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The Twenty-First Century Art Book presents a fascinating overview of what has been a hugely prolific period for the visual arts since the start of the new millennium. Easy to use, insightful and fresh, this book is a far-reaching A to Z of international artists working across a wide range of media and techniques. It features the best known names in the contemporary art world – Ai Weiwei, Matthew Barney, Jeff Koons, Christian Marclay, Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall – as well as introducing many of the rising stars of the next generation. Each artist is represented by an illustration of a significant artwork, accompanied by an illuminating text. The alphabetical arrangement allows a performance by Marina Abramović to be studied next to a painting by Tomma Abts, a sculpture by Subodh Gupta contrasted with a photograph by Andreas Gursky, or an intricate installation by Sarah Sze considered alongside a two-screen video projection by Fiona Tan. The entries are comprehensively cross-referenced, and glossaries of artistic and technical terms are included, together with a listing of the major art events across the globe. By avoiding traditional artistic and geographical categorizations, The Twenty-First Century Art Book is an invaluable visual source book that provides an exciting and compelling celebration of contemporary art.
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As part of the biggest ever exhibition of performance art in MoMA’s history, Abramović sat on a chair for seven hours a day, six days a week, for nearly three months. Visitors were invited to take turns sitting opposite the artist who, dressed in a flowing gown, remained silent throughout. Viewers became participants, as much a performer as the artist. Some cried, others stared, and some even claimed to have had transcendent experiences. For Abramović, the work was a simple exhortation to contemplate the present moment. While appearing straightforward, it was, in fact, incredibly gruelling, both physically and psychologically.


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After graduating as a painter, Ahtila studied filmmaking in London and Los Angeles. The work she now makes straddles both installation art and film, and although it is typically shown in art galleries it draws on the techniques and production values of cinema more than a lot of moving image art. The House is a three-channel film that plays across three perpendicular screens. A woman drives through a forest to her house, where she eats a sandwich at her kitchen table. Linear time and rational logic break down, however, when we see the car moving without a driver, sounds emerging without sources and the woman floating through the trees. The film evolved from conversations Ahtila had with people suffering from psychotic disorders. The House allows viewers to inhabit the disordered mind of the protagonist. Throughout her work, Ahtila dissolves the perceived boundaries between interior and exterior worlds, frequently focusing on women going through a traumatic experience.

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Thousands of sheets of fine cotton cloth have been cut into the shape of a world map and layered precisely to create a three-dimensional sculpture. Actual geographical borders between countries are ignored in favour of the straight edges of the fabric, which divide the map. Using a familiar image, Ai has constructed a complex work that is by design very labour-intensive to install, thus evoking China’s status as a source of cheap workers for the garment industry. The difficulty of placing the elements accurately also introduces issues of international relations and global trade. The historical, socio-political and economic conditions of contemporary China frequently serve as starting points for Ai's art and he has become internationally known for his critical stance. He uses a diverse range of techniques and materials, often drawing on Chinese traditions, and although politically motivated, he uses humour and metaphor, producing work that is poetic and subtle in its content, with formal aesthetic qualities.


Ai Weiwei. b Beijing, China, 1957. World Map, 2006. Cotton on wooden base. h 10 d x w 800 x d 600 cm. h 39 1/2 x w 315 x d 236 in
altogether in 1970 by burning many of his works. This act of destruction signalled his transition to the text-based and photographic practices for which he is best known. Fusing Pop art’s use of mass-media imagery with Conceptual art’s approach to language, Baldessari’s witty and subversive works typify a Post-Modern approach to art-making.

Kelly, Koons, Reyle

A surprised facial expression fills this large, strangely-shaped work, which combines photography, painting and sculptural relief. The furrows of the brow have been gouged out and filled with green paint, while the eyebrows, which protrude from the surface of the work, are coloured black and blue. The piece belongs to a series of similar works that recall paintings, based on old billboard posters, made by Baldessari in the late 1950s. In a career spanning over five decades, Baldessari has worked with painting, photography, video, printmaking, sculpture and installation. Though beginning as a painter, he renounced the medium altogether in 1970 by burning many of his works. This act of destruction signalled his transition to the text-based and photographic practices for which he is best known. Fusing Pop art’s use of mass-media imagery with Conceptual art’s approach to language, Baldessari’s witty and subversive works typify a Post-Modern approach to art-making.

Kelly, Koons, Reyle

A multicoloured rainbow shoots skywards above a desolate, post-apocalyptic cityscape. Perhaps the fallout from some catastrophic explosion, the radiant fan of coloured stripes threatens to engulf the detritus-strewn street below. With its bombed-out high-rises, smashed street lamps and collapsing telephone poles, each element of de Balincourt’s composition draws your eye to a single vanishing point. The French-born artist employs a variety of materials and techniques in the creation of his work, including stencilling, masking, scraping and spray-painting. His paintings are filled with detail and odd spatial distortions, often hovering between representation and abstraction. Central to his earlier works were ideas regarding the nature of government and the social, political and economic structures of the USA, where he has lived since childhood. More recently his scenes have shifted in their focus, presenting an imagined world at odds with the rampant consumerism and imperialism that he previously critiqued.

Jules de Balincourt. b Paris, France, 1972. Blind Faith and Tunnel Vision, 2005. Oil on canvas on wood. h 198.1 x w 147.3 cm. h 78 x w 58 in
Reaching up from the floor, Barlow’s enormous scaffold-like sculpture dominates the display space. The complex work consists of numerous vertical and horizontal wooden poles that have been roughly joined together with cement and fabric, evoking something that might be seen on a construction site. Barlow’s apparently slipshod assemblage, as with much of her work, takes its inspiration from the urban environment. She has made work since the 1970s, alongside a career as a celebrated art tutor, and is best known for her large-scale sculptures using cheap, readily available materials such as plywood, plaster, cement, fabric, paper and cardboard. She assembles them intuitively, often in situ, by throwing, pouring, stretching and balancing their component parts to create unexpected formal relationships that often respond to their surrounding architecture. The results are abstract, resolutely anti-monumental and many are crudely coloured with industrial paint. Reflecting the transience of life, the fragile sculptures are typically dismantled after they have been shown.

Barney’s epic Cremaster Cycle (1994–2002) consists of five feature-length films that explore processes of biological reproduction and development with Cremaster 3 as the final, and at over 3 hours, longest of the series. The films have stylized futuristic settings and are peopled by exotic and hybrid creatures. The enigmatic narrative incorporates elements of genetic science, body modification, sport, mythology and sexuality. It seems to dramatize a yearning to transcend the genetic limitations of the human condition, which resonates with contemporary issues of cloning and biological engineering. The films are notable for their production values, which aspire to the gloss of high budget mainstream cinema. Barney’s long-time collaborator Jonathan Bepler composed and arranged the films’ soundtracks. The cycle unfolds not just cinematically, but also through related photographs, drawings, sculptures and installations produced in conjunction with each film and often presented alongside them.
For this ambitious public artwork, Eliasson installed four artificial waterfalls along New York's East River, near Lower Manhattan. Constructed from scaffolding and industrial pumps, the enormous falls ranged from 28 to 37 metres (92 to 121 feet) high and ran continually for four months. By simulating nature in this way, Eliasson offered viewers a new way to experience the city's waterfronts, providing them with a phenomenon that was both natural and cultural. Eliasson's immersive installations typically replicate climatic and atmospheric conditions using basic materials such as water, heat and light. One early work created an ethereal rainbow inside a gallery, using just an electric lamp and a perforated hose; another, made for Tate Modern’s gargantuan Turbine Hall, used humidifiers and hundreds of mono-frequency lights to generate a hazy yellow sunset. Yet Eliasson does not attempt to fool anyone with his works, and he deliberately allows viewers to quickly discern how his effects are achieved.

Olafur Eliasson. b Copenhagen, Denmark, 1967.

New York City Waterfalls

Elmgreen & Dragset
Prada Marfa, 2005.

Marfa, a small desert town in Texas, USA, has been a hub for artists since the 1970s, when artist Donald Judd moved there from New York. In October 2005 the Scandinavian artists Elmgreen & Dragset sited the permanent sculpture Prada Marfa about 60 kilometres (37 miles) outside the city. Resembling a real Prada store, it features shoes and handbags from the designer’s fall/winter 2005 collection in its windows. However, the door to the store is permanently closed so nothing can be purchased. Elmgreen & Dragset have worked together since 1995. Their art examines the intersection of art with architecture and design, and the shelving and repeated forms in this piece echo the art of Judd and other Minimalists. The sculpture also provocatively explores the often-contentious relationship between contemporary art, fashion and commerce. It was intended to remain untouched after installation, left to slowly disintegrate, but shortly after completion it had to be restocked when the original contents were stolen.

Michael Elmgreen. b Copenhagen, Denmark, 1961.

Ingar Dragset. b Trondheim, Norway, 1969.

Prada Marfa. 2005. Adobe bricks, plaster, aluminium frames, glass panes, MDF, paint, carpet, Prada shoes and bags. h 299 1/4 x w 185 x d 189 in. Sealed mockup of a Prada boutique, located in the vast American desert landscape near Marfa, Texas. Highway 90 in Valentine, just outside Marfa, Texas.
Cavemannman. 2002

Cardboard boxes and packing tape are the main materials used to create this sprawling, cave-like sculptural installation. Lit with fluorescent tubes, the walk-in grotto is crammed with photocopied texts, posters of celebrities, and numerous books on political theory and philosophy. Empty drinks cans litter the floor and television screens in the walls show scenes of Lascaux II, a theme park recreation of the prehistoric painted caves in Montignac, France. Capitalistic greed, sadomasochism, martyrdom and the Iraq War are just some of the themes confronting visitors to this information-saturated cavern. Cavemannman is typical of Hirschhorn, whose complex works are characterized by their superabundance and use of cheap, readily available materials. Since the 1990s, the Paris-based artist has used his room-sized sculptures, drawings, videos and writings to critique contemporary politics and express his faith in the transformative power of art. His works are also intended to stimulate dialogue and provide space for contemplation.

For the Love of God. 2007

A human skull encrusted with 8,601 flawless pavé-set diamonds, For the Love of God cost £14 million to create and weight 1,066.18 carats. Its title comes from an expression regularly uttered by Hirst’s mother on hearing his early ideas for artworks. The work was first exhibited at the White Cube gallery in London in 2007, amid heavy security, and attracted queues of visitors. The skull is likely to belong to an eighteenth-century man of European/Mediterranean ancestry and was bought by Hirst from a London taxidermist. Its teeth are real and belong to the skull. The piece acts as a memento mori, a reminder of the inextricability of death. In making it, Hirst drew inspiration from Aztec representations of skulls as well as Mexican rituals of honouring the dead. Death has been a recurring theme in Hirst’s art, stretching back to his very earliest works.


Damien Hirst. b Bristol, UK, 1965. For the Love of God. 2007. Platinum, diamonds and human teeth. h 17.1 x w 12.7 x d 19.1 cm. h 6 3/4 x w 5 x d 7 1/2 in
One Million Years, 2009

One Million Years is a conceptual artwork about the passing of time. Created in two parts, it comprises One Million Years (Past), which was made in 1969 and is a typewritten record of the dates of every year from 998,031 BC to AD 1969, and One Million Years (Future), created in 1981, which records the years from AD 1996 to AD 1,001,995. The work is in book form and has been presented in exhibitions around the world, where sections are read aloud to visitors. In 2009, David Zwirner Gallery in New York recorded a reading live, with a CD of the event edited and packaged on site. An installation featuring a recording booth was installed in the gallery space.

Time’s passing is a recurring theme in Kawara’s art: since 4 January 1966 he has created a series of paintings titled ‘Today’, which simply display the date that each work was made.

Àlmond, Graham, Marclay, Sugimoto

One Million Years

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Almond, Graham, Marclay, Sugimoto

140

Kelley Mike

Day Is Done (Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstructions #2-32), 2005/6

Vampires, hillbillies and rapping Nazis are just some of the bizarre characters appearing in this feature-length video, which is part carnivalesque musical and part anthropological study. Each of its thirty-two chapters is a live-action interpretation of a photograph from Kelley’s vast collection of old high-school yearbooks. The selected images reflect the gamut of American folk culture, including Halloween parties, holiday pageants, theatrical productions and musical performances. The ritualistic nature of these extracurricular activities fascinated Kelley, inspiring him to concoct a loose narrative woven together by song. Broadway show tunes, heavy metal, hip-hop and other popular musical styles are satirized in the film, which was first shown as a fifty-screen video installation in New York. Despite finding inspiration in popular culture, Kelley never intended to glamorize it; rather — through drawing, collage, sculpture, performance and video — he subverted, deconstructed and reconfigured it and explored themes as diverse as American class relations, sexuality, religion and politics.

Barney, Jamie, Trecartin

On Kawara


Kelley Mike

As one of Germany’s most prominent artists, Kiefer has developed a monumental oeuvre that orbits around the theme of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. The term translates as ‘the struggle to come to terms with the past’, and since the Second World War it has been associated with the painful associations that Germany has with its own national identity and recent history. Kiefer’s fearlessly direct approach has been controversial ever since his early series ‘Occupations’ (1969) in which he photographed himself in uniform giving Fascist salutes while travelling through France, Switzerland and Italy. His subsequent paintings and sculptures may be more poetic in their iconography – sunflowers and ploughed fields are common subjects – but their unapologetic forcefulness remains, evoking a national psyche in ruins. Found objects such as photographs or dead plants are embedded into the pictures’ thickly impastoed paint, and handwritten inscriptions quote from literary sources such as the Romanian poet Paul Celan.

Paul Celan: wir schöpften die Finsternis leer, wir fanden das wort, das den Sommer heraufkam: Blume; (We scooped the darkness empty, we found the word that ascended summer flower), 2012

Acrobat is a sculpture in the ‘Popeye’ series in which Koons casts inflatable toys in aluminium, and combines them in surprising ways with unaltered everyday objects. As with the jolly lobster in this work, these toys are cheap, brightly coloured, lightweight, and made for fun. By casting them in expensive and durable aluminium, Koons signals that he takes the subject of fun very seriously indeed. In the 1980s Koons worked as a commodities broker to fund his early work. The artist has since dwelt upon those aspects of contemporary American culture that are commonly dismissed as banal or tasteless. He sees subjects such as balloons, puppies, flowers and cartoons as redeemable sources of democratic, shameless pleasure to which everyone can relate. As heir to the Pop artists of the 1960s, Koons subscribes to the idea that art can be simultaneously critical and celebratory of the culture it draws on. The artist has observed that Acrobat can be seen as a reference to the work of Dalí and Duchamp.

Jeff Koons. b. York, PA, USA, 1955. Acrobat, 2003–9. Polychromed aluminium, galvanized steel, wood, and straw. h238.9 x w148 x d64.8 cm. h93 1/2 x w58 x d25 1/2 in.
Sehgal allows no photography of any of his artworks. Instead, they are recorded only in the recollections of those who have experienced them. This Objective of that Object, like Sehgal’s other work, is what he calls a ‘constructed situation’, in which interpreters (he rejects the term ‘performers’) enact a sequence of actions dictated in advance. A visitor enters the gallery and is immediately surrounded by five people. After repeating, in unison, ‘The objective of the work is to become the object of discussion’, the interpreters wait for the visitor to respond. If nothing is said, they slowly fall to the ground, but if the visitor speaks or moves, then that prompts an improvised discussion. Sehgal, who lives in Berlin, does not see his art as performance but as influenced by his training in dance, as well as early studies in political economics. He aims to create experiences that are valued as highly as objects.

Serra Richard

Promenade, 2008

In Paris’s Grand Palais, the largest uninterrupted glass and iron building in the world, Serra placed five vertical sheets of rolled Cor-Ten steel on end in a single line. The work, titled Promenade, was commissioned for the building’s ‘Monumenta’ series of temporary sculptures. It commanded the whole of the space, the towering sheets – each one 17 metres (55 feet 9 1/4 inches) tall – casting dynamic shadows due to the fact that they were installed at subtly different angles and inclinations. In common with many of Serra’s steel installations made since the 1970s, Promenade gave the impression that the heavy sheets might topple over at any moment. Building on the power of early sculptures such as Prop (1968), made from precariously balanced rolled lead, Serra disguises any necessary welds or structural supports in his work. Often, as with the curling walls of Snake (Sugea) (1994–7), he allows huge sheets of steel to stand unassisted.
Hair-like strands of colour swirl across a clear background, sometimes blurred, sometimes sharply delineated. Pigment appears to be dissolving in liquid, or is this a flock of starlings at dusk? Freischwimmer 25 is one of a series of images in which Tillmans has used purely photographic processes to directly capture light in fluid, painterly marks. Though abstract, there is a sense that these are drawings of moving light. Tillmans rose to prominence with his casually styled work, which was published in style magazines and resembled a mix of fashion photography and reportage. He continues to mix observational photography with abstract work, often montaged in his signature displays in which photographs, magazine cuttings and photocopies are taped directly onto the wall at different heights and arranged in vitrines or on tables. By rearranging and re-contextualizing, Tillmans creates new associations and narratives. In 2000 he was the first photographer to be awarded the Tate’s Turner Prize.

A home-made pirate television station is installed within a gallery space and is used to transmit a film. On the gallery walls are displayed the text of the US Constitution’s First Amendment – which advocates freedom of speech – as well as information on how visitors can create their own low-tech TV stations. The film being broadcast is Punishment Park, a 1971 US documentary on the suppression of anti-war protesters during the Vietnam War. Alongside the political, this installation references art history, with the bicycle wheel, which forms the station’s antenna, mimicking Marcel Duchamp’s 1913 ready-made. Tiravanija, a Thai artist who is based in New York and Chiang Mai, often creates installations that bring people together, and are indeed only complete when this occurs. In another significant work he displays in the gallery a replica of his New York apartment, where visitors are invited to cook, eat and sleep.
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