

# IS NEWNESS STILL NEW?

BY GREG LINDQUIST

**C**an *newness* be considered *new* any longer? Is the concept of originality in contemporary art even possible or relevant? Interpreted as fresh, transformative, or even deliberately backward-looking, the idea of newness seems empowered by our own personal and idiosyncratic senses of perception, achieved via emotional, intellectual, and physical responses to art. While encountering art, is it our individual experience, together with our collective cultural participation (one informed by familiarity and repetition of exposure to the particulars), that develops a sensation of the new?

Inspired by Irving Sandler's artist questionnaire "Is There a New Academy?" (published in *ARTnews*, Summer-September 1959), I surveyed 10 prominent emerging artist peers on this topic. My only definitive criteria for selection were that the artists' work be highly visible, and that they be rigorously and intellectually engaged in discussing their work. I was also thinking about these artists in regard to their revisitation of the old by digesting influence or quotation, their use of recently developed materials and methods, or the incorporation of something unfamiliar from the cultural sphere into an art context. I began with a fairly vague, open-ended question: What does newness mean in your work with regards to growth, progress, originality, novelty, and freshness? There was intentionally no context provided for the definition of these words. Rather, the implied expectation was that the artists make these words their own (and thus new) by responding to the question.

The resulting voices collected here are diverse. While some responses explore newness as the embodiment of growth—in the artists' use of material and conceptual explorations—other participants define development in their practice in relation to their environment, understanding of history, and/or marrying of sensibilities. Newness, then, becomes a grouping of ideas, concepts, and histories contextualizing each of these artist's works. Some responses, stemming from disciplined routine and ritual studio practices, point to experiential growth (Joshua Abelow, Franklin Evans), while others reference the recombining of influences and environment (Ali Banisadr) and an elastic temporality stretching from the present (Josephine Halvorson). In addition, several display a self-aware engagement with political, scientific, and mythological histories (LaToya Ruby Frazier, David Brooks, Matthew Day Jackson, respectively). Lastly, other replies locate a socially conscious awareness and reinterpretation of capitalist and material contradictions (Liz Magic Laser, Mary Mattingly, Georgia Sagri).

The idea of newness is extended and challenged by the global reach of information technology. In this process, freshness is achieved by a synthesis of recombined and pre-existing elements. As in cooking, no work of art can be repeated exactly the same way twice. Making art becomes about the foraging of components and the reconstitution of history, influence, and the current moment. In the end, it is evident that we are continually reassembling universal and personal lexicons already used countless times before—but never exactly collected in this particular way—in a context that, until now, has never before existed.

*Note: Several responses have been excerpted for the print version and appear at [www.brooklynrail.org](http://www.brooklynrail.org) in their original lengths.*

## RESPONSES EXCERPTED

It's hard to say exactly what newness is or means. Literally, I suppose it means making something new, which I do all the time. I feel most comfortable when I have many paintings in progress, all over the floor of my studio. I always want new paintings and drawings around. I have a lot of anxiety when I'm in an empty studio. But, I think the anxiety is good because it forces me to make new paintings and drawings again. I'm always going through this process of filling up a room and then emptying it out. I also think newness has something to do with this crazy thing called the Internet. I often think a work of art isn't complete until it has been documented and transformed into a JPEG. I wonder what *that* means.

— Joshua Abelow

Newness for me is about being able to combine and recombine many different elements that interest me into one place. It's a way of trying to make sense of the world around me. This can be a combination of current events, art history, and personal history. In this way, I can function like an antenna—to capture what is in the air or in the subconscious—and then tune it in to my work. It's the juxtaposition of past and present that creates something original.

— Ali Banisadr

To elaborate on any concept of new I look to Charles Darwin as one of our great pioneers in framing a unique, almost timeless, concept of what new is. Darwin establishes newness within the realm of biological and deep time scenarios—the theory of evolution. Within a Darwinian deep time scenario, critical distance is a default and new is the norm. The process of evolution mandates that all living things be in a constant state of flux, existing in perpetual response to relations with other subjects and their environments in the present. They adapt and change form based on those particular responses to other subjects in those particular moments, just before the next moment's arrangements and then the next. The living world does not form along a predetermined plan. In other words, it materializes and takes momentary form by virtue of the infinite reoccurring of singular moments in the ever-marching present.

The living world is a network of unfixed entities floating through ever-shifting circumstances, never anchoring, as the goal is to remain unfixed, providing the ability for adjustment, adaptability, and consequently, life. Stasis is to die. To frame out and separate any individual moment of "new" is to snuff the life out therein, or is, at least, to be deluded that this one moment of new is the new.

Therefore, it must follow that there can never have been an autonomous "new." It is by its very nature beholden to its momentary context, which inevitably must change. To live free of delusion, one only needs to pay attention to the constant, uninterrupted stream of new(s)—anything else leads to a state of stasis. In that sense, the "new" is the norm; it is daily life.

— David Brooks

Newness in my work exists in the eternal conflict between the repetition of the familiar and the hope that process will allow for newness in form, content, and my understanding of the work. The repetition encompasses the routine (two cups of coffee and a semi-conscious stare at the walls, floor, and the stuff packed into the studio). Even in this repetition, the temporal (today versus any prior day) and the actual light, which passes through three north-facing windows and a skylight in the southwest corner of the studio, adjust the experience of my morning stare. It's the same but never quite. Repetition carries over into the repetition of my artistic processes. My hope is that because the processes are open, my work is open to growth and an experience of newness. I am not so interested in originality or novelty, but rather, growth, expansion, and freshness.

— Franklin Evans

Newness in contemporary art could be possible depending on the artist's intentions and clarity.

In photography, new advancement in technologies has pushed formal and aesthetic approaches to the point that photographers do not have to rely on cameras. But in my own practice, the use of the camera is essential in order for me to speak back to the historical significance of social documentary work of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when photographers were committed to addressing social and political progress in the United States. The future of our country is an urgent matter that needs to be addressed and archived. I locate myself within this historical continuum conceptually by documenting how current ideologies surrounding revitalization in Rust Belt cities are impacting our social landscape. The aesthetics of my work are not new, but the concepts and concerns deal with new social and theoretical debates in the 21st century. This balance adds on to the growth and legacy of documentary work.

— LaToya Ruby Frazier

I don't tend to use those five words often, either about my own work or more generally. Painting is an elastic practice that stretches outward from the present: it recalls its past and inspires its future. In my mind, making a painting is by nature always a new experience—sensually, intellectually, in so many other ways. What may be new is that the role of an avant-garde is no longer a cultural imperative, and neither is the narrative of progress. For me, history is not determining, but a resource—not to scavenge callously, but to access consciously.

— Josephine Halvorson

Innovation is at the very core of what we deem important when evaluating (in every sense of the word) contemporary art. Originality is also important in this consideration. Both innovation and originality reside principally in the arena of mythology because so much of the conversation that revolves around these notions includes the “unique genius” practitioner. This mythological creature shares the characteristics of Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians: otherworldly and slipping through time with no apparent history.

History is not a drag or anchor but a foundation on which to build, or a ledge from which to dive into the abyss of the future. In both cases, the colors, forms, languages, and structures are embodied in all of us, informed by our shared history.

The process of innovation begins when finding fluency in the language of one's practice. To innovate, there must be a recognition of the shortcomings in the existing language that requires new verbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions, et cetera. Innovation occurs in the details; it is always slight in relation to human history. Though the leaps are small (more akin to hops), I believe that every small innovation is a reinvention and that there are only new ideas. The “epiphany” is a fallacy—it only occurs when we do not, or are not able to, pay enough attention to the slow progress of our ideas and engagement with our environment.

— Matthew Day Jackson

The demand for the new is a double-edged sword: On the one hand, it places the artist at the whim of a somewhat sinister dimension of consumerism, and on the other hand, I am disappointed by art that lacks the ambition to innovate the conversation. An artwork is never inherently new, but we can strive to break down concepts and methods, to digest and reconstitute them anew. Most recently I have been looking to the journalist as a role model of someone who insinuates themselves in an ongoing dialogue between the media and the public. My idealized model of the journalist I'd like to emulate is someone whose commentary takes up pre-existing terms to offer a new perspective that has the potential to impact the situation at hand.

— Liz Magic Laser

Utilizing recording devices and tools of dissemination such as photography and video, I first invent and intervene with sculptural forms to facilitate the story I need to tell. By interceding in urban or rural space with itinerant, architectural sculptures created to move through it, I'm commanding a larger narrative around them by organizing people to inhabit them, working with officials for permits, and barter-partners for necessities. The sculptures have a life-cycle and take on a life of their own as a journeying, living experiment for inhabitants whose experience is dependent on chance circumstances, interactions, and the vagaries of daily life. Using forms and imagery that dominate our lexicon of particular times and places, I'm re-examining and reinserting the perceived meanings into a continual construction of a present and building of multiple futures.

Through these drifting stories I'm asking: Can there be instances situated far enough outside of the larger apparatus of standardization and commodification that instead attract and repulse, through narratives about communal spaces, while bringing people together to grapple with their presence? I use art to contend with political, economic, and environmental circumstances and to work out proposals for improving human coexistence. Newness, which has for a while been directly in tandem with marketing new products to people across the world, may be less important than learning from multiple pasts to inform possible presents and futures. Exceptional thought naturally grows out of a combination of perspectives and a reexamination of narratives that inform through multiple interpretations.

— Mary Mattingly

If newness is that which we are seeking, then the changes we are part of alter only the images surrounding us. Our actions will be merely a desire to transform physical, material representations. It seems, though, that this is not the deeper and urgent motivation of the current social uprisings and political changes. The term I would like to use is *nownness* rather than newness. *Nownness*, for me, is the political responsibility that each one of us seeks for him/herself and for all when we meet in the public sphere. It is presence, commitment to the events of the moment. It is the environments we create with our bodies when we gather to share ideas, intellectual and material resources, and change our lives by actions and not by choosing mediators. It is when we actively demand rights, such as the freedom to assemble, without waiting from power, that the political and economic elites acknowledge those rights and give them to us. We take that which is already ours.

It is by the effort for *nownness* that we are taking power. The mass media and the sterilized academic scenes analyze the social struggles and the cultural changes only as a desire for newness. They don't understand that without drastic participation—each one with different capacities, in the physical and virtual spaces of interaction, exchange, and production—that we cannot eliminate inequality, social polarizations, and the idea of private property, which are the call of *nownness*; there are many moments of *nownness*, and they are new as the new of the now.

— Georgia Sagri