

AAH Panel – Seeking the Contemporary Art Historian

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AAH Panel 2006

Session Title: Seeking the Contemporary Art Historian

CFP deadline: 11 November 2005

Art History departments and museums have become increasingly motivated to hire scholars whose work and teaching focus on contemporary art practices. Contemporary art museums and exhibition centers have multiplied around the world, changing the mechanisms of art production and dissemination. Unique challenges come with this apparent multiplication of possibilities.

While the "new art history" was developed out of reflections and debates shared with the contemporary art of the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary art scholars are still often suspiciously looked upon in academia. Now packaged as a repertory of dominant methodologies, the "new art history" has shed its intimacy with contemporary art. Likewise, the contemporary art historian turned curator is often looked upon as too "academic."

There seems to be little reflexivity within our institutions over the scope of contemporary art history. How, for example, does one define the contemporary in the conditions of contemporaneity, especially given the growing need for a global and trans-national perspective within the discipline? Likewise, how does the contemporary art historian deal with the mass of visual and research material unique to the age of information, the simultaneous multiplication of research methodologies invoked through the mantra of interdisciplinarity, and the redefinition of the tool of art historical research, the traditional archive? What are, if any, the problems created by a lack of historical distance and frameworks? What does working in the present uniquely enable? How do the methods and strategies of contemporary art historians pressure traditional art histories? These questions transcend the age-old bastions of art history versus art criticism.

This panel seeks papers that address the methodological, pedagogical and curatorial challenges unique to contemporary art historians. We are interested in papers that address this topic from art-historical, art-critical and curatorial perspectives. We are not striving for consensus. We want to explore this issue from a range of perspectives and

experiences. Additional questions to consider may include: How have the fragmentation of the field and the proliferation of sub-categories-cultural and visual studies, museum studies, curatorial studies, curating and commissioning, new media studies, and critical writing studies-impacted our understanding of how contemporary art history is practiced? How do we reconcile the term "contemporary" with art practices that are now securely historical? How do we meet the unique and overwhelming demands of the field of contemporary art history: producing historically rigorous scholarship while staying abreast of current art and visual culture? How do we combine the historical and critical dimensions of this demand? Is contemporary art history suspect because it holds up a mirror to the discipline of art history, revealing its inextricability from judgments of value? Why is the contemporary art historian generally the person expected to "do theory" in the art history department-and what generally counts as "theory"? What are other methodological and pedagogical issues unique to the contemporary art historian? Why are so many of us symptomatically wearing so many hats? Why is it that our bio lines are often accretive-writer, editor, art historian, curator and activist? What can we all learn from contemporary art practices?

Paper proposals due 11 November 2005. Please send to:

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