

# Being

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# Contemporary

When starting on this issue, we tried to answer an impossible question: What does it mean to be of our time?

While we would never be able to fully grasp this question's insurmountable layers, we realized that it's not depth which makes the path difficult, but rather the methodological framework necessary to navigate this question with rigor. Surely a survey of contemporary practices, trends, and tropes may have sufficed. But is being contemporary a distinct and identifiable category that we can ascribe to the work of others? Or could a collection of works reciprocally define this quality? Were we willing to let novelty win out over a deeper and more resonate collectivity?

An internet image search for "contemporary architecture" results in a predictable matrix of swoopy and slickly clad forms, a materialization of the "now" or a representation of society's desire for spectacle and singularity. One might assume that academia offers the counterpoint to this narrative. But truthfully, current discourse on the contemporary in the discipline isolates a select set of terms around which intellectual silos are built, offering little opportunity for resistance or a view from without.

The contemporary, as a descriptor, is often invoked, without qualification, to explain away a trend. In effect, it is a simple aggrandizer—if it is contemporary, it must be good. But to define the term before using it applies pressure to it; in limiting those things that fall under its umbrella, we gather a narrower grouping than just all the things that are happening right now. As this issue of *Cite* suggests, this particular qualification of currency might be a disqualifier from our understanding of the contemporary. What value, then, does defining the term bring?

We decided to flip the question and ask: Of what and of whom are we contemporaries? This approach, perhaps as flawed as others, was far more liberating. Since a single univocal direction isn't discernible today, we weren't interested in moving forward. We chose to move sideways.

For us, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's 2009 essay "What Is the Contemporary?" is both illuminating and obscure. The obscurity comes from the open-endedness of statements such as: "The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its

light but rather its darkness” and the alternate proposition that those who are “truly contemporary, truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands.” Meditating on these thoughts yields illumination. Take, for example, the first statement: the “darkness” to which he refers suggests a counter-balance to the flashy events and celebratory discourses that we normally think of as contemporary.

We take Agamben’s words as a call to consider contemporaneity as liberation—not as a construction intended to limit the understanding of the world and its forms. The liberating aspect stems from the recognition that “contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time.” There is not one absolute characteristic of what it means to be of our own time, nor one episodic unity of contemporary thought, but rather many ways in which each individual participates in the present. In other words, Agamben’s singular is one of many co-existing singulars. This condition presupposes, in each contemporary subject, a separation from the present in order to read it, discern it, and see its many expressions. In other words, Agamben hints at the idea that total immersion in the present causes a blindness and a resignation to the continuous race for originality and frenzy. In contrast, his position presents “contemporariness” as a perpetual questioning of what it is to be in this time while simultaneously questioning what it is to be at all possible times. A new definition of time is, therefore, inescapable—one that is expressed not by urgency but by relevance.

P.S.

Humbled by the events of 2020 and our inability to control or even comprehend its consequences, how could the realization of this deep intersectionality and interconnectedness truly help us advance the way we see the discipline of architecture? And how can we act within this framework? Reading the statement above at a temporal remove—it was written a year ago—due to the pandemic reveals both naïveté and forethought on our part. Defining the contemporary is intertwined with qualifying time itself, and nearly all of the world was forced into a new relationship with time in the last year.

The following essays, images, and interviews are bound together by the notion that, though they might refer to other times, we can see our own time in them. Stepping away from any pretense of being timely, we gathered work and ideas that maintain currency by putting our present concerns in a different but distinct perspective.