

TYRANNY OF THE PRESENT

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How is history transformed when human memory is externalized as data and stored on servers? For instance, if we Google the events of January 6, 2021, when insurrectionists, incited by Donald Trump's refusal to concede the 2020 presidential election, stormed the United States Capitol, in the hope of preventing Congress from certifying Joe Biden's election, what results will we get? Will the results of a search made in Manhattan be identical to ones made in Houston, or Berlin? Will the web pages included on a list generated today be identical to those that appear tomorrow? And if so, will the emerging consensus on what happened on January 6 and what it meant (if there is, or could be one) be based on empirical evidence, or merely on the number of times that any link has been clicked? Elsewhere, I have used the term "epistemology of search" to describe a form of knowing based not on excavating and testing new facts, but on the reassembly of existing information that is already accessible online.¹ This is not merely a matter of convenience, but represents a transformation of what counts as knowledge. Modern history has proceeded by induction (arriving at general rules or characterizations from a mass of particulars), deduction (the description of singularities through general rules), and/or dialectic (by which one historical condition induces a response or negation of another). But algorithms, which do not think, proceed statistically, and produce lists of the most popular and relevant web pages in real time. The authority of this output is not based on reason or open debate, but on forms of analysis that are obscure, if not invisible, to the average user.² Although in our daily lives we operate as though Internet searches involve a neutral process of compiling knowledge, nonetheless, we know from numerous studies of Internet bias, and reports of detrimental trolls and bots, that this is frequently not the case.

There are two conditions that emerge from the epistemology of search. The first is a shift in authority from the historian to the algorithm. What you get in a Google search has been vetted only by its algorithm,³ yet all generated links appear equally legitimate, since each belongs to the same list, a textual format whose aesthetic banality affords it a false neutrality. Indeed, with the list as our primary online format for retrieving information, we may have returned to the realm of the *Annals*, a pre-modern genre of

recounting history by listing events according to the years in which they occurred (and sometimes listing only the years, with no corresponding event). According to Hayden White's analysis of the "content" of this form, the annalist operates outside the realm of narrative, as characterized by a coherent subject—or narrator—of events, and a formal closure of their accounts. The Annals has an author, but no narrative to unify its discourse; it is a chronologically-organized list wherein significant occurrences are strung together concisely, rather than being presented as a continuous coherent story. Indeed, we might think of the Google search as a form of the Annals that replaces chronology with another kind of quantitative measure: page rank. Interestingly, White suggests that the Annals' chronological list form, and particularly their authors' unwillingness or inability to organize events hierarchically according to their perceived significance, indicates a foreclosure of social cohesion. He writes, "It is the absence of any consciousness of a social center that prohibits the annalist from ranking the events he treats as elements of a historical field of occurrence."⁴ I would argue that "the epistemology of search" accomplishes such an foreclosure, if the "social" in this regard denotes forms of knowledge that result from openly debating the legitimacy of what is taken as fact, and aim for some kind of negotiated agreement on what will count as truth. The occlusion of collective historical judgement leads to the second new condition I wish to elaborate: namely, the epistemology of search is premised on the privatization of history. Today, everyday historical accounts are not derived from the professional historian's careful investigation and evaluation of sources according to agreed-upon norms of evidence-based argumentation, but called up in response to each individual user's prompt. Therefore, the kind of unreason that characterizes our moment may be nothing more and nothing less than the absolute atomization of knowing. Everyone calls forth their own account of history, and each is equally valid. What we are witnessing is the mad proliferation of reason's simulation, which corresponds to the balkanization of political and identity positions that we have witnessed across the United States and Europe in recent years. Under such-conditions, un-reason arises from the incapacity (or unwillingness) to adjudicate among a multiplicity of professed forms of reason. Such privatization of knowledge is perfectly consonant with neo-liberalism's intense efforts to privatize or monetize every other aspect of everyday life, from social services once provided by nation-states, to human DNA. Not only is every individual person treated as a unit of cultural (and finance) capital—functioning as Foucault's entrepreneur of the self—but each of us is

encouraged, even required, through digital networks, to constantly express themselves.⁵ This “expression,” communicated through followers, likes, clicks, posts, and purchases, is then captured as valuable information for corporations to use to target us with advertisements. In a very literal sense, each of us, as a monadic digital subject, is an independent broadcaster, perpetually generating “content.” Even if one’s data trail is not apparent to oneself, and appropriated and monetized by others, it is still understood to be *one’s own*. In short, each of us is their own historian and their own archive. Consequently, there is little need for any kind of external validation, since each of us may claim sovereign expertise with regard to ourselves.⁶

If I am correct in my assertion that the citizens of digital worlds are called upon to generate information in the realms of both labor and leisure (which in any event have become ever more porous with respect to one another), then we might transpose Foucault’s formulation of the neoliberal subject from the entrepreneur to the *broadcaster* of oneself. This shift invokes the question of liveness. Since the beginning of television broadcasting, liveness has denoted the real-time dissemination of audiovisual content, but now, *human life itself* has become a form of broadcasting. However, the resulting compulsory contemporaneity, or presentism, has much deeper roots and a broader scope than digital culture. The latter is only one of several manifestations of capitalism’s endless search for (and production of) new frontiers to satisfy its imperative of infinite growth.⁷ Broadly outlined, we may distinguish between the period of industrial capitalism and imperialism (roughly 1850-1960) as an era dedicated to the identification, transgression, and colonization of *territorial* frontiers, and the era of information or finance capital (c. 1960 -) during which there has been an accelerated transgression and colonization of *temporal* frontiers—of time—through television’s structuring of the day as an orgy of consumption, globalization’s synchronization of production, the extraction of value from greater automation, not only in industry, but in virtually every profession, and finally, through the creation of the Internet as a means of extracting value from the behavior of human beings. Efforts to conquer time were also contemporaneous with the era of industrial capitalism and imperialism, as manifest in the rise of insurance (as a means of protecting oneself from future risk) and credit (which allows one to expand opportunities in the present by mortgaging the future), but we have nonetheless witnessed a dramatic acceleration of time’s “enclosure” since the mid-twentieth century. In theory, time may be a

more unlimited resource than space, though the effects of the Anthropocene on human and extra-human life make such a claim dubious. In any event, it is not only digital culture, but the structural presentisms of late capital that flattens the temporal depth of history, now understood as a proprietary and voluntaristic account of each individual. In short, both the past and the future have been “translated” into the present. The alterity of the past, as what David Lowenthal once called a “foreign country,”⁸ is now dissolved into the punishing periodicity of the 24-hour news cycle,⁹ in which events lose their relevance almost instantly, to be replaced by their newest (though perhaps nearly identical) iterations, while the future is (allegedly) emptied of its risk through predictive AI, which is directed at informing governmental and corporate bodies about how any individual will act tomorrow, based on their actions up until today.¹⁰

The status of the present as arbiter of past and future has had subtle but consequential effects on aesthetics. Not only has the contemporary art world morphed into a global “art industry” with the rise of neoliberalism, but through its presumed status as a “critical” and “conceptual” discourse, contemporary art has begun to assume various forms of curatorial authority, not only over the present, but also over the past.¹¹ This is most evident in how “gaps” in the art-historical record are papered over by exhibiting contemporary artworks, and the related practice of inviting contemporary artists to present critical readings of museum collections through curatorial interventions.¹² If history is privatized through the epistemology of search, it also means that every historical account may claim to be equivalent to every other—even if they have nothing to do with one another. Sometimes, this equivalency may be productive, as when it undermines the artificial belief in linear time, but it may also be deeply problematic, when a moment of historical trauma is papered over retroactively, by simulating its belated resolution. One prominent example of the latter was the inclusion of Faith Ringgold’s monumental painting, *American People Series #20. Die* (1967) in an installation at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) that included Picasso’s *Demaiselles d’Avignon* (1907) and other related works by the Spanish modernist.¹³ Ringgold’s canvas depicts a gruesome dance—or frieze—representing an ambiguous encounter between Black and white figures, many bloodied and holding weapons. Given the history of race relations in the United States, one might presume that the painting’s action pits African Americans against white Americans, but a closer look reveals interracial gestures of love or protection, suggesting that rather than being “natural” enemies, Black and white

Americans face the same forms of oppression. The question of who is in conflict and over what is not resolved in the painting, nor, I suspect, did the artist intend it to be. So, what was MoMA's motivation for exhibiting this work—made 60 years after the *Demoiselles*—as its companion piece? The brothel scene alluded to in Picasso's work seem an irrelevant—in fact irreverent—point of comparison, so one can only presume that it is present on account of his citation of African sculpture, and the resulting encounter between Black and White cultural heritage in his canvas, which inspired the juxtaposition. Although I find such a point of comparison problematic enough (after all, African culture is quite distinct from African American aesthetic production), I suspect that the primary curatorial motivation for organizing this gallery was the felt need to “represent” Black creativity in a gallery that only referenced it through the condescending, even violent, appropriation of primitivism, as presented by Picasso. But if this was the objective, why not introduce artifacts of African or African American visual culture from the same period, or at least close to it, such as philosopher and historian W.E.B. Du Bois's installation for the 1900 World's Fair, which included graphics and photographs that documented the African American experience, or perhaps more relevantly, the work of Harlem Renaissance artists of the 1920s and 30s, such as Aaron Douglas, who responded directly to the legacy of Cubism. To my mind, the answer lies in anachronism's capacity to mask the real inequalities in the archival record. As painful as Ringgold's themes are, as a “corrective” to Picasso they falsely suggest that the inequities of imperialism have been redressed and subsumed by the era of American civil rights struggles.

It may seem churlish of me to criticize the insertion of a major painting by an African American woman in one of the pivotal episodes of MoMA's canonical narrative of modernism. But to be clear, it is not the exhibition of Ringgold's work as a monument of modernism that I object to, but the illusion created by pairing it with Picasso's *Demoiselles*: by appearing to redress the ethical problems posed by one historical work through its anachronistic juxtaposition to another historically unrelated one. This sleight of hand suggests that African American or African responses to modernism's structural racism occurred only belatedly; it renders invisible more direct responses in visual culture that did precisely that, such as the aesthetic concept of *Négritude*, developed by Aimé Césaire and others in Paris in the 1930s. And equally importantly, it suggests that the only way to broaden one's understanding of Western painting is with another painting, instead of with diverse forms of visual culture,

including Du Bois's modernist infographics that might be more amenable to developing counter-narratives. Instead of attempting to answer an urgent historical question about primitivism, colonialism, and racism, MoMA prematurely foreclosed a charged episode in art history with an anachronistic "fix." This matters, because such sloppy relativism, which hinges on Ringgold's racial identity, is the museological equivalent of privatizing history, which I have discussed as a feature of the "epistemology of search." The equivalency established between the Picasso and the Ringgold insinuates that European imperialism is "solved" by African American civil rights struggles. In other words, history is dissolved into a perpetual present tense, characterized by the exchangeability of all available accounts. The only way to adjudicate truth under such conditions is through power—and power is derived quantitatively from the scale of one's platform. If we are to speak truth to power, we must not be ensnared by the tyranny of the present. History is too valuable a political tool to lose.

- 1 See my *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- 2 My analysis of digital environments proceeds as an analysis of the politics and aesthetics of their use. I am not an expert in the technology of the Internet—there are many brilliant commentators who are. What I hope to do is assess how the penetration of digital habits of thought into every aspect of life has profound effects on what we understand as history.
- 3 Although it does seem that the algorithm performs its work unassisted, many scholars have noted the human labor necessary to support on-line activity. See, for instance, Sarah T. Roberts, *Behind the Screen; Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 4 Hayden White, "Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form; Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 11.
- 5 As Tung-Hui Hu states: "Lethargy in a digital age is distinguished by the fact that you're always 'on' as far as technology is concerned, even if you think you have logged off." In Hu, *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2022), viii.
- 6 It may go without saying that this conviction is largely a fantasy. The content we generate is designed to be captured by corporations and analyzed, to manipulate our buying habits. Hence, there is a feedback loop between "expression" and its monetization as data for advertisers.
- 7 For instance, Jason W. Moore writes, "With the rise of capitalism, frontier-making was much more fundamental: not merely a safety valve, but a constitutive spatial movement unlocking the epoch-making potential of endless accumulation. the extension of capitalist power to new, uncommodified spaces became the life blood of capitalism." In Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life; Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 63.
- 8 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 9 For an aesthetic and political analysis of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, see my "Split Screens and Partitioned Publics," in *Signals: How Video Transformed the World*, eds. Stuart Comer and Michelle Kuo (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2023), 89-99.
- 10 See, for instance, Igor Tulchinsky and Christopher E. Mason, *The Age of Prediction; Algorithms, AI, and the Shifting Shadows of Risk* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2023).
- 11 It may seem paradoxical that contemporary art's significant market expansion was accompanied by the mainstreaming of its "critical" capacities, but in fact, art criticism is largely performative, and in many ways compensates ideologically for its market value.
- 12 The important emergence of this practice came with Fred Wilson's landmark 1992 work, "Mining the Museum," which reframed the collections of the Maryland Historical Society. Since then, artists' involvement as curators uniquely qualified to question collections and installation practices has become widespread, and often a normal part of exhibition programs that lacks much criticality. What was once understood as "institutional critique" now typically has the institutions' enthusiastic support.
- 13 The installation that was displayed in one gallery in 2019-21 comprised mostly works by Picasso, but included a much later sculpture by Louise Bourgeois.