WHIRLWIND: WHERE ARE WE AND HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Still Life with Flowers in Three States, Jordan Wolfson, 2007

A talk by Jordan Wolfson

Denver Art Museum, October 10, 2017

Hello! Welcome! Thank you all for coming. I'd like to thank the Denver Art Museum and FOPAS for this time and opportunity to speak with you. This evening I'd like to share with you some of the thoughts and ideas I've encountered over the last fifteen or so years as I've tried to make sense of our current and bewildering contemporary art world. And perhaps, hopefully, some of this may end up being of some use to you. I'll talk for awhile, tell my story, and then hopefully there will some time for some questions. I'll start with a bit of my background and what led me to this engagement. I'll take a look at the beginnings of Modernity, take some big jumps through the twentieth century and then try to unpack some ideas concerning where we are now in this contemporary world.

I'm a painter, now Colorado-based, and I lived abroad for most of the nineties. I left the States soon after grad school when I received my MFA from Yale University. I went to find myself as a painter and make my way. I lived in Israel and was pretty secluded from the larger art world, looking at it from a distance. As I did my thing as a painter, exploring, exhibiting, teaching – periodically I would glance through the art magazines or museum catalogs and what I saw just didn't make much sense to me. And I was quick to dismiss what I didn't understand. Eventually I returned to the States, in the early aughts, moving to the northeast and exhibiting in New York City, first at Hirschl and Adler and then with DFN, both fairly straightforward, representational painting galleries. And again, I thought I knew what was what and what wasn't wasn't. But as I started to peruse the galleries in Chelsea, and mid-town New York, I started to sense that perhaps what I was so sure of wasn't necessarily so. I started to encounter in first person, not through reproduction, what we might call "new media", forms that had been

developing since the sixties, so half a century, not so new actually – I started to encounter them first hand, installations, video, post-minimalist and conceptual art and found that a good amount of it really hit me, as strongly as anything else, and that it was a mix – some good some not, just like painting, sculpture and traditional media, and I began to be deeply curious about where we are when we speak of and encounter "art", and how in the world did we get here.

The period from the end of the nineteenth century up through the beginning of the twenty-first century is, of course, a very dense and complex period. I can't possibly do it justice or begin to cover all that has occurred and the various reasons for it. But I'll try to describe, this evening, in very broad strokes some ideas that I've found helpful to begin to come to terms with where are today in the art world and how we got here, which might hopefully lead to some ideas on what may be called for next. Like life it's a bit of a meandering tale, and along the way, I'll be giving shout-outs to a whole slew of books that I found just great and extremely helpful.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, Pablo Picasso, 1907

So let me start with some places that we're probably more or less familiar with. Here is *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, painted by Picasso in 1907, when he was twenty-six, back in the heyday of early Modernism. Looking at it a hundred and ten years later, it's still a jarring piece of work. And perhaps fitting for what

is to come. When we talk about the modern art world our origin story generally speaking begins with Impressionism, though certainly a case could be made for starting earlier – perhaps Courbet or Goya -- and all the changes that coalesced into the exhibition of the independents and what became the avant-garde. We have our cast of greats – Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Degas, Manet, among others.

Rouen Cathedral, Façade, Claude Monet, 1892-1894

We have the shift from the Salon as the official arbiter of what is good art to the independent exhibitions and galleries. And we have the next generation of greats stepping up – Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso – the list goes on.

Sunflowers, Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

And what I found, as I started to dig in to understand how we got to where we are, was that a great deal of what allowed these painters to become great, that is, what provided the necessary context for their extraordinary inventions and discoveries and expressions, was a changing world. And this too we know – the great technological, economic and political changes at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Marx, Darwin, Einstein, Freud.

Somewhere along the way I picked up a book that had been mentioned by Malcolm Gladwell in an article in the New Yorker, a book by David Galenson, who is a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, called *Old Masters and Young Geniuses*. Galenson sees the quality of innovation as that which makes an artist great – art historically speaking, the greater the innovation, the greater the artist -- and describes what he finds as two basic biographies of the creative life – one that is more experimental and one that is more conceptual. That is, how the artist arrives at their innovation can be through a more physically experimental process in paint, gradually arriving at the hoped for result – or it

can occur through a more conceptual engagement, with the creative process going on more in the mind and the physical process of painting occurring pretty straightforwardly.

The experimental painter is uncertain of their road, and finds it by going, experimenting along the way. The conceptual painter has very clear ideas of what is to be done and is able to execute them with decisiveness and clarity. And it turns out that these two kinds of creativities tend to occur in different age ranges. That is, the conceptually based artist tends to have their greatest innovations at a younger age and the experimental one has their greatest discoveries occur when they are older – hence the title, young geniuses and old masters. And Galenson uses the pair of Cezanne and Picasso to illustrate this. Cezanne, as an old man, is going through iteration after iteration, exploring ways to come to terms with Mount St. Victoire. Picasso, as a young hot shot, knocks out masterpiece after masterpiece. Here is a portrait of his dealer Ambroise Vollard from 1910.

Le Mont Sainte-Victoire vu des Lauves, Paul Cezanne, 1904-1906

Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, Pablo Picasso, 1910

Now the challenge for the experimental artist is to simply keep going because they are usually racked with self doubt and may very well lack public recognition and support until they are much older or gone. The challenge for the conceptual artist is to keep discovering fresh ideas and innovations as they get older and not to repeat themselves.

So, how did that play out more broadly? Getting back to the larger cultural shifts that were occurring there was also a growing shift in economics. And that resulted in part, in a shift from the salon as the arbiter of worth and quality to the gallery and dealer. The forces supporting the arts moved from the ruling aristocracy to the bourgeoisie and rising merchant and middle class. And with this shift was a growing emphasis on innovation itself, that is, what's new. If the old regime preferred a consistent and steady mode of representation to maintain cultural continuity, the new economics thrived on change and stylistic revision. "New and Improved".

Galenson takes this further in another book, *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth Century Art*, exploring the rise of the conceptual as a category of creativity and its ascendancy in the art world. If we see the history of art in the twentieth century as a series of headlines, then conceptually based art eventually becomes the headliner. And it turns out that the conceptual means of innovation, as opposed to the experimental one, is a better fit for a free-market economic system. Innovation happens at a quicker pace. New products arrive more quickly and at shorter cycles. It happens sooner – the artist is younger and there's more time for the investment to mature as time goes by, like a good stock in a company. And the means of dissemination are more efficient – because the location of meaning is in the idea, one can assess the work through reproduction more easily than a work done through experimentation, where the location of meaning lies more in one's experience in front of the actual physical work. It often can be harder to assess a more experimental piece through reproduction. That's a gross generalization, but more or less true.

So the stage was set for a shift from the experimental to the conceptual in the ongoing saga of art's story in the twentieth century.

Fountain, Marcel Duchamp, 1917

Now, not only did we have the great rivals of Picasso and Matisse, both deeply influenced by Cezanne, but we also had the trajectory of Duchamp. Fountain, Bicycle Wheel, The Bride Stipped Bare by Her

Bachelors. These first two works are Readymades. That is, they were already fabricated, found objects and Duchamp made a decision, in his mind, to call them art. It was a bold, radical, and utterly conceptual determination. In some ways we might say that one of the great unfoldings of the twenthieth century was between the lineage of Cezanne, basically experimental, and the lineage of Duchamp, clearly conceptual. And as I just explained vis-à-vis our economic system, the cards were stacked by the dealer toward the conceptual. And the dealer is the market.

Now we need to start leap frogging for the sake of time and brevity. At the end of World War Two, the world was clearly no longer the same world. The United States and the Soviet Union are the two great superpowers and the center of the art world shifts from Paris to New York. Serge Guilbaut has written a book, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, which looks at this period of time. It's a fascinating story of intrigue and cultural espionage. The CIA ends up using American art, particularly Abstract Expressionism, for its own strategic purposes during the Cold War. But of course, there were indeed great aesthetic innovations that were made and Abstract Expressionism ruled – Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko.

Orange and Yellow, Mark Rothko, 1956

In some ways it was the last great period in Modernity for the experimental lineage. The abstract expressionist painters were, by and large, engaged in a slow and uncertain undertaking, attempting to give abstract form to intuitive, spiritual and deeply emotional inner realms. What came next carried a more and more conceptual lean, which makes sense considering that American economics was becoming more powerful and with it the accompanying structural bias. The gallery scene in New York City went from small potatoes to Sidney Janis, Leo Castelli, and the rest that followed. The stylistic shifts, the cycles of innovation, what was cutting edge and avant-garde and what was old hat, had started to increase, that is to turnover more quickly. The Ab Ex folks took twenty to thirty years to find their way and to "make it". But in only half a dozen years after they came to prominence, new forms of painting arose and Pop Art took over – these included works by Johns, Rauschenberg, and Warhol, to name a few.

White Flag, Jasper Johns, 1955

In another fascinating book, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space* by William Dunning, he traces the history of spatial representation in Western painting. Dunning describes changes in the sixties as a shift from exploring the felt experience of space and different ways to describe it to something more like a visual discussion exploring the relationships between what's real, the illusion of this reality and the function of signs and symbols and the realm of semiotics. Things took a distinctly philosophical and linguistic turn. One artistic statement that was hard to miss was Rauschenberg's piece in which, as a young man, he erased a drawing by de Kooning, that de Kooning had given him, and then Rauschenberg promptly exhibited the result. Pop art was followed quickly by minimalism, then post-minimalism and the death of painting. Artists started to more overtly test the boundaries of art.

Untitled, Eva Hesse, 1969-1970

Here we see a piece by Dan Flavin, Donald Judd. Both exploring a geometric, materialist approach. An early work by Richard Serra and one by Eva Hesse. These works can be seen as exploring materials in a non-romantic, non-subjective attitude. What you see is what you get. We then had the resurrection of painting occuring in the 1980s with neo-expressionsim.

Untitled (Fallen Angel), Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1981

Here are some examples – one by Julian Schabel, another by Michel Basquiat and one by Eric Fischl, bringing back to the high end market and headlines the possibilities of painting, subjective interiority,

etc. And a great eclectic situation begins with no grand direction, no overarching style and the beginning of the possibility of no more straight road, no more ism, no more "new direction for art". The term post-modernism came into play, trying to come to terms with this new situation of eclectic uncertainty.

A good book covering this period from the beginning of the twentieth century through the 1980s is by Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*.

The nineties arrived and we had the great rise of multiculturalism in the arts and all sorts of ways of doing all sorts of things, in all sorts of directions, in places all over the world. Julian Stallabrass, in his book *Art Incorporated*, looks at the parallels between the rise of multiculturalism in the art world and the rise of a global economy.

Brillo Box, Andy Warhol, 1964

When I had returned back to the States in 2002 and trying to get a handle on what was happening in the art world I also started to read essays by Arthur Danto. Danto was a professor emeritus from Columbia who wrote extensively on art and was a critic for The Nation. Among his many books is *After the End of Art*, where he describes his encounter with Warhol's "Brillo Box" in the 1960s and how that posed

certain questions for him that led him to certain conclusions. I won't go into all the ins and outs, but the gist of it was that art had basically fulfilled its role and no longer needed to be "art" as such. People would continue to make and exhibit stuff but the larger need and trajectory for art was over. There was no longer a cultural need for a specific direction and grand style. One of the people Danto mentioned in his book was another art historian and critic, Hans Belting, who had come to a similar conclusion on his own. I followed the trail and read Belting's book, *Art History After Modernism*. I found it riveting and up to that point, the best writing I'd found on our current situation in the art world. It was like watching a great boxer land punch after punch, with each sentence, powerful and without any apparent malice, as he posed incisive questions and suggested possible answers.

So, were we at some kind of cultural cul-de-sac? Stuck or adrift?

A few years back I picked up another book, this time by Larry Shiner – *The Invention of Art*. His book describes the cultural invention of the category of fine art as we know it. Ways of thinking and relating to art that I always thought had been around since the Renaissance turn out to have more recent roots, and really only coalesced and entered mainstream European culture in the eighteenth century. This entailed the grouping together of painting, sculpture, music, poetry and to some extent, architecture. *Les Beaux Arts*. Art was separated from craft, artist from artisan, and utility from pleasure – or what became aesthetics. There were two main things that allowed these changes to occur. One was the shift economically from a feudal to a capitalist economy with a rising middle class, which helped create a wider market for "art", whether that meant literary journals, outdoor concerts or paintings for home furnishings. There were also changes in the intellectual categories and a regrouping of knowledge. Previously music was grouped with mathematics, poetry with rhetoric, painters with pharmacists – both used mortars to ground their minerals. These economic and cultural shifts created and supported the Fine Arts as a cultural category. Creativity went from being the sole prerogative of The Divine Creator to a special attribute, perhaps even a spiritual one, which humans could exhibit. The way we think about art and the artist, and what it means to us culturally, began about two hundred and fifty, three hundred years ago. This is still a huge chunk of time, but it has a definite beginning and development. What we call art, and its role, turns out to be not inevitable, not immovable. Making, yes -- human creative making, yes. But what art means? Who is an artist and what is the art world? The context and meaning? Perhaps these are more flexible than I had thought. And perhaps this last half century has witnessed a radical revision. I found the whole thing shocking and revelatory.

I began to explore the work of Joseph Beuys, the German performance, installation artist. Another book I picked up was *What is Art?* which has a lengthy interview with Beuys. In it he states his belief that every person is an artist. How can that be? What does that even mean? Beuys coined the term "social sculpture", and saw the scope of art as actually that of society and civilization and life itself. How do we create a world that provides the opportunity and means for everyone to explore and express their own artist self, in whatever medium or means is most appropriate? What would such a world look like?

My thoughts about who I am as a painter started to shift. What does it mean that I make? What does it mean that I paint?

Now let's move more fully into our current situation. A couple of years ago I was curious about what Hans Belting, the fellow I had found through reading Danto, had been up to and found a recent publication of his from 2013, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, co-edited together with Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddenseig. The book attempts to give a handle and scope to our current global explosion of contemporary art. It comes at it with a wide variety of information and directions and quite profoundly changed my sense, not only of contemporary art, but of what is occurring all over the planet, a vast global grass roots explosion of creativity.

1989 turns out to be a watershed year. It was the beginning of the end of the Cold War, the ascendance of a free market global economy, and the exhibition in Paris of *Magiciens de la Terre*. This exhibition, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, was organized in a way that had never previously occurred. Fifty artists in the traditional Western sense were exhibited in a mix with fifty non-Western artists who had largely not been represented in the art system before. The exhibition generated a shift of attention from seeing the West as the center of the art world to a more world-wide perspective. The exhibition can be seen as trying to even up the playing field in a post-colonial world. No more British empire. No more Soviet empire. Standing up to American power. This shift has been termed culturally as a post-colonial turn.

And I need to confess my own first reaction to all of this post-colonial stuff. As a painter who loves Cezanne, Titian, Rembrandt, Chardin, I had a helluva time making sense of this as art. I could certainly admire and support the desire and action for political and social freedom. But what does that have to do

with art? And I began to understand that what was happening here was a vast global striving for personal freedom, human freedom, and that one of the ways this has taken place has been through creative expression that has most efficiently been housed and shared as art.

The notion of globalization took hold. The biennales began to proliferate. Before 1989 there were approximately 25 biennials. As of 2013 the number had risen to 159. This burgeoning of the biennials since 1990 could be seen in part as an attempt by local and regional areas around the world to showcase and give attention to their own specific histories and cultural forms of current art and creativity. Concurrently, and in relation to that, but from the perspective of the art market, has been the rise of the art fairs. Since the 1990s we've had about one or two open each year and there were about 44 as of 2013. There are other market stats that I also found interesting – helping me get a handle on what's going on in the name of art. The global art market runs about $50 billion a year. About ten percent of that is derived from sales of contemporary art.

The book gave me an opportunity to look at a wide range of aspects of a very complex situation. The market. The money. The post-colonial turn. The changing role and identity of the museum. And the many, various Modernities. I was well aware of what I always thought of as Modernity – but I began to understand that every region on earth had its own trajectory and story and specifics. South America came into and through the twentieth century differently than Western Europe and the United States. Eastern Europe differently than post-colonial Africa. Different parts of Asia, Oceania, China, again different. And each set of differences has given rise to a different mix of global and local aesthetic concerns and values.

The great shift that occurred with the birth of Modernity, with French Impressionism, Monet, Cezanne, etc, is an essential story, but just one story, in the midst of a great planetary shift. One Modernity among many – crucial because of its power and impact and catalyzing quality, but still one Modernity story among many.

So I found myself somewhat excited and dizzy with the array and complexity and fullness of what I was starting to get a glimpse of. This great explosion of creativity under the heading of contemporary art all over planet earth. But what exactly is contemporary art? Is it just whatever people make today? What's the difference between modern art and contemporary art? Is there one?

So, here's one last book. By Terry Smith. And I found him through reading his essay in The Global Contemporary that I just described. Smith's book is entitled, fittingly, What is Contemporary Art? And he begins by asking 'what is this term "contemporary"'? He starts with the basics: different things, different conditions, occurring at the same time. You and I, we're both here, we're different, and we're contemporaries. Then Smith begins to unpack it further. How is the sense of the contemporary *now*, in the world that we now find ourselves? How is *being* now, different than, say, fifty years ago when the world was *modern*? Smith uses the term *contemporaneity* to describe this shift and he makes two contentions. The first is that our contemporaneity is the most evident aspect of our current world and two, that art today is shaped most profoundly by its situation within this contemporaneity.

So, then what is it? What is this contemporaneity? One salient, inescapable aspect is the ongoing, relentless experience of otherness – other cultures, other ideas and ideologies, other religions and values, banging up against each other. Relentless adjacency. We can't avoid each other. Not only is my world, our world, here, but *their* world is here too. Constantly. Not only does this occur in the political and sociological sphere, but also with our inner sense of identity and inner life. Straight sexual identity, gay identity, fluid sexual identity. Liberalism. Conservatism. Fundamentalism. Socialism. There are, in Smith's terms, constant "frictions of multiplicitous difference" that we are continuously confronted by. Deeply different experiences of time and place and cultural values.

Smith attributes this particular experience of contemporaneity and friction to three sets of forces. The first is globalization itself with its desire to gain and maintain control over the planet, economically, sociologically, politically, in the face of increasing cultural differentiation in a post-colonial world (think of the recent Kurdish and Basque votes for independence). This, together with a desire for the continued unfettered use of the earth's natural resources in the face of increasing evidence of the un-sustainability of the whole thing. This isn't a question of whether it's ethical, but simply whether it's even *doable*. The second set of forces is the increasing state of inequity among peoples and individuals – the enormous wealth disparity in the world accelerates the overall instability. And thirdly, "we are all willy-nilly immersed in an infoscape – or better, a spectacle, an image economy…capable of the instant and thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere. It is, at the same time, fissured by the uneasy coexistence of…open, volatile subjects, and rampant popular fundamentalisms." Think of the range of what can get served up on the web immediately. Taken

together this all becomes a recipe for a constant churning of reactivity and friction. We can't avoid the bombardment and upset of otherness, the bewilderment and lack of comprehension – "what in the world is going on over there?!" So there is also the desire to retreat, to isolate, and to locate comfort in the familiar. We live in a time of massive and unstable complexity and uncertainty.

So then Smith describes how he sees art being made today in this situation of our extremely complex contemporaneity, and he teases out three major kinds of work. The first he labels Re-modernizing and Spectacle Art , work that continues attitudes found in Modernity and the high end relationship to the global art market. In the Re-modernizing aspect we find artists who utilize strategies that are more or less familiar and come more directly out of Modernism. Like Gerhard Richter, and Richard Serra.

Abstract Painting, Courbet, Gerhard Richter, 1986

Balloon Dog, Jeff Koons, 1994-2000

We also see artists that are more bombastic like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, which Smith terms more as Spectacle Art. The second strand of the contemporary he finds more in political critique and protest, grounded in post-colonial reaction and issues of identity. Artwork that takes on environmental and feminist issues would be found here.

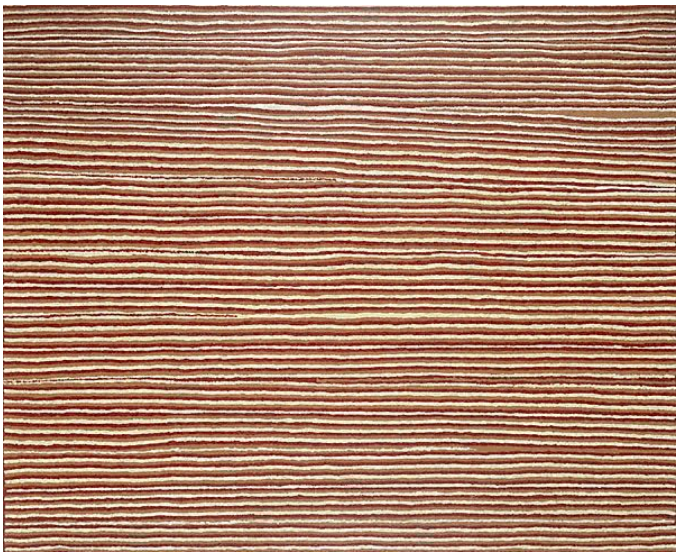
Drawings from Stereoscope, William Kentridge, 1999

Novembre 6 y 7, Doris Salcedo, 2000

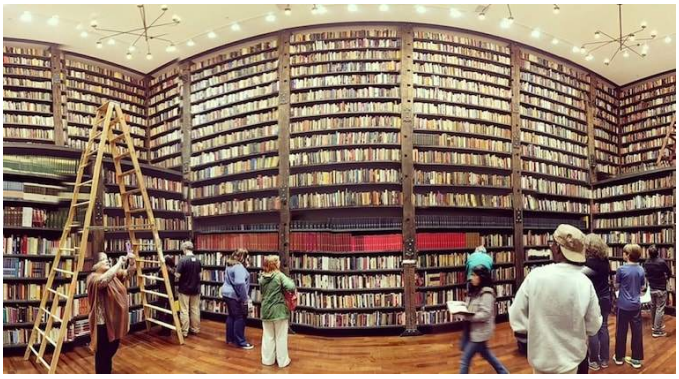
Works by Kara Walker would fit into this, exploring race relations, currently and historically in the United States. Here is a piece by William Kentridge dealing with the trauma of South Africa's history. Here is an installation by Doris Salcedo working with the disappeared in Colombia, and issues of forgetting and memory. The third and last arena of contemporary art, that Smith describes, is more subtle. And I'd like to read at length Smith's own words in describing it. "The third current is different in kind from the others, the outcome, largely, of a generational change occurring as the first two have unfolded, rejecting gratuitous provocation and grand symbolic statements in favor of specific, small-scale, and modest offerings – remixes elements of the first two currents, but with less and less regard for their fading power structures and styles of struggle, and more concern for the interactive potentialities…These artists seek to arrest the immediate, to grasp the changing nature of time, place, media, and mood today. They make visible our sense that these fundamental, familiar constituents of being are becoming, each day, steadily stranger…Within the world's turnings and life's frictions, they seek sustainable flows of survival, cooperation, and growth."

Here are two works dealing with a changing relationship to time as we know it in the workaday world. The first is by James Turrell. And one by Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, an aboriginal artist. Theaster Gates also come to mind and his community work in Chicago.

House of Light, James Turrell, 2000



Straightening the spears, Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, 1999



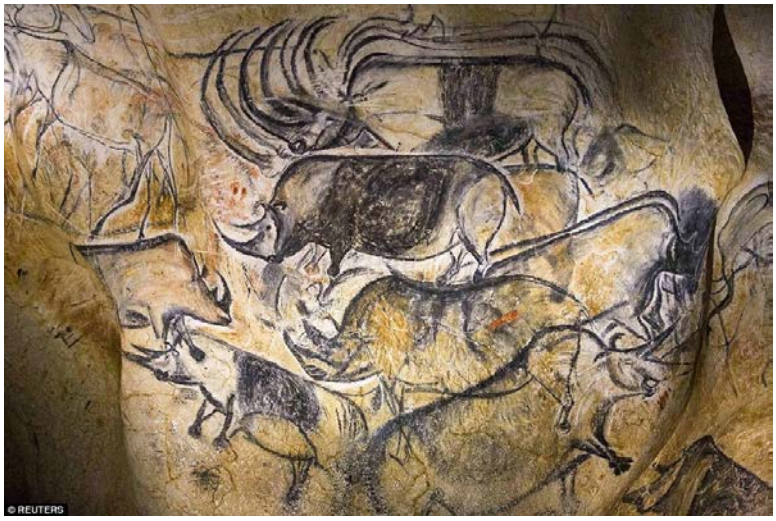
Stony Island Arts Bank, Theaster Gates, 2015

There is a phenomenal burgeoning of human creativity all over the planet, amidst this crazy-ass situation we're all in.

Where does that leave us as viewers of art? What about traditional experiences of visual beauty? Do I have to accept the cacophony and chaos? What does it really entail to make room for otherness? Living with dissonance. When it comes to art, which is something that lives inside of me, making room for dissonance and otherness, can get extremely unsettling. It's not just tolerating the difference and hoping it will go away –but somehow making room inwardly for that dissonant friction as an honored manifestation of a great creative planetary awakening.

Studio, Jordan Wolfson, 2016

And, where does this leave me as a painter? How does all this affect my studio practice? I don't mean making sure that my work passes a litmus test of contemporaneity, but rather how to use my understanding of our contemporary situation as a way of accessing deeper levels and implications of what I *am* already engaged in, and have that impact my ongoing, authentic process. And as a teacher of painting? Where does painting fit in the larger scheme of things and how is it relevant? What would it mean to teach painting in a way that equips students with skills and tools, and a context, not only with roots in the Renaissance and the great inventions of Modernity but with a working understanding of our inescapable contemporaneity, in our current, actual world? These are questions I've been working on, both as a painter and as a teacher, and I have some tentative answers, but I'll save those for another time. Let me just say now very briefly that I believe it relates to painting's inherent aspect of interconnectivity and our own interbeing.



Chauvet Cave, 30,000 B.C.E.

In closing, here we are. Wherever this is. Here is an image from the Chauvet cave paintings from approximately 30,000 years ago. In these times of immersion in the virtual and our enormous uncertainty, inherent aspects of hand-made image making, such as touch, actuality and presence, have become more clear as to their essential importance. I'd like to read a quote from John Berger, from his essay, Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible, from his book, The Shape of a Pocket. He writes, "Today, to try to paint the existent is an act of resistance instigating hope." Thank you.

Books mentioned:

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Belting, Hans, Buddenseig, Andrea, and Weibel, Peter, editors, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*

Berger, John, *The Shape of a Pocket*

Beuys, Joseph, *What is Art?*

Danto, Arthur, *After the End of Art*

Dunning, William, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*

Galenson, David, *Old Masters and Young Geniuses*

Galenson, David, *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art*

Guilbaut, Serge, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*

Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New*

Smith, Terry, *What is Contemporary Art?*

Shiner, Larry, *The Invention of Art*

Stallabrass, Julian, *Art Incorporated*