

WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY ART FORTODAY?
And what should it be for, if anything?



Perić Collection

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Nick Irvin

Lately I've been spending more time with historical modernism than contemporary art. I spent six fun years in vassalage to a very particular, yet very representative commercial gallery. This was plenty of education in the contemporary. Once I had my fill of that, formal schooling proved the most elegant exit: I moved to Princeton, I changed my life. I moved my focus back in time.

There's nothing brave or new to this. Stealing away to the university and dwelling on past utopias is an old trope, and cloistering solves nothing. But three years in, it's clear that my life is still with living art, because my friends are still, for the most part, artists in New York. I see a lot of them, too, turning away from contemporary art's career scripts, in different ways. This doesn't change the fact that they're artists.

Among my friends, there's a pervasive feeling that the conventional art circuit is "cooked": you're happy for your friend if they're invited to participate in a biennial, but otherwise the premise of a biennial is in itself abhorrent. The fact that the money faucet has dried up helps clarify things. It sorts out people's commitments. I'm 33, and many of the ambitious people younger than me are expressing their careerism through forms other than studio practice. Maybe that's for the best. In the other direction, *Artforum's* on life support, and even Michael Krebber has closed up shop, at least as we've known it. His current

show in New York dumps the entire contents of his studio into the gallery, and its inventory, ostensibly forever. Krebber explains his rationale: “I decided to just switch the power button off and ship this complete painting machine to the gallery and that way to also be rid of it.” The energy—the “power”—is elsewhere.

Where is it, then? Less exhibition-making than movies, music, novels, fashion, social work, activism, crypto scams, parenthood, etc. What’s most interesting is when these pivots are made “directly,” not through the frame of contemporary art: movies as in Sundance, not multichannel installation; novels as in Penguin Random House, not Sternberg Press; activism as in organizing, not “gesture.” In these other scenes, the de-skilled, outsider-naïveté of ‘artist as x ’ is not inherently enough. There are BS detectors. It’s better to just be x , artfully.

There was a lecture series at Artists Space some years back, by a scholar named Suhail Malik, called “On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art.” It was supposed to become a book, but that hasn’t happened. I recommend the videos, if you’ve read this far and have the stomach for philosophy. But even if you don’t, the title does a lot of the work: what’s good about art is something other than its frameworks, playbooks, and conventions. The “exit” cannot be refusal, since refusal has been art’s engine since at least Courbet. I think it might be more like ambivalence toward this shibboleth “contemporary art” and its mandates: an agnosticism, or promiscuity.