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ARTNEWS

ART OF THE CITY — BOOKS

ROGER WHITE'S 'THE CONTEMPORARIES' VENTURES NIMBLY THROUGH TODAY'S ART WORLD

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 02/05/15

Comprehensive, clear-eyed books about the art world are few and far between. Anthony Haden-Guest's *True Colors* (1998) offers a juicy look at the 1980s market surge, as Mary Boone swilled Champagne at Odeon, and Sarah Thornton's *Seven Days in the Art World* (2009) documents the international infrastructure that would come with the next boom, but they are both exceptions. They are also both primarily interested in power at the industry's highest reaches.

Roger White's *The Contemporaries: Travels in the 21st Century Art World* (Bloomsbury; 288 pp.; \$28), out next month, is a vital addition to that short reading list, a missing link of sorts that ventures to areas and concerns beyond the top-flight fairs and art centers that his forebears studied. In a series of substantial case studies, White considers topics like the murky art of educating MFA students (occasioned by crit season at RISD, where he teaches), the potential viability of regional scenes (a trip to Milwaukee), and the increasingly common phenomenon of the rediscovered artist (the tricky Stephen Kaltenbach).

A graduate of Columbia's MFA program and an artist himself (he shows at New York's Rachel Uffner Gallery), White is an ideal guide to the scene. He has experience, access, and a measure of success. Like *Paper Monument*, the irregularly published art journal that he runs with Dushko Petrovich, *The Contemporaries* approaches the art world with equanimity, and a balanced measure of criticism and reporting. He is neither cynical nor craven. He gets it.



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The uninitiated can read it for a nuanced understanding of the art world's codes and rituals. Veterans can delight in the material White digs up and his expert rendering of it. His chapter on the recent glut of young market darlings, which is told through the rise of Dana Schutz, is refreshingly devoid of the hyperbolic alarm that typically accompanies such pieces. He calmly explains how the prevailing wisdom in much of academia that painting was passé left an opening for a talented figure like Schutz to emerge, helped along by a collector base hungry for fresh talent. And he captures her achievement: "Primarily," he writes, "her images bear witness to the mood of boom-time, war-time America: festive and horrible, monstrously cheerful, like a party about to get thoroughly out of control."

White has some good gossip, as when a onetime assistant for the performance artist Vanessa Beecroft talks about her dealer, Jeffrey Deitch, first encouraging Beecroft to take up painting, and then deciding, on second thought (after seeing those paintings), she should maybe give sculpture a whirl, which she does. We hear about Nam June Paik's assistants making works that the artist, late in his career, never even set eyes on. (I only wish White had revealed the name of the artist he mentions who offered, as a year-end present to an assistant, the opportunity for her to paint one of his works, on her own time, that he would then sign and give to her.)

These stories come in a chapter on the peculiar job of being an artist assistant, after White relays the story of informing an incredulous sociologist at a party how perfectly common it is for artists today to have other people make most, or even all, of their work. "I left the party feeling weird about the conversation," White writes, "...mainly because I'd enjoyed divulging this little factoid about contemporary art, in the way that a hairdresser to the stars might enjoy reporting on the toupees and extensions of various celebrities. Clearly, something still nagged." I suspect we have all probably felt that way at some point—smugly proud of, but also a little embarrassed by, art's idiosyncrasies. White, though, is brave enough to admit it, and admit that the relationship between artists and their assistants is, at best, fraught. ("You're not my assistant; you're my paid friend!" is how painter Alexis Rockman puts it.)

White's prose is crystalline, and gasped with poetry and humor. "MIPAS are swiftly flowing rivers into which it's impossible to step twice," he writes of the regular turnover in two-year graduate programs across the country, as teachers cycle in and out almost as quickly as students. And on drug use in the circa 1970 art world, this: "Many Conceptualists got stoned, but they got *rigorously* stoned."

The Contemporaries is particularly strong when confronting two of today's most pressing contemporary issues: that there's more art being made than ever before, and that it's increasingly difficult for artists to make a living in places where they will actually get exposure. On his visit to Milwaukee, White meets an artist who wonders if people could be persuaded to "invest in local artists the way they invest in local beer." Could thriving local scenes replace the current hierarchical one, which is winner-takes-all and centered on a handful of cities?

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“Proposing that we approach [art] like a case of microbrewed beer or a loaf of bread may have significant consequences on its pricing, for starters,” White decides, “but it may also offer a new perspective on the value of art.” It is hard to imagine a dramatic shift to localism occurring anytime soon. As MFA programs bulge in size, the dream of artistic success in the big city shows no sign of dying out. But increasingly it feels like something has to give. Things are getting tense out there.

White quotes Dan Graham in 1969: “It’s time to leave all this shit behind; the art world is poisoned; get out to the country or take a radical stance.”

In the meantime, most of us keep working, chasing after the aesthetic kicks that White so thrillingly documents. “I want to be surprised by my own work,” the artist Mary Walling Blackburn tells him at one point. “It’s about wanting the work to change you, as hokey as it sounds.” Hear, hear.

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