

The Contemporary, the Common: Art in a Globalizing World,
Chantal Pontbriand, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013, 462 pp.

Michael Frederick Rattray

Number 98, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/72991ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Productions Ciel variable

ISSN

1711-7682 (print)

1923-8932 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rattray, M. (2014). Review of [*The Contemporary, the Common: Art in a Globalizing World*, Chantal Pontbriand, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013, 462 pp.] *Ciel variable*, (98), 100–101.

très illustrée de l'ouvrage présente ses appareils photographiques un par un, en ordre chronologique. Les textes développent le rapport entre l'objet ou l'évènement à photographier et l'appareil créé pour le faire. La *Lemons Camera* (1977-1978), première occurrence de cette série, était faite pour photographier des citrons et exploitait le rapport convexe/concave typique de ces fruits. D'un aspect évoquant lui aussi le bricolage, la *Neighborhood Camera* réalisée en 1977 présente une structure architecturale permettant aussi la captation de plusieurs points de vue. À l'exception de quelques appareils tels que les *Musical Notes Cameras*, la plupart des autres appareils fabriqués par Deüelle Lüski ont une signification essentiellement politique. C'est le cas notamment de l'*Horizontal Camera* (1998), de la *Refugee Camp Camera* (1994-1995), faite en argile comme le sont les habitations provisoires des réfugiés, de la *Shoulder Camera* (1996), sa réplique en argile synthétique qui se place sur l'épaule, ou encore de la *North-East-South-West Camera* (1992), qui offre un point de vue simultané sur les quatre points cardinaux.

Enfin, l'entretien entre Ariella Azoulay et Aim Deüelle Lüski offre encore une nouvelle perspective à la fois sur le travail du photographe et sur celui de la théoricienne. Il rend tout d'abord compte d'une collaboration entre eux et précise la nature de l'influence que chacun d'eux a pu exercer sur l'autre. Ainsi, le photographe situe régulièrement sa pratique par rapport à ce qu'Azoulay appelle le *civil contract of photography*. En outre, cette partie de l'ouvrage permet de situer le travail de Deüelle Lüski par rapport aux circonstances historiques ou biographiques qui l'ont fait naître. On découvre, par exemple, que lorsqu'il a reçu sa formation dans les années 1970, l'histoire de la photographie n'était pas encore une discipline et sa pratique n'était pas enseignée. Il explique ce que les appareils photographiques doivent à sa formation en sculpture et à la fréquentation des étudiants en architecture qui avaient accès à des laboratoires de développement photographique. Il s'agit là d'un détachement du caractère mécanique de la photographie au profit d'un rapport à la création plus proche de celui des arts plastiques. Outre plusieurs aspects techniques de la pratique de Deüelle Lüski, comme la différence des appareils

qu'il crée avec les sténopés, le photographe présente enfin les affinités théoriques qui ont orienté sa réflexion sur son propre travail et nourri ses écrits et son enseignement. Il évoque ainsi le caractère eurocentriste de la conception de la photographie fixée à la fin des années 1830 et la perspective que lui a apportée l'histoire islamique des sciences qui développe des conceptions différentes quant à la formation et à la perception de l'image. Ainsi une des questions auxquelles il tente de répondre par la production de ses appareils est celle du devenir de l'image lorsqu'elle n'est pas perçue par une conscience humaine. Il s'agit de comprendre la représentation au-delà de la conception étroite qu'en développe ce qu'il appelle l'axe *Descartes-Kant-Husserl-Merleau-Ponty*, afin d'éviter la réduction de l'expérience sensorielle au point de vue unique qu'affectionne la philosophie depuis Descartes et Kant. La remise en question du statut traditionnel de la photographie explique aussi son refus de produire des images séduisantes susceptibles de faire l'objet d'une fétichisation. Visant à repenser la photographie à neuf, le travail conjoint d'Ariella Azoulay et Aim Deüelle Lüski amène à reconsidérer l'histoire de la photographie ainsi que ce par quoi on la définit. Il s'agit là d'une expérience déconcertante, mais cette réflexion apparaît nécessaire pour se dégager des conceptions qui entravent un rapport citoyen à la photographie.

—
Erika Wicky est historienne de l'art. Elle enseigne et effectue un stage de recherche postdoctoral à l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Elle s'intéresse tout particulièrement aux écrits sur l'art et à l'histoire culturelle du XIX^e siècle.
—

The Contemporary, the Common: Art in a Globalizing World

Chantal Pontbriand

Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013, 462 pp.

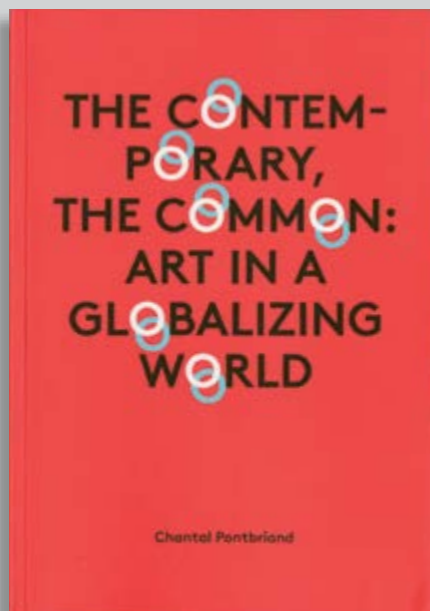
Few art critics command respect. Chantal Pontbriand is one critic who, without question, should command respect. In my opinion, she deserves the position that she has earned in the contemporary art world. As a co-founder of *Parachute*, a publication that is sorely missed, her impact on art writing, art criticism, and art history is enormous and still difficult to measure. *Parachute* was a high-water mark, offering proof that a journal of contemporary art theory and criticism can exist in Canada. *Parachute* closed up shop in 2007, one year after the Conservative Party of Canada took over the PMO and one year before the financial collapse of 2008. In the democratically chosen Conservative™ era, our era, circumstances are different and, consequently, our reality is different. These differences expose both the strengths and the weaknesses of Pontbriand's latest work, *The Contemporary, the Common: Art in a Globalizing World*.

The title is intriguing and situates the book among others that have addressed globalization of the "contemporary art" brand¹ and contemporaneity in recent years. Recently, Peter Osborne's meditation on the contemporary designation in art and his claim that all contemporary art is post-conceptual² have weighed on my thoughts, so I was interested to read Pontbriand's take on the current issues driving the globalization of contemporary art. In typical fashion, she did not disappoint.

The book is a collection of essays on contemporary art history written by Pontbriand between 2000 and 2011 (other than the new writing undertaken to contextualize and draw together the at times disparate essays). It is a personal reflection upon and an example of an early-twenty-first-century sensibility that we experience collectively – the knowledge that we are caught in the past yet

intrigued by an unknown future – as well as a meditation on a decade that will be recognized for both its triumphs and its failures. The book, published by Sternberg Press, is divided into three sections: "The Idea of Community"; "Globalization: The Common and Singular at Large"; and "Expanded Consciousness: Art without Borders."

In the introduction, Pontbriand refers to the book as a "test-drive," and I find this admission curious. She is reluctant to recognize, perhaps even pessimistic about, the possibility that her book will be considered authoritative. The essays explore various art practices yet stay theoretically consistent with significant and identifiable themes, such as utopia, enhanced-medium, the art of the everyday, and borderless expression. Each one of these themes owes a debt to theoretical anarchism. In this way, she remains within the trajectory of a theory of the avant-garde proposed by the Italian theorist Renato Poggioli during the 1960s.³ However, the globalization of contemporaneity occurred during the 1990s, "when contemporary art finally reached the most remote outposts and 'contemporaneity' was no longer the distinct domain of the Americas and Europe."⁴ This is a tall order for art – to be the messenger of contemporaneity and to deliver it to the farthest regions of the world – and the comment reveals Pontbriand's faith in the radical potentialities that are encountered when the liberation of expression is achieved and a globalized contemporary designation that neither defines nor lays claim to expression is established – to use contemporaneity, much like art, in name only so that the sign can fulfil a moral and political purpose. Whether this global contemporary, or borderless expression, is an example of the borderless neo-liberal global financialization



exported from the Americas and Europe in the post-1989 era remains to be seen.

Pontbriand's method for analyzing the contemporary is to analyze artwork. In exemplary fashion, she leads with the work and lets the work develop the theoretical concepts that she references and explores in her essays. She takes up many of the notable philosophers of our time who discuss the contemporary paradigm and, indeed, some proto-contemporary art historians as well. Jean Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben are influential in these texts, as is the early-twentieth-century art historian Aby Warburg, who, Hans Belting observes, "sought to locate art within a vast repertoire of forms of cultural expression, as one of an entire array of symbolic languages within world culture."⁵ Collectively, they explore and theorize the potential of a utopian future community, a global community with a one-world aesthetic vision. This global aesthetic, or art without borders, is positioned in the first section of the book and solidified in the second, and the third section relies upon this established foundation to facilitate a vision of the coming common and contemporary art. The question of the gift and the theorization of exchange among community members dominate Pontbriand's reading of community. This theoretical being-with, exchanging with, and giving to the other is a major theme throughout. Of note is an interview with Pontbriand and Nancy, in which they discuss the possible ramifications of a new universalism, which I see as commensurate with the desire for a global aesthetic or world culture. Nancy calls this global aesthetic the coming universal language of communication, and Pontbriand theorizes the potential for radical direct actions to hack into and exploit the ubiquitous presence of the image in twenty-first-century culture.

For Pontbriand, the body being in time, or the body being-with movement, draws attention to the ephemeral nature of bodily action and its relationship with the commodity-form of the fixed image. Art is thus a mediator, an interlocutor, and intended to unfix the fixity of the human-world – and, moreover, capitalism in general. Any attack on capitalism is problematic because it begs questions such as how contemporary art, which is a luxury good and luxury experience by any other name, can manage to evade its own parasitic relationship with monopoly capitalism. I am thinking here about Claire Fontaine's *Capitalism Kills (Love)* (2008) and *Foreigners Everywhere* (2005), which Pontbriand theorizes. Although it is certainly plausible to argue that Fontaine problematizes "the failure of utopias, the worldwide proliferation of homogenized lifestyles, the systematization of modes of functioning, and the objectives of growth that also mark the field of art" and are powerless to do anything about this situation, the theory reads as hollow in the post-2008 era.⁶ As such, any art theory, art criticism, or art history that claims to be global must account for and confront the luxury of contemporaneity, the luxury of criticism. If criticism does not address the social position of the artist – whether the artist fulfils a moral obligation – then criticism resists being-with much of the global population.

Are contemporary artists defined by the potential that they embody to produce and reflect upon betterment? Do globalized artists remain in the post-conceptual realm of permanent critical distance? Like Yves Klein, will they take your money and make you burn it too – but just your half? The purpose of avant-garde antagonism, which in theory produces an agonistic moment when art expands our consciousness and is elevated

to the status of the mythic, will always posit that the artist reacts against, as opposed to with, a dominant hegemonic order. Yet, it is difficult to take this antagonism seriously when one of the longest essays is reserved for the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, who has made a career of exploring the gutters and the high-rises of the privileged and imagines a post-modern utopia that decries social engineering while simultaneously socially engineering the participant's experience: this is the aporia of relational art.

We read about the coming community, the being-with that many of us are prone to discuss, the way an unbounded and free contemporary art claims inclusiveness; yet, these ideas are instigated by and popularized among a global avant-garde group that is distinctly privileged. These ideas continue to exist within a global economic system that ironically sells a vision of an idea of community that is enforced over the totality of the globe. How can contemporary art somehow remain at a critical distance from these phenomena? In the global art world and the global contemporary art economy, are we given a space for radicalism, a site that is designated for protest, an autonomous zone where direct actions and criticisms of globalization validate the dominant institutions of global capital?

As I wrote at the beginning of this essay, our time is different and we must develop different strategies, different methods, for confronting the issues of this contemporary era. Where is the common? Is it at the global limit of an unfixed and free expression? Or is the global limit on the ground, in the streets, and within the trajectory of a self-aware consumer who ethically engages a consumable world? What is the purpose of an institution? Is a globalized institution that manages control over its own position and the critical discourse written about it much different from the censorship exerted by a nation-state? Are we the cogs in a global machine of everyday living? As Wodiczko declared some time ago about any authoritarian control over art, including its globalization, "The beer is getting hot (warm)."⁷ Certainly for Pontbriand, who has the last word, this contemporary is beyond the corrupted centre of the institution: "In the consumerist and institutionalized society that defines postcapitalist culture, there are hordes of artists literally being produced

by universities and art schools everywhere in the world. . . . From the museum to the university, the artists of today know what is expected of them and how to fulfill their tasks in order to please the system."⁸ Art must break through borders to remain relevant.

1 See Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.), *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007); Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.), *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Culture* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011); Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (eds.), *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013); Sylvia Von Bunnigen, Irene Gludowacz, and Susanne Van Hagen (eds.), *Global Art*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World INC: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2004); Jonathan Harris, *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Peter Osbourne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013). 2 See Osbourne, *Anywhere or Not at All*. 3 Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). 4 Pontbriand, *The Contemporary*, p. 8. 5 Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 19. 6 Pontbriand, *The Contemporary*, p. 71. 7 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 34. 8 Pontbriand, *The Contemporary*, p. 141.

Michael Frederick Rattray is an independent researcher and a practising artist. His recent PhD dissertation, *Functional Anarchism(s) and the Theory of Global Contemporary Art* (2014), theorizes that global contemporary art promotes a theoretical anarchism that can be traced to the aesthetic philosophy of modern art. He currently resides in British Columbia.