



FORUM

On the anthropology of the contemporary

Addressing concepts, designs, and practices

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Between 2007 and 2014, on his own and in association with Gaymon Bennett and Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul Rabinow has been devoted to the development of an “anthropology of the contemporary.” The project is widely recognized as being original, stimulating, and provocative, within and outside of the disciplinary corridors of anthropology. Only spotty attention has been paid, however, to the overarching integrity of the complex spiral of figuration and refiguration through which it has unfolded. Even less attention has been paid to the overarching integrity of the works that Rabinow inaugurated and has continued to pursue throughout his career—from an original and frequently cited formulation of the relation between tradition and modernity through his more recent articulations of the anthropology appropriate to the relation between modernity and the contemporary. Severally and jointly, the contributors to this forum give attention to both. Anthony Stavrianakis joins Rabinow in a response that engages these contributors, taking the opportunity thus provided to address criticism and to elaborate and to refine an anthropology of the contemporary as they currently understand it to be.

Keywords: anthropology, theory, the contemporary, collaboration, remediation, concept work, cases

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Introduction

James D. Faubion

Between 2007 and 2014, on his own and in association with Gaymon Bennett and Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul Rabinow has been devoted to the development of an “anthropology of the contemporary.” The works central to the venture include *Marking time: On the anthropology of the contemporary* (2007); *The accompaniment: Assembling the contemporary* (2011); and (with Anthony Stavrianakis) *Designs on the contemporary: Anthropological tests* (2014). His project is multi-faceted and each of its many facets merits critical attention. Three of them are especially prominent. The first of these is his definition of the contemporary: “a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (non-linear) space,” through the lens of which both the “traditional” and the “modern” become “historical.” The second is a diagnostics that synthetically brings together Max Weber’s vision of the design and the ethos of research, Foucault’s investigations of power, and the historical constitution of knowledge and the dynamics of problematization, and John Dewey’s conceptualization of thinking as a problem-driven enterprise that has “remediation” as its telos. The third—intimately related to the preceding two—is his conviction in the ontological legitimacy of the category of “the emergent” and so of the legitimacy and necessity of developing the concepts adequate to envisioning it and the design of research adequate to elucidating it substantively.

Rabinow’s project is widely recognized as being original, stimulating, and provocative, within and outside of the disciplinary corridors of anthropology. Only spotty attention has been paid, however, to the overarching integrity of the complex spiral of figuration and refiguration through which it has unfolded. Even less attention has been paid to the overarching integrity of the works that Rabinow inaugurated and has continued to pursue throughout his career—from an original and frequently cited formulation of the relation between tradition and modernity (Rabinow 1978) through his more recent articulations of the anthropology appropriate to the relation between modernity and the contemporary. The forum that follows brings together distinguished scholars of diverse interests and training who severally and jointly confirm the originality, the stimulation and the provocations of Rabinow’s efforts to codify the former and his sustained and ongoing efforts to codify and draw out the analytical and investigative consequences of the latter relation. Severally, these scholars look as far back into Rabinow’s oeuvre or only to its recent installments as their inclinations and interests compel them to do. Jointly, the contributors register the longer term through which—with consistent self-critical reflection from the 1970s and still today—Rabinow’s project continues to break new anthropological ground.

Co-author of *Demands of the day: On the logic of anthropological inquiry* and *Designs on the contemporary: Anthropological tests*, Anthony Stavrianakis joins Rabinow in a response that engages the contributors to this forum and takes the opportunity that the contributors have—in their consistently intelligent, charitable, and challenging remarks—provided them to address criticism, to elaborate and refine an anthropology of the contemporary as they currently understand it to be.



If it isn't clear at the outset, it will soon become clear that Rabinow and Stavrianakis embrace the project of fashioning an anthropology of the contemporary as a fundamentally collaborative enterprise—an enterprise in collaboration with the subjects of their research as much as with their disciplinary colleagues. As they point out in what follows, the goal hasn't always come to fruition. In its disappointments (and precisely because of those disappointments), they've learned important and constructive lessons that they have been able to offer to the discipline as a whole. The goal of their enterprise doesn't aim toward consensus, but is governed instead by an imperative of Rabinow's that those of us who have been, who continue to be and who might be Rabinow's students can only take to heart: Onward!

* * *

“On the verge”: From the possible to the emergent

Jane I. Guyer

Signposts: Methodological implications of “the contemporary”

“The contemporary,” as Rabinow applies the term, places everything that is entailed in research into the same frame, “adjacent” to each other: the objects and their intellectual depiction; the researcher and his/her actions and collaborations; and the temporal frame, in this case, the present not as a timeless “ethnographic present” but as an unfolding event. To quote him: “An anthropology of the contemporary faces the challenge of finding a means to remain close to diverse current practices producing knowledge, ethics, and politics, while adopting an attitude of discernment and adjacency in regard to them, thereby providing a space for a more precise and better formulation of contemporary problems and risks” (2007: 29). In this orientation, there is no disciplined objectivity and focused observation that hold some dynamics out of the picture. His own empirical work is experimental in this regard, in the literal sense of “accompanying” (2011) laboratory experiments in highly dynamic sciences. Hence the terms I choose for my title, which come from *Marking Time*: “The initial mapping and sequencing of the human and other genomes during the course of the 1990s was an event; in its wake almost everyone seems to agree that we are on the verge of something momentous and extravagant” (Rabinow 2007: 12). As scholars in his mode of study, we would then share that “being on the verge” along with our subjects is a condition that I see infused by a replacement of our classic concept of “possibility” by “emergence.”

My own contribution here moves towards what our classic concept of “participation” means in the study of “the contemporary,” in which being “adjacent” is a basic presumption, and not a craft that we learn how to do in advance and then refine continually by actually doing whatever we are studying, since it happens repeatedly: hunting, gathering, marketing, joking, performing, “learning to see” (Strathern 2013) and so on, some of which—such as being brutally violent—are difficult to imagine being a purposive “participant” in at all. What, then, does *participant*-observation become in the study of “the contemporary”? Can we extrapolate from the laboratory to all kinds of other places, events, protagonists, and

existential conditions, whose nature is not of the controlled experimental kind? I hope to see how Rabinow's approach could enrich my own recent studies.

First I outline how I came to draw on Rabinow's work and to appreciate its aspirations, through seeing its place amongst the most recent of the series of historical shifts in our approaches to "human possibility," which has always been central to our discipline. Rabinow moves to a focus on "emergence." Secondly, I explore how the concept of "the emergent" works as a replacement for the concept of "possibility." Thirdly, I attend to how new terms have grown out of the experience of attending to "the emergent," and particularly of our conception of agency. This leads to "participation" as method: what are we now participating in? And how? And is participating in emergence different from learning, through both observation and participation, about "the possible"?

Rabinow in the history of possibility

In a paper published in 2009, reviewing the several changes in the meaning of "possibility" in anthropology, I ended with Paul Rabinow's *Marking time* (2007) as my example of the most recent generation, together with David Graeber's *Possibilities* (2008). I started with Ruth Benedict's shift of terms away from nineteenth-century evolutionism and from Franz Boas' diversity of world cultures to what became paraphrased persuasively as "the great arc of human possibility." This conception of possibility was similar to Malinowski's at the very end of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Malinowski wrote that anthropology offers "the possibility of seeing life and the world from various angles" (1984: 517). Malinowski's era saw the rising importance of function, for comparative purposes, in which the conception of the arc of possibility came to be applied to socio-cultural domains: politics, economy, kinship, religion, and others. I could trace "possibility" at length through works that grappled with the immediate traumas and transformations during the middle of the twentieth century. Suffice it to say that the "great arc" was turned around to face forward into the future, making possibility into the potential for change rather than for lateral difference. This happened in the post-war, post-colonial moment, when the vast struggles of the Cold War, the anti-apartheid movement, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement and others (such as the War on Want, the War on Poverty, Ban the Bomb, etc.) had to be engaged. In one of my essays, I quoted Ernest Gellner on this moment: how to be and to study when "tomorrow is not *another* day; it is an *other* day, altogether" (1965: 67). Gellner's metaphorical point of reference was Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, hence reviving a holistic framing of change. I ended with an observation by Claude Lévi-Strauss: in the face of the certainty of death "man has to live and struggle, think, believe and above all, preserve his courage" (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 694). The distant horizon is sure, the near horizon is indeterminate, and the realization of any its possibilities will require effort.

Much later, in the twenty-first century, we find an intensification of this temporal orientation. Paul Rabinow has been a leader in the introduction of these methods and terms, in part through his French philosophical foundation, and in part through the sharp focus in his ethnographic work on experimental situations where novel ideas and newly apprehended phenomena are—literally—under the microscope,

in the petri dish, under computer calculation, etc. As he notes in *Marking time* (2007: 3), the focus shifts from reproduction and humanly designed revolutions to much slower, indeterminate temporal processes, arising from complex interactions, which he terms “emergence,” referring to Foucault’s terms “alternatively translated as ‘release’, ‘emergence’ and ‘way out’” (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013: 90).

The questions we can raise here include how the inspiration taken from this experimental and philosophical focus can be extrapolated practically in worlds where reproduction and innovation are *both* at stake, where “courage” could cross a whole “arc of possibility,” from just “hanging in” through being diligently attentive to novelty, through continually reshaping elements and reweaving compositions, toward making large bold moves in new directions.

What the emergent appears to offer then, as a concept beyond the possible, is attention to what is, within events themselves, in fact *impossible* to know or to anticipate with a sense of specific purpose or final end-point, since it becomes noticeable during the happening itself, through interactions rather than through seeds germinating. In my own reading, the explicit purposes of human agency—either on the part of the masses or on the part of scholars—to produce epochal change and create visions of the future fades from the complement of allusions in Rabinow’s works. If one or another realization of the future might be “possible,” then the vernacular response would be “go for it!” By contrast, the implication of “emergence” is to learn to become familiar with what’s unfolding, to live with it. Agency is diffuse in this latter case, and ultimate goals may not guide one’s vision and “courage.”

Indeed, so inscrutable is the *trajectory* within such a situation that must we ask, with Rabinow, “How is one to decide where one is? And where one is going?” (2007: 12). Subjectivity is at issue as it was for Gellner, but Rabinow asks “where?”—not “who?”—and approaches it in much smaller arenas rather than larger wholes, on more intimately shifting scales, largely unnoticed by non-participants, even where the scientific results may eventually, along ramifying indirect pathways (hence the question “where?”), become momentous for everyone’s lives. The process is “emergence,” through events and interactions. Rabinow refers to his method in approaching such processes as “accompaniment” (2011). Holism is never at stake, neither in the comparative cultural sense of “the great arc” nor in the revolutionary sense. Many things are simply adjacent to each other: contemporary.

The concept of emergence

“The contemporary” is a noun produced by combining the definite article with an adjective, thereby achieving something for which usual English grammar has no clear counterpart: that is, a way of grouping widely varied phenomena into a single broad class to which new things can be added if they take place as contemporaneous events, even if, by the established classificatory method of identifying distinctive features, they would differ radically from each other. “Emergence” is what happens as they interact. This vision possibly accounts, in part, for the expansion of the concept of ontology, to embrace interactive participants beyond the human. The classificatory regimes and distinctive features of previous cultural analytics

retreat into the background, and situations or events, containing problems and risks whose own terms are still emergent, come forward.

Even for those of us whose topics and locations of study differ from Rabinow's own, his experiment with the possible as the emergent can be helpful as an exercise in thought. Being "on the verge," in the temporality of the emergent, would make objective "observation" insufficient to the task. But knowing about "verges" (from my English gardening background), I notice a new kind of participation implied here, which would be worth examining in close detail. To recognize a "verge" in the first place, one needs to be there, in the weeds and the undergrowth. Any "verge" does contain *some* processes of reproduction of its elements and components, as possibilities, as well as enabling and containing emergent qualities from their interactions. Some weeds may take over; some alien species, combined with weather conditions, may shift the whole mix. And in conditions of duress, we would need to apprehend how some things may become *impossible*; to glimpse how one small element becomes a catalyst, and to accompany those who notice it, cultivate it, and weed out the choking and competing vegetation. Rabinow's examples, however, tend to be slightly retrospective in narrative form, which allows for a schematic version. In *Designs on the contemporary* (2011), the examples are past rather than actual and contemporary: "the emergence of norms of research" (27), "the emergence of pop art" (44); "conditions for the emergence of philosophy in ancient Greece" (140).

Participation

So we suddenly see a translational challenge in Rabinow's method, honed on the momentous and the extravagant, both in retrospect and in the present, when it would be applied to life "down in the weeds": weeds which may be "adjacent" to useful crops and gorgeous flowers, productively or as stranglehold. His own approach gives close attention to collaboration among colleagues in the "labinar," where he takes on a role relative to ethics (2011: 106). But the laboratory context tends to obscure the agency of the central participants. Any struggles "on the verge" are less about bold visions and the stifling of some "possibilities" while fostering other emergent phenomena, but rather about broadly ethical issues and amongst fellow researchers. There seem to be no "informants," or recipients of the *effects* of emergence in the center of this process, although certainly one could broaden the range to include them (and perhaps he does, elsewhere than I have read). The challenge would be consider how to import a fuller consideration of the participatory mode into all anthropological work, in other situations where emergence "on a verge" reasorts many elements and may attempt to craft their interaction, with the aid of agency, interest, power and creative destruction as well as construction. Writing itself is engagement—as, for example, in Graeber's extension of possibility into the realization of vistas, through social movements: collaborative but also deeply committed to stirring up and fostering specific emergent dynamics, such as the Occupy Movement, through participant-action. Most of us work somewhere between three positions on participation: learning in place from local expertise, collaborative research labinars with colleagues, and a version of committed active agency, whether simply as a presence and dedicated witness or as an instigator within the process of emergence.



Concluding thoughts

My own most recent direct attention has been to assemblage-creation in the current, Western economic world (Guyer 2016). As it happens, I hardly use or refer to the conceptual literature on emergence as such, largely because the particular world of economics seems too self-consciously crafted to further indeterminate outcomes “on the verge”—which “emergence” implies—to be strongly relevant. Indeed, emergence is an official term, as in “emerging markets,” created by an economist at the World Bank in the 1980s to replace “developing economies.” But it is worthwhile for someone with my own interests to try out a Rabinow-like focus on emergence: by participating in other ways, by working “on the verge,” by circling back into the western philosophy and theory that Rabinow draws on, then into African philosophy where originality has always been fostered, as I depicted as “Traditions of invention” (Guyer 1996), and back again to the “great arc of human possibility” in the face of the challenge of making a living, whatever that is, in the twenty-first century. I could revisit my paper on “epistemologies of surprise” in anthropology (Guyer 2014) to think more carefully about when “surprise” leads into the lateral extension of possibility and when it opens up the indeterminacy of emergence. The extrapolation of Rabinow’s method could enrich this process, but the whole approach could be further enriched by recombining the different generations of anthropology’s understanding of “possibility,” especially on questions of the *participation* and *agency* that action entails, whether with *courage* or any other *durational ethic* (Guyer 2013). How *do* people “hang in” and “push on” within “emerging markets” and other indeterminate dynamics in the world?

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Isochronism as analytic: Reflections on Rabinow’s contemporary

Tom Boellstorff

Up the hill

January 1993. The first-year graduate student in the Department of Linguistics trekked from Dwinelle Hall to Kroeber Hall, up the hill past Berkeley’s tall Campanile. Here was the Department of Anthropology, where the student, with a growing sense that linguistics was not the right fit, sought a seminar to take. And here was where the student—myself of course—came knocking during Paul Rabinow’s office hours to ask if I might take his graduate course. I have no notes of the meeting but what I recall is a warm invitation coupled with a firm caveat: “you need to have some background in social theory.”

I walked back down the hill both deflated and invigorated; I did not end up taking that seminar. Yet the encounter was among a cluster of events, moments, epiphanies that shaped my decision to leave linguistics for graduate training in anthropology at Stanford. Paul, I did get that background in social theory!

Down to earth

This fun snippet of biographical trivia reflects how Paul Rabinow and I have never collaborated, but also how my intellectual career has nonetheless been deeply shaped by his scholarship. The vignette additionally recalls how in the body of writings discussed below, Rabinow himself reflects on influential teachers and colleagues, particularly Clifford Geertz and Michael Foucault.

The collective discussion in which this essay participates takes such socially contextual thought as its object. What makes the discussion unusual is that it is structured around neither a text nor a thinker's intellectual contribution in toto. Rather, the task is to engage with Rabinow's development of an "anthropology of the contemporary." One might trace this line of inquiry back at least to *French modern* (Rabinow 1989), but it is foregrounded in three monographs published since 2007: *Marking time: On the anthropology of the contemporary* (Rabinow 2007), *The accompaniment: Assembling the contemporary* (Rabinow 2011), and *Designs on the contemporary: Anthropological tests* (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2014).

Throughout this trilogy, rather than seek rigid definitions, Rabinow (with his colleagues, including Anthony Stravrianakis) has sought to advance an anthropology of the contemporary "by laying out examples and reflections on those examples" (2007: 1). That said, the closest he comes to a definition appears in the Introduction to *Marking time*. Here we find a sentence rendered almost entirely in italics—any doubt of its significance laid to emphatic rest—and a sentence repeated as nothing less than the epigraph to the preface of *Designs on the contemporary*: "The *contemporary* is a *moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical*" (Rabinow 2008: 2, emphasis in original; see also Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2014: vii).

The implications of this thesis are immense, explored throughout the trilogy of books mentioned above. My explorations here must obviously be partial. But while exegesis is not my goal, I do work through three lines of analysis that speak to what I see as the pivotal problematic: the nexus of temporality and science/technology.

Behind the time

Rabinow's anthropology of the contemporary builds on ethnographic involvements with science and technology. Implicitly, it also counters temporal imaginaries of anthropological inquiry that date back to the beginnings of the discipline. For that very reason, I find the most surprising omission throughout the trilogy to be Johannes Fabian's *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object* (1983). In this classic text, Fabian advanced an argument regarding time and anthropological reason, naming the dominant logic "allochronism," a "denial of coevalness" between anthropologist and interlocutor. In his foreword to the 2002 edition of *Time and the other*, Matti Bunzl summed up Fabian's diagnosis thus: "At once the product of an entrenched ethnocentrism and the enabling ideology of traditional discourses about the Other, anthropology's allochronic orientation emerges as the discipline's central problematic" (Bunzl 2002: xi).

Recall that Rabinow frames the contemporary as a "moving ratio" of modernity. This is possible if we treat the contemporary as "not an epochal term" (Rabinow



2007: 2), but instead as an emergent relationship between modernity and the historically novel. I find this way of thinking about the contemporary as a differential relation to the modern—as a “moving ratio” through which the modern becomes historical, a helpful counter to allochronism. Rather than place Self and Other in different times to make the anthropological object, Self and Other are imbricated in an affirmation of coevalness. They are framed as constitutively co-temporal in a shared ethos of modernity. In place of allochronism, we might name this “isochronism”—a term used in geometry going back to Leibniz. This would be a relation of similitude on a temporal plane, gesturing to the broader possibilities of an anthropology of similitude (see Boellstorff 2005; forthcoming). The potential of isochronism as analytic is a valuable contribution of Rabinow’s anthropology of the contemporary.

Around when

In considering the anthropology of the contemporary, Rabinow regularly pauses on questions of temporality as such. One of these is the topic of this section; another, of the section that follows. Both appear in Rabinow’s thesis on the contemporary, which for convenience I repeat here sans italics: “The contemporary is a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical.”

What a tantalizing parenthetical! To speak twice in one sentence of “moving” and then possibly undermine that movement. Yet “nonlinearity” never appears in the trilogy outside this thesis. Even implicit engagements with the idea are hard to discern (one possible example is the discussion of the artist Gerhard Richter’s eschewing a “linear approach to artistic change” [Rabinow 2007: 117]).

What forms might nonlinear temporalities take with regard to the contemporary? One promising possibility is coincidental time, a notion I have found helpful in my own work (e.g., Boellstorff 2007a; 2007b). Briefly, coincidental time is based on the nonlinear intersection of temporalities. For instance, “Friday the 13th” is the coincidence of the seven-day weekly and monthly temporalities. One does not count these coincidences quantitatively, to say for instance that “today is the 34,434th Friday the 13th.” Rather, the coincidence identifies a quality: the day is unlucky.

In parts of the world where multiple weeks run simultaneously, every day is coincidental. On Java, for instance, one commonly finds the seven-day week and five-day week in simultaneous use, so that there are 35 possible coincidences (imagine if not just Friday the 13th but Thursday the 20th, Monday the 5th, etc., each had cultural significance). Given that Rabinow refers to his teacher Clifford Geertz throughout the trilogy, it is noteworthy that in “Person, time, and conduct in Bali” Geertz discusses the coincidence of ten (!) different weekly cycles in the traditional Balinese calendar. He emphasizes that these cycles “do not accumulate, they do not build, and they are not consumed. They don’t tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is” (1973: 393).

In the West, coincidental time was largely displaced by the linear, millenarian time of Christianity. However, it can make unexpected reappearances—for instance, in the idea that an organization might hold its regular meeting on the third Tuesday of every month. Rabinow’s thesis that the contemporary moves in a

nonlinear space opens a conversation regarding how that nonlinearity might take the form of emergent assemblages of coincidental time. Rabinow sees the contemporary as a site where “older and newer elements are given form and work together” (2007: 3). Considering coincidence as one modality of this giving-form and working-together furthers our ability to ask after the production of historicity in contextual fields of culture and power.

Near the now

It is not only the evocation of nonlinearity that is provocative. Provocative as well is the contention that the contemporary moves “through the recent past and near future.” A particular kind of time-bracket is posited as the landscape on which “older and newer elements are given form and worked together.”

What fascinates me here is that this notion of movement “through the recent past and near future” is emic to the domain of science and technology itself, particularly in its hype-laden Silicon Valley variant. In their analysis of discourses of ubiquitous computing, Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell note that “the dominant tense . . . is that of the proximate future. That is, motivations and frames . . . portray a proximate future, one just around the corner” (2011: 23). It is the entrepreneurial logic of the product launch. The proximate future is the temporality of the Next Big Thing, which definitionally supersedes That Which Just Came Before (sometimes known as Last Year’s Model).

Rabinow’s “near future” provides a point of entry for rethinking this “proximate future,” which reappears in claims that the value of ethnographic research lies in its ability to predict trends (Boellstorff 2014). Nor is the intervention necessarily limited to the proximate. For instance, in my ruminations on big data I have explored how we find in that domain, alongside the logic of the proximate future, “a distal future that can be predicted and even proleptically anticipated” (2015a: 94). To me, an important topic for further inquiry with regard to the “recent past and near future” is precisely the rubrics by which we decide what counts as the “recent” and the “near”—and how the tacit establishment of these very time-brackets constitutes the present as contemporary. Rabinow discusses adjacency as involving two things with something different between them (2007: 33–35). I wonder how we might conceive the contemporary as constituted through the adjacency of the “recent past” and “near future.”

Beyond the future

When first drafting the text that would become *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human* (Boellstorff 2015b), I planned on following the introductory chapters on theory, history, and method with chapters on selfhood and intimacy. After all, avatar bodies, acting as one gender online and another offline, and questions of deception and desire were all fashionable topics with regard to the virtual. After continued analysis of my fieldwork materials, I realized I could not effectively address such topics without first looking closely at “Place and Time,” as I ended up titling the fourth chapter of the book. Appreciating the fundamental importance of temporality profoundly shaped the trajectory of my thought regarding the virtually human. Time matters.



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While of course Rabinow's insights regarding the anthropology of the contemporary are not limited to questions of time, I hope to have underscored how temporality is a predominant concern in this body of work, and how Rabinow's reflections on the mattering of time offer great conceptual resources for anthropologists regardless of the fieldsite in question.

I see Rabinow providing tools to rethink temporal frameworks of the contemporary, including contemporary ethnographic practice. Anthropologists who appoint themselves arbiters of the ethnographically innovative are often surprisingly shallow in their assessment of what is "traditional," confusing sites with methods, socialities with paradigms for inquiry. These assessments of the future of anthropology or ethnography—and, *nota bene*, I am in strong agreement with Rabinow and others that these cannot be conflated (Rabinow 2007: 4–5; Ingold 2008)—often result in strikingly conventional understandings of ethnographic theory. One consequence can be a distressing ratio of posturing to intellectual content, a too-frequent participation in the modernist logic that conflates shocks of the new with conceptual import. Here as well, Rabinow's sustained intervention into the contemporary contributes powerfully to debates regarding the anthropological project. This is possible because of his consistent advancing of theoretical architectures that remain closely entangled with ethnographic data and move through (not around) that entanglement to generalizing and comparative anthropological insight.

I consider Rabinow an anthropologist's anthropologist. Many of his writings are oriented toward an anthropological audience, and he is deeply invested in the discipline in spite of (better: precisely due to) equally deep investments in interdisciplinary work. I can think of no better way to frame my own ongoing intellectual journey than as a continuing trek up the hill, accepting the invitation to craft, though inquiry, social theory that reshapes our understanding and practice of the human.

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Experimenting with the contemporary

Marilyn Strathern

The present moment first took shape five years ago. This was a reaction that came in the course of reviewing a book Paul Rabinow had written with Gaymon Bennett (Strathern 2010). Then only to be found on-line, *Ars synthetica* was a kind of log of an extraordinary set of observations-interventions that amounted to what they called "an experiment in the anthropology of the contemporary." The challenge was to join a program of scientific experimentation that went under the name of synthetic biology; in 2006 Rabinow was invited on board to lead its ethical arm. While the outcome is now well known, the staging of his own conceptual-ethical experiment is highly germane for present purposes. (I shall return to the nature of my reaction.)

Ars synthetica

There are many facets to the work of this renaissance man of our times, and Rabinow had already acquired what anyone would have taken as equipment enough, in the colloquial sense, to join the program—his long-standing interest in the unfolding ontological possibilities (new entities as things in the world) of genomics, and their correlates in imaginings of life and humankind. Bennett, for his part, was a bioethicist with special experience in stem cell research. The invitation seemed a unique chance for fieldwork, through their participating in an enterprise that knew itself as on the edge of what post-genomic biology could be. But as one might have anticipated from the author of *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*, Rabinow did something altogether unexpected, and probably as equally ahead of its time. Well, perhaps it was not so unexpected to his anthropological colleagues, given that his program in the conceptualization of the contemporary was already underway, and that to him the crucial equipment lay in the intellectual instruments through which thinking might be facilitated. However, it was certainly a surprise to the synthetic biologists who took him on. For if he deliberately turned aside the ethnographic opportunity, he also deliberately turned aside from the role that social commentators on the new genetics had generally embraced and into which they had regularly been cast. Unraveling the “social consequences” of this or that turn in science and technology had become institutionalized as the appropriate ethical intervention: this was the heyday of the ELSI package (acknowledging ethical, legal, and social implications). Rabinow, and those who worked with him in this fresh venture, had no intention of being ELSI-ists. That their intellectual radicalism turned into a social and political scandal in the biologist’s research world was where the learning began.

This was real world stuff, and it became exceedingly unpleasant at times. That it was of the real world (so to speak, that is) must forever give the lie to the assumption that social scientists—Rabinow talks of “human scientists”—can only ever be after the fact, and thus always downstream from the action. They were in the end regarded as positively in the way. Not the outcome he wanted, but what Rabinow was resisting was precisely that divided location, popularly iterated, which turned social enquirers into icons of their subject matter: social issues regarded as add-ons to techno-scientific developments, as handmaidens to techno-scientific enterprise. Social scientists, including anthropologists, had long been bemoaning their after-the-facts position in diverse interdisciplinary gatherings. He wanted to seize the opportunity to create a different kind of collaboration. After all, the invitation implied that the outcome could be an experiment within an experiment, and for both parties: on the one hand the anthropologists’ Human Practices project would lie within an already experimental anthropology of the contemporary, and on the other hand this experimental collaboration with anthropologists would be folded within the larger innovations of a multi-university consortium, specifically of SynBERC (the Synthetic Biology Engineering Research Center). “Human Practices” was specifically *non*-ELSI, and practices were not technologies or tools for immediate use.

We might ask what Human Practices brought into Rabinow’s fold of the contemporary. Obviously it was not because SynBERC regarded itself as ultra modern, rehearsing the traditional claims of cutting edges. It was rather the social appeal



of that beckoning collaboration itself, where collaboration entailed a mutuality of purpose to be distinguished from the conventional cooperation of experts. It was where the appropriate equipment already implied a fusion in certain practices of truth claims, affects, and ethical inclinations. Bioscientists and anthropologists were to grow together. As a mode of working, the anthropologists saw themselves gathering diagnostics appropriate for their inquiry, an open and unfinished orientation to the way problems were encountered, the prospect implying changing one's habits and dispositions, and which they called Mode 3. Mode 3 was set apart from the multiplicity-of-experts paradigm (Mode 1) to which science-and-society interventions had already been a response (Mode 2). In other words, there would be a dovetailing of practices, with the anthropologists offering conceptual schemata, and a hope for interpenetration or "participation" in and on both sides.

Designing Human Practices

There is no need to go over the devolution of the exercise. I take this occasion to remark on the book (Rabinow and Bennett 2012) that appeared a handful of years after *Ars synthetica* went online in 2008. Although the two specifically overlap, retaining the sense of a log of events, the second book stages the sequencing of the Human Practices project in a more formally genealogical-historical mode, taking us both before the experiment began and beyond the 2008 horizon to 2010. Just out of antiquarian interest, the book also truncates some of the exercises in concept-setting—though diagnostics were never simply ideational—that the earlier volume gave in fascinating detail; this had been a characteristic that made it something of a handbook as well as a journal (the literary form was very much in the making). Rabinow and Bennett's 2012 volume has a documentary voice of a more familiar kind. I have only just read it. I wondered if the moment that captivated me five years ago would recur.

For the moment had come in no small part from those very deliberate exercises. Quiet, dogged, orderly, aside from pedagogical aims they amounted to an exposition of the ramifications of actions and processes that make modern lives/life. These are scholars taking care, with specifiable precision, of the way we make thought part of the world. Of course, over Rabinow's lifetime of work, that care has taken different forms, and it was never about (the formulation of) ideas alone: in his vocabulary diagnostics have a telos in the remediation of ethical problems. What is at issue is always the relation between knowledge and care. In any event, this reader's experience of accompanying the patient, iterative, conceptual flexing in *Ars synthetica* itself evoked a sense of flourishing. Almost a visceral sense of being soothed. Inexplicably, as I admitted in the review, it made me feel good. And before I rush to take it apart and release from its bowels all the demons of false consciousness and other delusional fantasies of the word-worker, I simply note how I registered the sensation. Not untrivial to ask if it would recur.

Inevitably, in the hands of these two explorers, something else (a.k.a., the same thing!) has happened. Bennett and Rabinow have, it seems to me, recreated some of that quiet determination, a still-ness of sorts, in the second account. The 2012 book achieves a kind of incontrovertibility. While the effect is different, it nonetheless instills a curious, unlooked-for positivity, confidence almost. This is odd given that

what they write about holds little cheer. Perhaps it is the way they are able to write about it that compelled a comparable reaction.

I refer not so much to their own argument that the experiment was, after all the blockages, setbacks, and incomprehensions they encountered, turned to productive effect. Rather I refer to what one could call their inadvertent ethnography. Of course they embarked on the exercise with this far from their sights.¹ Their response would be that they had avoided traditional participant-observation with a stance of adjacency (being close but without touching). Their own distinctions left to the side, it remains that in the process of trying to come to terms with their persistent exclusion from collaborative mutuality they have *documented* an extraordinary tale of scientific dead ends. No doubt synthetic biologists and scholars at SynBERC are individually as diverse and dedicated as any bunch of anthropologists; the issue is their institutional positioning. To return to Rabinow and Bennett's term "ramification," the ramifications of the way experimentation proceeds can be alarming to contemplate. Ramifications are not downstream consequences, not effects from which the science can be insulated, but part and parcel of the scientific effort. (*Pari passu*, any institutionalized activation of interests, not excluding academia.)

A principal example of the alarming on which the authors dwell is security. Ethical surveillance is supposed to guard against certain injustices or kinds of damage, in ELSI mode regarded as the outcome of enterprises that never intended such infliction. Surveillance was among the measures with which institutions caught up in SynBERC were required to comply. Yet to imagine that enterprises could ethically insulate themselves thereby is, they would assert, a misreading of what taking action—or not taking action—entails. For a start, where does the very capability of knowing what is at stake come from? Rabinow and Bennett point out that, while many of the existing safeguards concerned "safety," their technological framing did not begin to incorporate "security" challenges related to (say) the political environment or international governance. Here problems associated with the uncertainty of future events could only be addressed through a framework of preparedness. Of course the biologists and engineers talked about biosecurity, but that was where they brought in technical experts; in other words they operated, as the anthropologists put it, as though they were excused from any responsibility of the ramifications of their work, among other things since they were not prepared to listen to the argument for preparedness. To cordon off the scientific enterprise as ethically neutral is in the authors' view frankly dangerous, and being alert to "danger" is not the same as simply adding up a number of risks.

How their exposition could possibly have a calming effect I don't know, except that what it conveys is far from the usual state of constant excitement we are supposed to be in. In any event, my attention is drawn to the methodical way in which Bennett and Rabinow proceed through analyzing the "externalities" and "critical limitations" of the life scientists' efforts. The criticism does not have to be new, but

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1. Although one might argue it returned with Rabinow's instantiation as (the participant-observation in and of) "the actual." However, Rabinow and Stavrianakis (2103: 11, 104) are at pains to distinguish an anthropology of the actual from ethnographies of the present. The former entail already worked-upon objects of knowledge, a configuration expanded in greater detail in their subsequent (2014) joint work.

cordoning off their own second-order reflections from the first-order responses of experts gives it new power. That is, through their practice of diagnosis, they have articulated an understanding of why the criticism matters. Rather than talking of consequences as somehow out of the frame, imagining co-present and co-produced externalities as “the price to be paid”—the products not taken into account in estimating the cost of an exercise—gives us a different language of description. It would not be complete without the anthropologists applying similar criteria to their own efforts, and to the modes of engagement, Modes 1, 2 and 3 all coming under scrutiny.² The calmness with which this is done becomes devastating in its own way, as soon as one takes the idea of experiment literally: a focused intervention into just one set of affairs that may well be applied to what one suddenly realizes are patently countless, dangerous, others.

Remaining

I have not done much more than find a way of being “with” some of the formulations through which Rabinow and his colleagues have insisted on the significance of folding ethical ends into the language of inquiry. However, this account has been considerably aided by a third work (*Demands of the day*), in which Anthony Stavrianakis joins Rabinow (2013) in rehearsing the anthropologists’ experience of the SynBERC experiment alongside another in nanotechnology.³ Another step, each a fresh application of ideas, indifferent as to whether they strike the reader as old or new but an emergent process if there was one: the third a remediation, perhaps, of the second inquiry, as the latter was a remediation of the first. Certainly over this trio of publications, and more largely, Rabinow’s exposition often proceeds through seeming replications and reiterations. There is the habit, for example, of not defining a concept once but over and again, presenting a mini-assemblage of its elements, such as concept-plus-definition-plus-etymology-plus-key usage, and so forth. It is too quick to simply say, as one could, this has the effect of making contexts anew. There is something else. What I have learned from this stylization—this registering of thought processes—is that rushing into metaphoric appropriation, as I have just now invoked remediation, is exactly what this discursive practice is not. Metaphors are vehicles for epochal displacements, a mode that for other times, other places, can be exhilarating. As I understand it, however, what is at issue here is the specific hard work (and recognition of the hard work) of con-figuring and re-figuring the elements of figures already worked upon, where both “work” and “figure” are in turn precisely conceived.⁴ It is an exercise of our times without parallel.

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2. They subject Human Practices to scrutiny by following through the stages by which they approached the “problem-space” of synthetic biology and, in posing the question about the distinctiveness of its ramifications, lay out the limitations and externalities of their own inquiry.
 3. At several specific junctures, although I have not given the references.
 4. In any event, “remediation” in these works refers to situations and relations as they have been problematized, rather than to the process of conceptual refiguring, and is rather more than simply contextualization.

Nonetheless, a query remains about the here and now. For whom does the contemporary exist? I thought at one point that an outcome of the experiment might be the demonstration that, while the biological and the human (social) sciences could be cast as synchronous or coeval, it would be illuminating to find they are not one another's contemporaries. After all, though it is never said, what might have been among the dashed hopes of the original invitation was that it would enable each side to see their contemporary efforts in the other. If so, then acknowledging "the contemporary" would have had an ethical resonance as a precondition for inclusively mutual flourishing. But I don't think that is right. Again it is too quick: rather, as we are told over and over again, flourishing would come from the effectiveness of Human Practices to be a fully collaborative arm of the exercise, pursuing the relations between knowledge, thought and care. The contemporary in this experimentation appears to be elsewhere.

The last few pages of *Demands of the day* are clear: it is anthropology that needs to conceptualize the contemporary if it is to do its analytical work. Anthropologists do not have to suppose that synthetic biologists have a counterpart contemporary of their own (as ethnographers often imagine in the case in cultural encounters). For sure, biologists have their own pasts and futures, reasons for appropriate conduct and ideologies of intervention, but to take on board investigating the social conditions for critical thought in terms of a near future is not what they are about. Anthropologists of science, it is argued, cannot for their part do without a notion of the contemporary if their thinking about what is happening, as it is grasped in the here and now, is to have any critical edge (elsewhere the positioning of that grasp is called one of adjacency or untimeliness). They cannot afford to limit their repertoire of concepts as though they themselves belonged only in the (imagination of the) present. But where, when, and how they might do otherwise is a challenge that can only be described by attempting to live it.

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Remediation, and some problems post-ethnographic museums face

Clémentine Deliss and Frédéric Keck

Paul Rabinow's writings and his friendship have been seminal to both of us at different moments in our careers. Frédéric Keck, who worked with Paul Rabinow in Berkeley on the history of French anthropology, has been increasingly involved in issues surrounding the anticipation of animal-engendered pandemics. Since February 2013, he has headed the research department at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. Clémentine Deliss, whose fieldwork took her to Paris in the mid 1980s where she met Paul Rabinow for the first time, has worked on the borders of anthropology as a curator of contemporary art. Between April 2010 and May 2015, she was the director of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt. What aligns us today is an ongoing discussion on the potential offered by collaborative inquiry within the museum.

One of Paul Rabinow's significant advances has been to reframe the question of critique in anthropological inquiry in a way that brings it closer to certain strains



of curatorial practice in contemporary art. Critique, suggests Rabinow, is not the denunciation of the present from a more authentic position in the past or in the future. It reframes problems we face today from another subject position, one that articulates norms and forms differently. Critique relies on diagnosis: if there is a problem with the norms and forms through which we live our lives, then modern subjects must invent new ones to build their social environments. As social scientists, our task is to describe these norms and forms in the situations where they emerge.

We expand this proposition to a field common to both of us: the problematic condition facing European ethnographic museums with their unique holdings of artifacts amassed during the colonial period. Harboring collections that appear anachronistic within today's geopolitical context, these museums face a crisis, which cannot be resolved by display and presentation alone. In contrast to the increasing consumerism and marketability of public exhibitions, the backstage of the ethnographic museum has been declared out of bounds to anyone other than the custodians. In contrast, we contend that the post-ethnographic museum should open its doors to scholarship that is born of current concerns, culturally heterodox and interdisciplinary in structure and inclusive of new hybrid disciplines that have emerged around the globe in the last ten years, such as curatorial and critical studies, postcolonial studies, visual and cultural studies, black studies, gender and trans-gender studies, not to mention anticipated new forms of museum anthropology.

However, it remains a fact that access to what is stored in ethnographic museums is far from encouraged. Each movement of opening and closing, of handling and manipulating carries risk and advances deterioration, all of which can shorten the life-span of the object. In a recent episode, Deliss requested the loan of an object from the Ethnological Museum in Berlin for the purposes of a lecture she was giving at the nearby *Wissenschaftskolleg* (Institute of Advanced Study). The conservator in charge refused on the grounds that it would require too much administration and time to disinfect (*entwesen*) the requested object. Disinfection is a technical procedure that endows objects with ontologies (*wesen*). Even if we "moderns" don't know what the spiritual beings are that are associated with these objects, we can nonetheless attribute invisible existences to them (insects, dust, microbes, bugs) and in good Bataillesque tradition create fabulistic relations between them and us.

Toxicity is therefore the latest argument to emerge implying that not only does touch endanger artifacts but that their repeated disinfection with arsenic and similar poisons has rendered them highly dangerous to human contact. You could argue that exhibitions exist in order to elude public access to the mass of objects contained and regulated in storage units, which are becoming progressively detached from the museum building and relocated in suburban neighborhoods. If these newly constructed storage units were designed as the architectonic foundations for *museum-universities* with open shelving and workspaces, their decentralized position would offer a significant move toward an inclusive museological space for further education.⁵

5. The Humboldt Forum requires all objects from the Dahlem Museum of Ethnography in Berlin to be relocated to a newly built storage space outside of the city. Currently, and until the Humboldt Forum is built and opened (not before 2020), all loans have been

Our discussion centers on the potential for a *remediation* of these contentious collections within a proposed re-rendering of the museum as an institution of advanced aesthetic and scientific inquiry. “Remediation,” writes Rabinow, has a two-step unfolding: the term means that one has diagnosed or simply sensed that something is deficient and needs improvement or correction; the term also suggests that the pathway forward to achieve that desired correction is through a change of medium. Hence the challenge for a new museum is to think through the limits and deficits of a past form and to welcome a change of medium. This change of medium will certainly include the obvious introduction of technology but it also might mean that the way visitors, museum workers, and observers interact is given a creative form, one of experimentation that enriches experiences; one that is open to change as well so that return and revisiting is encouraged (Rabinow and Bennett 2012: 8).

In other words, to remediate the ethnographic collection is to see it as a dynamic and changing assemblage, and therefore as an operative field. Drawing objects together from different locales into new dialogical configurations touches on the concept of *venue* that Rabinow so aptly describes as “a scene or setting in which something takes place—a place to come to work with others, to undertake research, to teach, to learn, to question, and to contest findings and methods with some earnestness and excitement” (Rabinow 2011: 71). To remediate is to reinterpret these items with languages and practices as we articulate them today, in the *contemporary*—understood by Rabinow as *teamwork*—thereby eschewing static, often ethnicity-centered identifications. Interestingly, the critique of notions of ethnos or culture in professional circles of social anthropology is paralleled by the growing disinterest of the public in ethnographic museums. How, then, can we think of ethnographic collections today without referring back to the politicized tool of “ethnos”?

Rabinow asks us to first describe a situation as it emerges. Rather than take a position for or against ethnographic museums, we can look at them as fieldwork sites where norms and forms are invented. This is where remediation departs from redemption—or from another spiritual technique: restitution.⁶ “The challenge,” he

withheld. When the Musée du quai Branly was conceived in 1996, with the collections of objects coming from the Musée de l’Homme, one of the projects of architect Jean Nouvel was to make all storage areas open to the public. However, in the final plans of the museum, which opened in 2006, the storage spaces were built underground. The only visible storage that remains at the entrance of the museum displays musical instruments.

6. See Rabinow 1999: 179: “Although one cannot say with certainty that attention to certain forms/events will provide a cure for the desire for redemption, it does offer a prescription for the temporary relief from the ‘spiritual’ demands of the day. The spiritual is diffuse, devoted to identifying what makes humanity distinctive, and organized to value the universal part of the particular in human beings.” Spiritual technology becomes its own worst enemy, activating a dangerous machinery that forestalls or inhibits the flourishing of things, practices and assemblages that could well enhance and abet our search for a better form of life before they are either understood or communally evaluated through experience.



writes, “is to turn a collection of separate entities, however distinctive, into a dynamic site for experiencing and reflecting on our history, our future and our uneasy and unsure mutual connectedness” (Rabinow 2012: 7). We need to move from a vision of a world of separateness and hierarchy to one of multiplicity, creativity and worth beyond the exotic. Said another way, the “our” in our history, our future and potential connectedness is what needs to be thought through, reinvented and presented in such a way that it matters for those who come to a museum of world cultures. Placing too much emphasis on diversity and discreteness leads to a pale relativism with a complex if at times sordid history; placing too much emphasis on commonality leads to a pale humanism with its own thinned-out legacy. One way to navigate this slalom between the too particular and the too general is to turn the parceled collections into an assemblage, carefully wrought, and to produce an open, detailed, and precious vision of world cultures. If that vision or presentation is open to change, conflicts of interpretation and creative reinvention then at least the possibility of vitality can be restored to these “artifacts of lives once lived and collections collected” (Rabinow 2012: 8).

Our discussion of the potential for a remediation of these contentious and contagious collections parallels Rabinow’s collaborative work on the ethics of biosecurity (Collier, Lakoff, and Rabinow 2004). In a paradoxical double twist that produces the dynamic of neoliberal societies, the more living beings circulate globally, the more humans want to secure their circulation. This is strikingly true for ethnographic collections, with their organic materiality (skin, skulls, feathers, hair . . .). But it also draws them closer to the ambiguities of objects defined as contemporary art, raising increasingly complex challenges to conservators. Ethnographic objects and contemporary artworks appear in museum holdings as valuable yet vulnerable things, threatened by imminent decay and degradation, and endangered by all kinds of threats. The Sisyphean task of conservators is therefore to disinfest objects while at the same time letting them travel to other museums where they run the risk of being infested once again—a striking illustration of Michel Foucault’s definition of biopower as the power to “make live and let die.”

Rather than link objects with ethnos, the task of anthropological research in a museum is to pay attention to these assemblages of things and their potentiality to create “a better form of life.” Whether or not we want it, independently of the positive or negative values they take, these things are there; the question is what to do with this “being-there” and the forms it can adopt. This shift from the level of objects with values to the level of forms emerging, Rabinow suggests, is where social anthropology meets molecular biology and contemporary art as a practice.⁷

Understood as a physical and epistemological venue of collaborative intensity, the laboratory or research department in the museum confronts the stubbornness of material objects and organizes these into new, dialogical assemblages that have the capacity to produce alternative narratives. With this form of fieldwork, the

7. “The biosciences have long since sacrificed cultural meaning in order to achieve their form of power and knowledge. The plastic arts have sacrificed their object in order to enhance and protect the aesthetic over which they have lost control. Whatever the sacrifices demanded of the anthropologist, they are not the same as either those of the synthetic biologist or the contemporary artist” (Rabinow 2011: 206).

museum itself becomes the *region* and the collection the *practice*. In a recent project, produced in collaboration with the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, Keck invited biologists to work on the microbial flora contained in ethnographic artifacts using noninvasive techniques of sampling and high-throughput genetic sequencing. The goal of the project was to use the microbiome as a marker of hygienic and alimentary revolutions that distance societies in space and time. At the Musée du quai Branly this investigation was applied to a Songye statue from the Congo. The sculpture was given an MRT scan that revealed an unknown digestive track believed to contain magical charges. The results were shown in an exhibition with the title “The Anatomy of Works of Art.”

This type of remediation, which involves a collaboration between conservators and biologists, moves beyond the boundaries between nature and culture that have shaped the constitution of European museums over the last two centuries. It provides an opportunity for a collective inquiry into the problem facing the biosecurity of ethnographic objects today and offers a contemporary approach to their display. Writing about Paul Klee and Gerhard Richter—two quite different artists who both figure in his recent work—Rabinow (2011: 102) suggests that “to participate in nature, or with nature as it were, is continuously to create new forms; for this ceaseless process of creation and variation is precisely what happens in the natural world.”

Fieldwork undertaken collaboratively inside the bowels of the ethnographic museum with biologists, artists, lawyers and writers produces conceptual prototype works, which act as narratological vehicles through which to understand the collection and draw it back into the contemporary. The artist and biologist are both *mediators* of associations and *remediators* of the collection, encouraging the object to perform an *excess* of translation rather than being subject to the precision of one overriding ostensive definition. As such, agency goes viral in the museum of ethnography. It multiplies and propagates new searches, encouraging conflicting as well as complementary interpretations that extend beyond ethnic, cultural, or sociological explanation toward a wider number of translations and forms of relay. The museum generates a context that is partial and unfolding, built—following Rabinow—on *adjacencies* rather than ethnicities. It reflects “neither the overdrive of the universal intellectual nor the authoritative precision of the specific. Rather, a space of problems. Of questions. Of being behind or ahead. Belated or anticipatory. Out of synch. Too fast or too slow. Reluctant. Audacious. “Annoying” (Rabinow 2007: 39).

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Art, anthropology, and anxiety

Terry Smith

Since 2003, Paul Rabinow has identified “the anthropology of the contemporary” as the urgent object of inquiry for the profession of anthropology if it were to have an imaginable future, or, should that prove too grand an ambition, at least find a form in which it could become a viable, somewhat useful and, perhaps, even an ethical practice. He has undertaken an indefatigable search for the conceptual tools



that such a task might need to have at hand, immersed himself and his collaborators in a variety of situations that seem central to contemporary life, and produced a number of books that read as reports from the field. Vividly written, reflexive, and speculative, they are also about that field—the complex, multiplicitous contemporaneities of sameness and difference that are shaping relations between humans, sentient beings, machines, and the planet today.

Three obstacles

As the project unfolded, Rabinow encountered many practical problems, odd contingencies, and unanticipated outcomes. In principle, given the contingency that attends all eventuality, these were no surprise. More so were the three major obstacles to an adequate anthropological understanding of the present that he came to identify as persistent problems, or, better said, ongoing problematics. First, anthropology as a historical discipline, for all of its recent, searching self-critique, remains deeply divided as to its purposes and approaches, incapable of encompassing the contemporary within its beleaguered paradigms. Second, the apparently most transformative drivers of contemporary culture—not least, the biotech industries of Southern California—turn out to be irredeemably modern, not to say modernist, in their structures, protocols, and belief systems or ideologies. Third, the area of contemporary culture that one would expect to be unequivocally contemporary, and which constantly proclaims itself as such—the visual arts—turns out to be conflicted and confused about the nature of its contemporaneity. Sadly, none of these sets of tools amount to a kit, nor do the partialities within each add up to one.

Faced with this situation, Rabinow's constant recourse has been to the philosophical bedrock in which his values were formed during the 1970s and 1980s, as an admirer of Max Weber (whom he reads as a critical sociologist), as a dissenting student of Clifford Geertz, and as a close follower, and friend, of Michel Foucault. Yet he knows that to fully grasp the contemporary he must radically remediate the purview of these essentially modern perspectives. The break out from Foucault's intense reflections on past models as potentials for futures to come that is anticipated in *Anthropos today: Reflections on modern equipment* (2003), profiled as being in progress in *Marking time: On the anthropology of the contemporary* (2007), hits the obstacles just outlined in *The accompaniment: Assembling the contemporary* (2011), and remains entangled within them in *Designs on the contemporary: Anthropological tests* with Anthony Stavrianakis (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2014). Each step, from the hope that shaped it, through its successes and its disappointments, is set out with a lucid honesty. Despite a mounting disappointment in what he is finding, and not finding, his faith in the transformative power of theoretical reflection—especially when it is being challenged by immersion within an experimental situation—remains constant: he has been there, and has seen that it works, more often than not. Or at least, often enough to make it a better option than any available others.

All this makes Rabinow the most articulate theorist of “the anthropology of the contemporary,” and thus of what would seem to be the most viable program for a contemporary anthropology or, more modestly, a defeasible approach to anthropology going forward. Yet the obstacles remain. I am competent to make no

more than a few outsider observations on the first of these: the adequacy or not of the continuing anthropological disciplinary paradigms when it comes to understanding the present. Regarding the second, I am not at all surprised by Rabinow's realization that the bio-tech industries are essentially modernist rather than contemporary: almost all science is a continuation of the modern project of completely describing the physical matter of the universe in measurable, material terms, and doing so in the hyperbolic name of the search for "a theory of everything." Perhaps the most we can expect is a contemporary account of this centuries-long search, such as those provided by Peter Galison (see Galison and Stump 1996) or Carlo Rovelli (see Rovelli 2015). I would, however, be surprised to find that no aspect, no project, and no approach that could be properly understood as contemporary is to be found in this field. I will have more to say about the third topic, the contemporary visual arts, and about Rabinow's reading of them, as I too have been working for some time on how our current contemporaneity might be thought, and have some suggestions that aim to take us beyond the inherent vagueness, indeed the self-mystifying unknowability, of "the contemporary."

Anthropology's anxiety

Rabinow has not been alone in identifying the main challenge to anthropological inquiry as the need to rethink the nature of the interlocutory relation—the contemporaneous encounter between others (individuals, cultures, peoples, worldviews, codes, subjects, and objects)—that defined its uniqueness as a form of inquiry. In the decades during which the European empires imploded, when decolonization pervaded most relationships between world sectors, and postcolonial critique drove disciplinary reform across most of the humanities and many of the social sciences, anthropologists everywhere felt acutely the impending anachronism of their profession. The leading responses are well known to readers of this journal, although you may be interested in an outsider's list. Alfred Gell drew attention not only to the agency of the subjects of traditional anthropology, but also to that of their objects of use and of art. This was a direction honed and expanded by others, such as Michael Taussig. Foundational theories, such as Lévi-Strauss on kinship, are revised by successors, such as Marilyn Strathern. Clifford Geertz offered unparalleled "thick descriptions" of the particularities of the interactions at play in given cultural situations, and discerned the lineaments of larger formations within them. Johannes Fabian profiled the basic iniquity, the unconscionable de-temporalization, and above all the withholding of coevalness that disfigures the relationships between the (usually Western) anthropologist and the (usually "non-Western") Other. Marc Augé highlighted the need for European anthropologists to turn their inquiring gaze upon their own cultures, to the otherness around them, indeed within them, as well as those that populate the transitory spaces of contemporary displacement. Rabinow takes up some of these leads, along with many more, and brings them to bear on the task of discerning the figure of the "human thing" as it appears to him and his immediate collaborators now.

How much of what he finds is given to him as a result of using these revisionist approaches? Very little, it seems, if one were to take his texts on their face. Few professional predecessors and even fewer contemporaries within the profession are

acknowledged. Many of those recognized are refused as contemporaries. Echoing his deep debt to Max Weber, due respect is given to the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, but much less to Pierre Bourdieu. Philosophers and theorists are his main companions. While Habermas and Agamben are rejected as unsuitable for this role—the first for his conservatism, and the second for his tangentiality—Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dewey, and above all Foucault are heralded as true, and constant, contemporaries. Then there are a few artists, such as Gerhard Richter, who should surely be ideal companions in contemporary time, as they would seem to be most sensitive to its core complexities, and most dedicated to the nearly impossible problematic of wrestling these complexities into discernable figures.

Practitioners of the contemporary

Much of the last section of *Marking time* is devoted to an exploration of the work of German artist Gerhard Richter, perhaps the most celebrated among those who continue to paint (most contemporary artists having moved on to other mediums, or, more often, mixtures of mediums within installations of many sorts). His paintings attract huge prices in the stratospheric market for “Contemporary Art” as well as intense attention from the art critics most concerned with defining what is distinctive about contemporary art. This combination is rare, as many of the top twenty market artists, with Jeff Koons as the most obvious example, have become content to mirror back to their purchasers flashy figments of their voracious, and vacuous, greed. Richter is a good place to start, then, if one is looking for what might be substantive about “the contemporary” in today’s art.

Rabinow does not explore any one of Richter’s paintings in any depth or detail, nor any of the artist’s many series. He is not an art critic or historian, so we cannot expect that. But it should be noted for the record that the paintings are this artist’s statements, the actual embodiments of his work on the world, with and against the world. Close textual reading of them is necessary to disclose just how they cut with and against the grains of modern and contemporary art—indeed, how they operate as acts of thought, in parallel to the writings of the philosophers whom Rabinow regularly parses. Unlike his frequent exchanges with his subjects in the bio-tech industries, Rabinow does not seem to have engaged Richter in conversation, although he has read many of the interviews that Richter regularly gives and is, therefore, alert to how contrarian Richter is as an interviewee, how difficult he is a witness to his own intentionality. Rabinow has, however, read carefully much of the best art critical writing about Richter, notably that of Peter Osborne and Jean-François Chevrier (Osborne 1992; Chevrier 1991). He is therefore alert to the fact that Richter’s work eludes most general and most specific art historical and art critical categories—indeed, it consciously, knowingly, with careful erudition, contradicts or conflates them. Richter’s interpreters also tell us that, from fixed but relatively random starting points, his art is an open-ended interrogation of the multiplicity of images, and types of images, that proliferate within modern and contemporary cultures; and that it is committed above all to manifesting, in the most concrete possible terms, in tactile materials, *in a painting*, the always shifting ambiguities that attend every effort to see something and to come to know something more in the act of seeing.

When Rabinow searches for what is contemporary about Richter's enterprise, he offers some generalities, such as, "I prefer to call him 'a painter of the contemporary world'" (2007: 108).⁸ Or he identifies Richter as sharing problems facing all contemporaries, such as how to imagine a relationship with "nature" at a time when that relationship, for most of us, especially the new subjects of anthropological inquiry, has long ceased to be "natural" (111). He is on surer, although art critically quite normal, ground when nominating Richter's "desubjectivizing of his own presence" (114), that is, his eliminating signs of authorial intention or personal expressiveness from his work, and in noting that Richter's embrace of "stylistic inconsistency" and his "refusal of painterly dogma" marks him as "a contemporary image maker rather than a [modern] builder of programs and theories" (115). Rabinow is particularly drawn to his sense that Richter "does not yield to a worldview" (115), that he eschews them (117). This does, however, sit oddly against Richter's local reputation. An escapee from East Berlin in 1961, Richter has, in recent years, become *the* artist of a unified Germany, not least in creating a huge hanging *Abstraktbild* in the colors of the national flag for the entrance foyer of the rebuilt Reichstag.

Rabinow is at his strongest on Richter when citing a long passage from Osborne that locates the artist firmly within a post-Auschwitz, Adornesque "double negation," which reveals Richter to be marking a time after modernity's utopian dream, an infinitely recursive temporality in which it is realized that no future is possible, only a continuation of this profoundly crippled present (118; Osborne 1992: 109). This gives Rabinow his book's title, and its central metaphor, but it is one that exposes Richter's nostalgia for modernism, and for a critical relationship to modernity. This is, indeed, Richter's "untimeliness," his oblique angle to contemporary life and times, a vein he has been mining for fifty years. But it does not make him a nonmodern contemporary, in the sense that Rabinow seems to want him to be. Indeed, it leaves Richter marking time, as does a brass band, when its ranks march on the same spot, preparatory to turning back, and repeating the same tune.

In *Marking time*, a chapter on "Vehement contemporaries," that is, the protagonists, indeed antagonists, in the race to define the human genome, precedes the passages on Richter. These passages are followed by some brief thoughts about what digitalization is doing to the image in contemporary circumstances, drawn mainly from Lev Manovich's arguments in *The language of new media* (2001) and those of Bolter and Grusin on remediation (1999). For all of Rabinow's absolutely appropriate care in acknowledging the specificity of each of his instances, there is an implication throughout that each stands for "the contemporary" in some larger sense. The degree to which each does so is, however, unclear. Richter is not the only artist obsessed with the opacity of the image today—indeed, it is a widespread concern. Nor is Richter's insistence that this meaningfulness be manifest without the articulation of concrete meanings the only way to approach the issue. Alfredo Jaar, for example, does so through installations that emphatically evoke the libidinal economy of images in the context of situations such as the resource exploitation of the Third World, the massacres in Rwanda, the limits of photojournalism, and the sequestration of image files by Corbis Inc., among many other such contexts.

8. One catches here an echo of Baudelaire's famous characterization of Constantin Guys as "The Painter of Modern Life." See Baudelaire 2001.



In the art of Jaar, and many, many others the work being done on what images are doing today, right there, in the artwork that you are seeing, is the content of that work.⁹ William Kentridge, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Kara Walker—a long and growing list could be readily adduced. Further, increasing numbers of artists work collaboratively, some in community settings, such as Thomas Hirshhorn, or the London-based collective Assemble. Then there are those who explore the interstices of our contemporaneous differences through fictive modes, such as Walid Raad's richly imagined "Atlas Group." Collaboration is a practice that Rabinow celebrates for an anthropology that would be truly contemporary, but curiously does not look for it among artists.¹⁰

These examples merely hint at just how thoroughly *unrepresentative* Gerhard Richter is if we are to take him as *the* contemporary artist *par excellence*. In my view, he is exemplary—in the quality of his interrogations, and the relentless persistence of his concerns—of one sub-tendency within a broader current of contemporary art: one that I have dubbed "remodernism" within official, museum and market-based "Contemporary Art." In a number of essays and books since 2000, I have argued for and, I believe, demonstrated two core claims: that the "multiple modernities"—which we can now see as definitive of art made in many places throughout the world during the twentieth century—were a key art historical precedent for the diversity within contemporary art today; and that the *worldly* contemporary art that has been produced since the 1980s may be understood as being constituted by three distinct, internally recursive yet also constantly converging currents: first, "Contemporary Art," which fuses remodernist and retro-sensationalist impulses into museum and market spectacles; second, the art of new nations, and of peoples in movements around the world, an art of transnational transitionality; and third, the new modes of visual imagining enabled by social media, transient collaborations, and experimental forms of life. These currents are each contemporary in their own ways, and are contemporary to each other, in their temporal coincidence but more significantly in their different ways of engaging with the world's differencing (see, e.g., Smith 2009; Smith 2010). Any "anthropology of the contemporary" that wants to take the visual arts as a field into which to inquire might be expected to take on rather more than one artist, however brilliant. Likewise for the fate of the image, and indeed of art, in today's digitalized communicative schema: quick expositions of one to two texts can only be suggestive, not substantive.

By 2011, when *The accompaniment* set out to "assemble the contemporary" as its subtitle suggests, a growing literature by art critics and historians, and a number of important exhibitions (notably the documentas in Kassel, and various biennials in Venice and elsewhere) by curators, were dedicated to showing how artists were engaging with contemporary life. It is disappointing, then, that Rabinow confines

9. Rabinow is not alone in being caught in the modernist trap of conflating subject matter as sufficient for meaningfulness. See Rabinow 2007: 116.

10. Also relevant to this discussion is "the ethnographic turn" in contemporary art practice. It is a strong, if contested tendency, pursued by a number of significant artists, and has generated a range of commentary, including Hal Foster, "The artist as ethnographer" (originally published in 1995) in Foster 2001; the essays in George Marcus and Fred R. Myers 1995 and, more recently, Marcus and Myers 2013.

himself to offering a few arch comments on some of the responses to “A questionnaire on the contemporary” published by *October* (Foster 2009). He complains, inaccurately, that none of the respondents took up the editor’s challenge to “move beyond general reference to ‘the market’ and ‘globalization’” (192), although this is true of most respondents. He is rightly concerned that a certain theory-driven interpretation of contemporary art has become hegemonic, and that critical, historical perspectives have diminished (196). This was arguably true of the main line in *October* magazine until relatively recently, but not so of much other art discourse and curating throughout the world, including the outline I briefly alluded to above, which is unequivocally presented as a historical hypothesis about the disposition of cultural power in artworlds in the present.

The obstacles now

Where does this leave anthropological inquiry? In *Marking time*, Rabinow dismisses ethnographies of all kinds, enquiries into the nature of Man, and the idea of a human science, in favor of the following:

Rather, I take the object of anthropological science (*Wissenschaft*) to be the dynamic and mutually constitutive, if partial and dynamic, connections between figures of *anthropos* and the diverse, and at times consistent, branches of knowledge available during a period of time; that claim authority about the truth of the matter; and whose legitimacy to make claims is accepted as plausible by other such claimants; as well as the power relations within which and through which those claims are produced, established, contested, defeated, affirmed, and disseminated. (Rabinow 2007: 4)

To me, this looks like discourse as Foucault characterized it for us in his classic studies of exactly these phenomena and these relationships between them. Anthropology, then, is meta-discourse. When is it contemporary? When, Rabinow suggests, it is applied to current discursive settings and when it uses “practices, terms, concepts, forms, and the like” from “tradition” and from recent (modern) pasts but reconfigures them in fresh ways (Rabinow 2011: 110–11). Is this enough to meet the demands of the day?

In the conclusion to *The accompaniment*, Rabinow reviews the state of play in the three fields he has been following in order to assess their progress in overcoming the obstacles identified above. As to a possible anthropology of the contemporary, it is no surprise that he returns to his three inspirations—Weber, Dewey, and Foucault—for guidance as to how to conduct oneself as someone who, with other like-minded seekers, inquires into to what it is to be human today. It is telling that no anthropologists are numbered among his guides. The biosciences, he notes, remain “busily and contentedly modern and modernist” (2011: 205). In the arts, where we would expect to find a productive “problematization of the division of value spheres,” the situation seems less clear. Thus the humanities, he believes, “remain either modernist or postmodernist in their abandonment of grand narratives or in their critical genres” (206). That this is Rabinow’s only comment on the topic, one that has already attracted a vast literature, attests to his lightness of touch. He goes on immediately to say, “when it comes to the anxious turbulence



over the status and boundaries of contemporary art, it is true that the relationship to other spheres, mainly political until recently, has been a topic of discussion and experiment. Of course, being untimely was the last thing anyone was attempting to achieve” (206). This is true of fashionable artworld with-it-ness, but not of the work of the artists of the kind mentioned above, nor of the critical commentary. His summary is this: “the biosciences have long since sacrificed cultural *meaning* in order to achieve their form of power and knowledge. The plastic arts have sacrificed their *object* in order to enhance and protect the aesthetic over which they have lost control” (206). Partly true, I would say, but not of the main, continuously diversifying body of contemporary art.

How do Rabinow’s observations compare to earlier efforts by sociologists and anthropologists to understand modern and contemporary artworlds? The record is thin. Following Arthur Danto’s identification of “artworld” as a concept based on his own experiences in New York in the 1960s, philosopher of aesthetics George Dickel sketched an institutional theory of art and sociologist Howard Becker proposed introductory profiles of Western artworlds; Pierre Bourdieu studied the societal pressures shaping within these worlds (Danto 1964; Dickel 1974; Dickel 1997; Bourdieu 1979; Becker 2008). Despite numerous studies, especially those involving the operations of the market, there is no significant anthropology of contemporary art. Exceptions occur when there is a convergence between Indigenous art practice and contemporary artworlds, as in the case of Indigenous art from Australia (see, e.g., Morphy 2008; Myers 2002). Meanwhile, in bestselling publications such as Sarah Thornton’s *Seven days in the artworld* (2008), “participant observation” remains at the level of profile journalism.

What is “the contemporary”?

“The contemporary” is an odd, awkward, even hesitant locution, in English in particular. When, however, we ask “the contemporary . . . *what?*” we hear immediately that it is an adjectival phrase missing its noun. In most cases, the speaker is using an abbreviation for “the contemporary world,” “our contemporary situation,” “the contemporary condition,” “contemporary experience,” “the mood of the moment,” “the feeling of our times,” or some such. Being more conversational, French and Italian are more comfortable with such incomplete utterances, while German has a variety of words that enable a little more immediate precision. Giorgio Agamben posed the question *Che cos’è il contemporaneo?* in a 2007 seminar, the title of which is translated as “What is the contemporary?” (Agamben 2009). His “first and foremost” question was “What does it mean to be contemporary?” He sought to articulate what he called, in an approximate English, the qualities of “contemporariness.”¹¹ That is, the sense of being contemporary as it is experienced by those who are most capable of understanding its true nature—a truth, he believed, to be found precisely in that experience, in the grasping of its inner registers. His method of inquiry was to pose, mostly via metaphor, one paradox after another to demonstrate the usually arcane shadow play that comes into being whenever “the contemporary” is subject

11. See the video of his lecture at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5S9VPS_gms&feature=related.

to analysis. In *The accompaniment*, Rabinow dismisses this, I think rightly, as an oblique, backward looking perspective (Rabinow 2011: 189–91).

Yet everyone concerned with this issue senses that the condition of being contemporary, while present since the first two sentient beings became aware of each other, is now somehow more definitive of human existence, more pervasively present, than it has ever been. And that the particularities of our contemporaneous sameness and difference to each other are no longer framed by a greater historical logic, a more encompassing world picture, or a higher power, one that is orienting us all towards a similar future. The introduction to *Marking time* sets out one of the most lucid articulations of “the contemporary” written by anyone at that time.¹² There Rabinow rightly recognizes that “the contemporary” cannot be “an epochal term,” otherwise it remains modern, a descriptor of a shared, single, one-directional historical period, and would thus fail to acknowledge the many temporalities adjacent within contemporary time. Instead, in his much cited definition, emphasized in the original, he states: “*The contemporary is a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical*” (2, emphasis in original). The question of “how older and newer elements are given form and worked together, either well or poorly, becomes a significant site of inquiry.” He then says, “I call that site the contemporary” (2–3).

Looking back at these formulations, eight years later, we can see how prescient they were at the time—but also how tied they are to their adjectival dangler, and to conceptions of modernity, as itself a ratio that worked on tradition, rendering it past, then on its own earlier forms (which were presumed never to age). Rabinow does not fall for the self-deception widespread in the artworld, much favored by those committed to the continuity of its primary institutions (most of which were founded in the modern period, and with modernizing objectives): that contemporary art is, substantively, the latest version of modern art. But he does, by coincidence, employ a strategy quite common among museum officials and curators: to take as their contemporaries the artists of their generation, and thus open their museums to exhibitions of work by the generation of artists *preceding* theirs, work that may eventually be acquired, that is, added into the history of art. This, too, is a moving ratio. It assumes that it is measuring the recent and current instances of the same kind of thing—in this case, art. In contemporary circumstances, however, this is not an assumption that can readily be made.

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12. It parallels in striking ways the account of “contemporaneity” as the pervasive contemporary state or condition proposed and debated at a 2004 conference in Pittsburgh, key papers from which may be found in Smith, Enwezor, and Condee 2008; see especially the introduction.



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De l’anthropologie du contemporain: Usages des concepts, design et pratiques

Résumé : Entre 2007 et 2014, seul ou en collaboration avec Gaymon Benett et Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul Rabinow s’est consacré au développement d’une “anthropologie du contemporain.” Le projet est largement reconnu pour son originalité, son inventivité et son audace, au sein et hors des confins disciplinaires de l’anthropologie. Cependant, l’attention accordée à l’intégrité générale des complexes spirales de figuration et de reconfiguration associées au développement du projet demeure limitée. Et la cohérence générale des travaux de Rabinow tout au long de sa carrière—de sa formulation, originale et souvent citée, de la relation entre tradition et modernité à ses réflexions plus récentes sur une anthropologie adaptée à la relation entre modernité et contemporain—a fait l’objet de moins d’attention encore. Indépendamment et collectivement, les contributions de ce forum présentent ces deux aspects du travail de Rabinow. Anthony Stavriakis rejoint Rabinow dans la réponse à ces contributions, saisissant l’opportunité de répondre aux critiques,

d'élaborer et de raffiner l'anthropologie du contemporain telle qu'ils la conçoivent actuellement.

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