

# SNAP!

Timotheus Vermeulen

Depending on how old you are, 20 years may seem like a long or a short period of time. The Queen might think little of it. In my estimation as a 32 year-old, much has happened. For a collection 20 years old, it must appear overwhelming. Between 1995 and the present, the internet happened, and New Labour, there were the 2005 bombings, Man United's treble, the 2008 financial crisis, the BP oil spill, the YBAs, Twitter, the Good Friday Agreement, Britpop, the 1996 Manchester bombings, Grime, the London Olympics, Boris bikes, the privatisation of just about everything, uneven geographical development, trolling, the FSA, the hipster, floodings, skinny jeans, post-internet art. And that's just the UK. The national history of which the Zabłudowicz Collection is part, regardless of whether it has always been aware of it or not, affected by it or not, affecting it or not, is a history of crises, of technological acceleration and ecological depletion, of capitalist expansion and financial contraction, of political upheavals and the general decline of (belief in) democracy. The exhibition *Zabłudowicz Collection: 20 Years* looks back on the Collection's long and short life so far amid these developments. What I intend here is to look, or glance, really, at how it looks back – to be sure, at its premise, its conception, not the actual show itself – I leave that to the critics. What is this private collection's line of sight? Which art is in focus? What events are cut out? In other words: what image does it have of its own past? There are three parts to this inquiry: first, I briefly discuss what it means to look back; second, I contemplate the exhibition's line of sight, the so-called 'contemporary'; and third, I consider the link between the 'contemporary' and the private collection.

To look back at your past is more difficult than you might think. If you look into the future, you look towards a horizon. 'That', you think, imagining a point of arrival, 'is where I need to go.' Your vision orders everything on your way accordingly. When looking at your past, however, there is often no horizon, since you do not necessarily remember your earliest days – or if you do, you no longer remember who you were back then, or how that person thought about himself, or how he experienced life. The events of your life, chronologically and unchronologically, faster and slower, in focus and out of focus, in whole and in parts, move before your eyes without vantage point, now pulling your gaze here, then drawing it out elsewhere. Looking forward steadies; looking backwards makes you dizzy. Every kid with carsickness can tell you as much.

Historically, there have been three ways to deal with this dizziness, this carsickness. The first – which we might call the 'linear model' – is to put into place a mythological point of departure, of origin, within whose remit the whole purpose of the trip is explained. This is often how religious texts, fables and Hollywood blockbusters tell stories about their past: all events are signified, that is, hierarchised, related to one another, in the context, the frame, of an originary motive. The second way to deal with dizziness – the so-called network, 'rhizomatic' or 'rhythmical' model – is to flatten the picture, to see all events distant and close, fast and slow, on the same plane. Modernism was involved in this game, for sure. The third model, the 'singular', is that of focus. Here you focus your gaze on one event from your past only, setting your sights on this one exclusively in spite, and at the cost, of all the others. It implies a discontinuity. Indeed, the other events only come into view when they cross paths with, that is, when they transgress, the isolated memory you stick with. An example of this model is the event.

## ZABLUDOWICZ COLLECTION 20 YEARS

The second in a series of three commissioned essays to accompany the exhibition *Zabłudowicz Collection: 20 Years*.

All three essays will be included in a new publication available in August 2015.

I am inclined to say that post-Obrist<sup>1</sup> most exhibitions combine these three approaches – the linear, the rhythmical, the singular. Or rather, perhaps, one should say that they – the shows and/or the curators – move back and forth between them, now focusing, then steadying, then flattening. A pick and mix, if you will. *Zabludowicz Collection: 20 Years* is a case in point here. Structured around the theme of the ‘contemporary’, it finds an origin, a unified line of sight, on the premise of which certain artists and artworks are put centre stage while others are marginalised, some foregrounded, others pushed to the background. Exhibiting alongside each other paintings from the mid-1990s and recent videos, fresh site-specific installations and more mature sculptures, it flattens and democratises, displaying all historical attitudes and styles in equal measure regardless of their individual qualities. And through selection, including some while excluding others, it focuses: ‘this is important, this isn’t’, ‘this deserves inclusion, that doesn’t’. The result is a picture that is at once hierarchical and ahistoricist, singular and multiplicitous, generalist and specific. In other words, a kind of lomo snapshot, with the emphasis on ‘snap’. *Zabludowicz Collection: 20 Years* ‘snaps’ shots of its past: subjective and accidental, directed yet arbitrary and isolated *cuts* from the skin of an intricate experiential reality. The exhibition is a series of intuitive bite-size responses to complex bodies of matter, just as a lomo instantaneously snaps an event from the hip, a hunting gun is triggered instinctively at the sound of an animal, or an animal involuntarily bites at the sight of movement. Snap! A right arm from 2003. Snap! Half a nose from 1996 through to 1999. Snap! A left foot from 2013. *20 Years* is a re-embodiment, if you will, of dismembered parts of earlier discussions, exhibitions and artworks. In what follows I have a look at the compositional logic of this snapshot, the skeletal structure of this new body, in particular the spectre of the contemporary.

What it means to say that *20 Years* is a retrospective of contemporary art is that it looks back at art that was considered contemporary during the past 20 years. For the phrase ‘contemporary art’, as the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>2</sup> has pointed out, is less a denominator simply of present production than that it is a category, a ‘criterion’, of art whose strategies and styles are (hence the ‘con-’) recognised by peers as of this moment. If you today paint a portrait in the style of Vermeer, or even Picasso, after all, few would call it ‘contemporary’. It is new, for sure. But it probably won’t be seen as ‘new’ by others. This is to say that the contemporary is both the exhibition’s balancing point and a sliding scale; a sun that sets in one place and rises elsewhere. The very definition of contemporary changes as time goes by; even, indeed, in a period as brief as 20 years.

By and large, the exhibition looks back at two pictures of the contemporary that I would agree are the most representative visions of the past two decades: the Young British Artists (YBAs) associated with the mass-media savvy shock, playful yet penetrating irony of Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Michael Landy and to an extent Sarah Lucas; and so-called post-internet art, aligned with the internetnetworked, contemplative post-irony of the likes of Ed Atkins, Andy Holden and Pamela Rosenkranz. Occasionally, it suddenly shifts position to see its past through the works of artists who fit neither the former nor the latter register but overlap with both of them: Isa Genzken, Haroon Mirza, Mark Leckey (who I think may well be one of the key predecessors of the post-internet sensibility).

In retrospect, the YBAs can be seen as the artistic flag bearers of what many in cultural studies call ‘Postmodernism’ or the ‘End of History’ and political theorists tend to refer to as the ‘Third Way’. More recently, and much to my liking, the term ‘capitalist realism’ has been reintroduced.<sup>3</sup> The YBAs signify what the theorist Fredric Jameson has referred to, lamenting it, mourning it, as ‘senses of an end’: the idea that for whatever reason – whether humankind has reached its full potential with its development of (neo)liberal democracies, or whether the trauma of the Holocaust has delegitimised all grand narratives – there are no more stories to be told, no more horizons to be chased, alternatives to seek, futures to long for.<sup>4</sup> You may celebrate this ‘end’ or criticise it – Hal Foster’s postmodernisms of ‘reaction’ and ‘resistance’<sup>5</sup> – but it is no longer possible to envisage an alternative to it. The YBAs therefore are concerned first and foremost with dominant discourses of the present, such as capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy, institutional racism, simulation and mediation. Hirst, decorating a human skull with diamonds, raises the question of whether even death can be reduced to a market value, while Lucas exposes the gendered power relations in sexual practice. If Nike celebrates the end of history by loudly proclaiming ‘just do it!’, the YBAs whisper: ‘should you?’ Where Nirvana laments ‘Here we are now – entertain us’, the YBAs counter cheekily: ‘who are we to be entertained, even?’ In similar vein, the YBAs

<sup>1</sup> I am referring here, of course, to Serpentine director Hans-Ulrich Obrist, who is generally credited with the emancipation of the curator as editor to the curator as author, as someone who, simply put, doesn’t merely help the artist realise his vision, but who has a vision himself that the artist may help realise.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Art Today’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 1, April 2010, pp. 91–99.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, London, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Hal Foster, ‘Introduction’, Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New Press, New York, 1998, pp. ix–xvii.

do not contribute to the development of the history of art as much as they encourage its deconstruction, abandoning the modernist impetus for new forms in favour of an impassive recycling, a 'slightly farcical repetition' of past moves.<sup>6</sup>

Post-internet art – the 'movement' associated, simply put, with art produced in acknowledgment, concrete or abstract, formally, conceptually, or affectively, in terms of production, distribution or consumption, of the internet and/or its influence on contemporary culture – represents a rather different attitude, though it is not entirely dissimilar to the sensibility of the YBAs. This attitude is characterised by a sense of what Robin van den Akker and I have elsewhere called 'informed naivety'.<sup>7</sup> What is meant by the phrase 'informed naivety' is the interrogation of the understanding that there may currently be no alternatives in sight by a wilfulness to imagine their possibility nonetheless.<sup>8</sup> The reason for this interrogation, presumably, is that the end of history wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. In the past decade there have been various ideological wars, inequality has risen exponentially, and climate change is turning the planet into an increasingly inhospitable habitat. Indeed, if there is any one difference between the YBAs and post-internet, it is the return of the project, as projection, of history: the perceived need to think beyond the parameters of the present. In some cases, this projection is apocalyptic; in others, and increasingly, it is also hopeful, utopian even. But regardless of its form, the alternative is once more a conceptual possibility. As the label post-internet suggests, the art often has an affiliation of some sort to the internet, if not the web itself then to the culture around it: hyperreality, glocality, the logic of the rhizome, control, networking and p2p, the collapse of the space-time continuum. Indeed, the term is often applied to practices that are hybrids between the algorithmic and the organic, as is the case in the works of Ed Atkins, or between the simulated and the material. It refers to analogue works produced for the digital screen, and to affective visions of the post-human – the oeuvre of Pamela Rosenkranz comes to mind here. In line with the web's rhizomatic structure, post-internet art also tends to project history less as a linear narrative, of lands colonised and to be discovered one after the other, than as an infinite archive full of unrealised possibilities to be opened and closed at will.

The Zabłudowicz Collection, by presenting us with this particular snapshot, structured around two vanishing points, suggests a distinct coming of age narrative which reflects both the Collection's image of itself and that of the world around it. Judging from the dates of the works included, most of the Collection's youth was spent with the YBAs. Here, the Zabłudowicz Collection looks back on its days helping the outcasts overtake the school establishment, kicking in doors of tradition, challenging outdated conventions and reinvigorating the curriculum. Indeed, interestingly, few of the included works of the YBAs are from the 2000s let alone the 2010s, suggesting that the collection lost touch with the gang after graduation, a period during which the latter's behaviour became, or was often perceived to be, increasingly erratic, wildly swinging between the repetitive and the grotesque, the ineffectual and the decadent. The Zabłudowicz Collection has long been, it appears, a Maecenas of those in need; not of the needy. As the Collection matured, so, it is suggested, did its tastes, extending its friend group to include reorganisers like Sigmar Polke, Jim Lambie, Isa Genzken, Mark Leckey and Haroon Mirza as well as the millennial millenarianists, the post-internetters. Here, what is supported is less the outcast kicking in doors, than the outsider trying to push or pull them open, looking for inspiration beyond the walls of hegemonic discourse.

*20 Years* presents the Zabłudowicz Collection at once as an insider, whose history is intricately interlinked with the history of contemporary art, and an outsider, affected but untouched by – and therefore able to support – movements reorganising the art historical tradition. It's an image of Maecenas as doctor, as GP, not only keeping his finger on the pulse, but interfering in it in the hope it will benefit his patient. This is commendable, especially in times where the NHS is less and less capable of dealing with the demand. Indeed, in this sense, *20 Years* is both a paean to the Zabłudowicz Collection's relentless efforts to further the UK's artistic discourse and its impact on society – and a requiem for the role of (public) art in the 20th century welfare state. You do also wonder how much work is stored in archives, how much blood has been tapped to be put away in freezers. Which works, what blood cells, and for what reasons? (For can a private collection ever really be the GP, given what is at stake, given that the value of its collection will rise or soar depending on the pulse of the patient – I personally do not think it can, which is not

<sup>6</sup> Kitty Hauser, 'Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, Jan–Feb 1998, p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Vol. 1, No.2, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Jörg Heiser, 'Post-Internet-Art: Die Kunst der Digitalen Eingeborenen'. Deutschlandfunk, 2015. [http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/post-internet-art-die-kunst-der-digitalen-eingeborenen.1184.de.html?dram:article\\_id=304141](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/post-internet-art-die-kunst-der-digitalen-eingeborenen.1184.de.html?dram:article_id=304141)

to say the private collection is doctor evil, necessarily, but rather that perhaps we should change metaphors here, and think of other roles: botanist? hairdresser? investor? editor? hunter?) Will that blood ever be injected back into our bodies? Who 'snaps' the criteria for the 'contemporary' from the body of art? What happens to the remainder, the disembodied carcass? May that be an idea for the next exhibition?

**Timotheus Vermeulen** is Assistant Professor in Cultural Theory at Radboud University Nijmegen, where he also co-directs the Centre for New Aesthetics. He is one of the co-founding editors (at large) of *Notes on Metamodernism*. Vermeulen has written on art, film and television for a range of publications, both academic and essayistic, and is a regular contributor to *Frieze* magazine.