

Brief History of Art and design

20th-21st century

# 10 Global Contemporary Art and Design

(2000–nowadays)

READING  
for English lesson



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**LAM**  
LIEPĀJAS MŪZIKAS,  
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## READING

Contemporary art is a term used to describe the art of today, generally referring to art produced from the 1970s onwards. Contemporary artists work in a globally influenced, culturally diverse, and technologically advancing world. Their art is a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that continue the challenging of boundaries that was already well underway in the 20th century. Diverse and eclectic, contemporary art as a whole is distinguished by the very lack of a uniform, organising principle, ideology, or “-ism”. Contemporary art is part of a cultural dialogue that concerns larger contextual frameworks such as personal and cultural identity, family, community, and nationality.

In English, modern and contemporary are synonyms, resulting in some conflation and confusion of the terms modern art and contemporary art by non-specialists.

The classification of “contemporary art” as a special type of art, rather than a general adjectival phrase, goes back to the beginnings of Modernism in the English-speaking world. In London, the Contemporary Art Society was founded in 1910 by the critic Roger Fry and others, as a private society for buying works of art to place in public museums. A number of other institutions using the term were founded in the 1930s, such as in 1938 the Contemporary Art Society of Adelaide, Australia, and an increasing number after 1945. Many, like the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston changed their names from ones using “modern art” in this period, as Modernism became defined as a historical art movement, and much “modern” art ceased to be “contemporary”. The definition of what is contemporary is naturally always on the move, anchored in the present with a start date that moves forward, and the works the Contemporary Art Society bought in 1910 could no longer be described as contemporary.

Particular points that have been seen as marking a change in art styles include the end of World War II and the 1960s. There has perhaps been a lack of natural break points since the 1960s, and definitions of what constitutes “contemporary art” in the 2010s vary and are mostly imprecise. Art from the past 20 years is very likely to be included, and definitions often include art going back to about 1970; “the art of the late 20th and early 21st century”; “both an outgrowth and a rejection of modern art”; “Strictly speaking, the term ‘contemporary art’ refers to art made and produced by artists living today”; “Art from the 1960s or [19]70s up until this very minute”; and sometimes further, especially in museum contexts, as museums which form a permanent collection of contemporary art inevitably find this aging. Many use the formulation “Modern and Contemporary Art”, which avoids this problem. Smaller commercial galleries, magazines and other sources may use stricter definitions, perhaps restricting the “contemporary” to work from 2000 onwards. Artists who are still productive after a long career, and ongoing art movements, may present a particular issue; galleries and critics are often reluctant to divide their work between the contemporary and non-contemporary.

Sociologist Nathalie Heinich draws a distinction between modern and contemporary art, describing them as two different paradigms which partially overlap historically. She found that while “modern art” challenges the conventions of representation, “contemporary art” challenges the very notion of an artwork. She regards Duchamp’s Fountain (which was made in the 1910s in the midst of the triumph of modern art) as the starting point of contemporary art, which gained momentum after World War II with Gutai’s performances, Yves Klein’s monochromes and Rauschenberg’s Erased de Kooning Drawing.

Contemporary artwork is characterised by diversity: diversity of material, of form, of subject matter, and even time periods. It is "distinguished by the very lack of a uniform organizing principle, ideology, or -ism" that is seen in many other art periods and movements. Contemporary art does not have one, single objective or point of view, so it can be contradictory and open-ended. There are nonetheless several common themes that have appeared in contemporary works, such as identity politics, the body, globalization and migration, technology, contemporary society and culture, time and memory, and institutional and political critique.

The functioning of the art world is dependent on art institutions, ranging from major museums to private galleries, non-profit spaces, art schools and publishers, and the practices of individual artists, curators, writers, collectors, and philanthropists. A major division in the art world is between the for-profit and non-profit sectors, although in recent years the boundaries between for-profit private and non-profit public institutions have become increasingly blurred. Most well-known contemporary art is exhibited by professional artists at commercial contemporary art galleries, by private collectors, art auctions, corporations, publicly funded arts organizations, contemporary art museums or by artists themselves in artist-run spaces. Contemporary artists are supported by grants, awards, and prizes as well as by direct sales of their work. Career artists train at art school or emerge from other fields.

There are close relationships between publicly funded contemporary art organizations and the commercial sector. For instance, in 2005 the book *Understanding International Art Markets and Management* reported that in Britain a handful of dealers represented the artists featured in leading publicly funded contemporary art museums. Commercial organizations include galleries and art fairs.

Corporations have also integrated themselves into the contemporary art world, exhibiting contemporary art within their premises, organizing and sponsoring contemporary art awards, and building up extensive corporate collections. Corporate advertisers frequently use the prestige associated with contemporary art and coolhunting to draw the attention of consumers to luxury goods.

The institutions of art have been criticized for regulating what is designated as contemporary art. Outsider art, for instance, is literally contemporary art, in that it is produced in the present day. However, one critic has argued it is not considered so because the artists are self-taught and are thus assumed to be working outside of an art historical context. Craft activities, such as textile design, are also excluded from the realm of contemporary art, despite large audiences for exhibitions. Art critic Peter Timms has said that attention is drawn to the way that craft objects must subscribe to particular values in order to be admitted to the realm of contemporary art. "A ceramic object that is intended as a subversive comment on the nature of beauty is more likely to fit the definition of contemporary art than one that is simply beautiful."

Contemporary art can sometimes seem at odds with a public that does not feel that art and its institutions share its values. In Britain, in the 1990s, contemporary art became a part of popular culture, with artists becoming stars, but this did not lead to a hoped-for "cultural utopia". Some critics like Julian Spalding and Donald Kuspit have suggested that skepticism, even rejection, is a legitimate and reasonable response to much contemporary art. Brian Ashbee in an essay called "Art Bollocks" criticizes "much installation art, photography, conceptual art, video and other practices generally called post-modern" as being too dependent on verbal explanations in the form of theoretical discourse. However, the acceptance of nontraditional art in museums has increased due to changing perspectives on what constitutes an art piece.

Taken and adapted from:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contemporary\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contemporary_art)

**TASK1:****Mark the statements as TRUE or FALSE according to the text:**

1. Contemporary art is defined by a consistent ideology that unifies its various forms.
2. The term "contemporary art" has evolved since its inception in the early 20th century.
3. The text suggests that the boundaries between for-profit and non-profit art institutions have remained distinct over time.
4. Nathalie Heinich identifies a clear distinction between modern and contemporary art based on their historical contexts.
5. Outsider art is widely accepted as a form of contemporary art due to its production in the present day.
6. The text indicates that contemporary art often addresses themes such as identity politics and globalization.
7. Corporations have played a significant role in the promotion and integration of contemporary art into their business practices.

**TASK 2:****1. What distinguishes contemporary art from previous art movements?**

- A. Its strict adherence to traditional artistic principles
- B. The lack of a uniform organising principle or ideology
- C. Its focus on exclusively classical techniques
- D. Its commitment to a single artistic perspective

**2. According to the text, how do contemporary artists approach their work?**

- A. By strictly following historical art conventions
- B. By working within a single, defined artistic style
- C. By creating art in a globally influenced, culturally diverse context
- D. By rejecting all forms of technological advancement

**3. How does the text describe the relationship between contemporary art institutions?**

- A. Completely separate and independent
- B. Entirely disconnected from commercial sectors
- C. Increasingly blurred boundaries between for-profit and non-profit sectors
- D. Strictly regulated with no interaction

**4. What is a key characteristic of contemporary artwork according to the passage?**

- A. Uniformity of material and subject matter
- B. A single, clear objective
- C. Diversity and contradictory nature
- D. Strict adherence to traditional representation

**5. How does the text characterise the evolution of the term “contemporary art”?**

- A. As a fixed and unchanging concept
- B. As a term with a permanently defined start date
- C. As a definition that is constantly moving and anchored in the present
- D. As a strictly historical classification

**6. What critique is mentioned regarding art institutions?**

- A. They are too innovative in their approach
- B. They completely ignore new art forms
- C. They regulate and potentially exclude certain art forms
- D. They have no impact on art classification

**7. How do corporations interact with contemporary art, according to the text?**

- A. By completely avoiding art-related activities
- B. By exhibiting art, sponsoring awards, and building collections
- C. By rejecting all forms of artistic expression
- D. By creating their own exclusive art movements