within specific regions. Along with this shift, an awareness of “otherness” has happened. This can be seen through the recognized artists of the day; the increase of artwork concerning identity, nationality, and tradition; and artists representing their own culture’s circumstances in their artwork. He also points out the importance of recognizing the legacies from earlier art while also transitioning to contemporary. Not only does

European and American art history and criticism need to be included but also viewpoints from “decolonizing, postcolonial, and indigenous interpretative practices” (Smith, 2010, p. 380).

In conclusion, Smith offers several ideas that can be utilized in the effort to create a new art history. His development of contemporary art brings into view the complexity involved with making this happen. It will take a united effort on the part of art historians as well as time and effort. However it is important to remember that we need art history to remind us where we have been and where we are going. Therefore, the effort will be worth it.

References:

Smith, T. (2010). The State of Art History: Contemporary Art. *The Art Bulletin*, 92(4), 366-383.