

BECOMING PAST  
HISTORY IN  
CONTEMPORARY  
ART

*Jane Blocker*



University of Minnesota Press  
Minneapolis | London

# HISTORY AS PROSTHESIS

*History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the now.*

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

## **The Problem of the Contemporary**

To be a historian of contemporary art is to work in a rather challenging and uncomfortable profession. First, no one can really agree on what we’re talking about when we use the term *contemporary*, a word that develops etymologically from *tempus* and yet yields little understanding of time. *Current, recent, new, up-to-date, modern, now, present, on the horizon*—*contemporary*’s synonyms are as numerous as they are vague. Second, whatever the contemporary is, it’s clear there’s way too much of it. Terry Smith nicely explains the unique obstacles set in the way of the contemporary art historian when he writes: “Look around you. Contemporary art is most—why not all?—of the art that is being made now. It cannot be subject to generalization and has overwhelmed art history; it is simply, totally contemporaneous.”<sup>1</sup> The spatial spread of the global contemporary overwhelms because there is no end of the “now” in sight.

As a consequence of that temporal and spatial flood, we attempt to erect levees, taxonomic sandbags to divert some of it elsewhere, but we’re not really sure where the dams should go. What constitutes “the now” as a period designation? The problem with the contemporary is that, inasmuch as its temporal parameters relate to an individual’s

lifetime (my contemporary is decidedly different from my students'), it is indexical, a fugitive, a shifter in Roman Jakobson's sense. Richard Meyer, in his recent book *What Was Contemporary Art?*,<sup>2</sup> describes the surprise felt by many middle-aged academics when he realizes that "rather than referring to art since 1945, art since 1960, or even art since 1970 [what are for us and our generation of art historians the logical moment from which the contemporary can be said to have embarked], 'contemporary' meant to [my students] the work of artists exhibiting today and in the immediate past."<sup>3</sup> I definitely feel his pain. The contemporary, of course, skews to a younger demographic. More contentious than any other historical period designation, the meaning of "contemporary" is only discernible in the specific context of its utterance and only for the specific audience it is hailing at any given moment.

Moreover, as soon as the number of years to which one can apply that name expands to sixty or seventy, its descriptive force is significantly diminished.<sup>4</sup> This is the problem with which Amelia Jones wrestles in her introduction to a survey textbook on contemporary art since 1945. "How can what is defined as *in existence now*—the contemporary—be written into (a) history? Is the notion of 'contemporary art history' or a 'history of contemporary art,'" she asks, "a contradiction in terms?" The challenge, she goes on to explain, is to explore "the complexities both of contemporary art as a now 'historical' phenomenon (as the years between 'now' and 1945 expand in number) and of contemporary art as potentially the cutting edge of what people calling themselves artists (or understood by others as such) are making and doing in this increasingly complex and globalized economy of cultural practices."<sup>5</sup> The contemporary, Jones suggests, flows in two directions at once: back toward history in the past tense and forward toward the cutting edge in the present progressive.

Not only is it a rather elusive category, but the slipperiness of the contemporary also causes actual panic. The charges read against it at academic conferences, in books and journals, and in the halls of art history departments are lengthy (I've heard them all): it isn't serious enough or distant enough in the past to warrant historical inquiry; we are too chummy with it and lose our objectivity; it blurs the distinctions between history and art criticism; it can't be researched because

there is no archive; it examines only that which is currently fashionable; it is self-involved; it is not all that new; it is an academic subfield that lacks rigor and is merely popular.<sup>6</sup> I believe that such claims are largely a manifestation of a profound lack of understanding of the contemporary's complex ontology and a certain level of denial about the degree to which other historical periods are equally plagued by subjectivity and self-involvement. To accuse the contemporary of being fashionable or popular is tautological; it is simply to accuse it of being contemporary. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his small essay on the topic, explains that the contemporary, like fashion, "can be defined as the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity," what he calls *dys-chrony*.<sup>7</sup> Like a sun always in the process of setting, the contemporary dips toward but never fully crosses the imaginary horizon between the present and the past, thus it feels too close, too personal, too subjective to be taken seriously as history. As such, however, it also makes evident the arbitrariness of all historical time and the imaginary and purely conventional nature of any historical distance that scholars deem to be sufficient.

Moreover, it is important to note that scholars' unease with this *dys-chrony* manifests itself in the dismissive rhetoric they use to describe the contemporary, a rhetoric that is very often cast in generational terms. That is, the contemporary is personified as an adolescent and associated with the indiscretions of youth—it is lazy, narcissistic, capricious, puerile, superficial, romantic, and unaware that previous time periods were young once too. Thus it must be re-proached, disciplined, and encouraged to mature. Although it is clear that Meyer does not necessarily share all of these views, his caution to the contemporary reads in similarly paternal terms. "We may . . . have developed too much love for the new and now," he counsels as though he were talking about a lovesick teenager, "while retaining too little for the old and then."<sup>8</sup> That paternalism, the close and yet alienated relation between symbolic fathers and their symbolic children, between the becoming past and the present, is, I argue, endemic to the contemporary (this indeed will be the subject of later chapters).

Even if we could sort out the timing, bridge the generation gap, and fix some date sufficiently far back to bear the weight of historicist gravitas (1960 to the present, say), and even if we could limit the

geographic reach (maybe exclude some of the more remote places—whatever those are), we would have dealt only with the term’s material definition, and of course at some point even that would have to be adjusted as the future continues to arrive. The other, much more interesting problem, to which I have already alluded, is the contemporary as a contradictory operation, a confounding mechanism, and a paradoxical logic. Agamben describes the complex temporal contortions to which the contemporary historian is subject when he writes: “The time of fashion [the time of the contemporary] . . . constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is also always too late. It always takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a ‘not yet’ and a ‘no more.’”<sup>9</sup> As soon as one names the moment of the immediate present “contemporary,” one performatively produces that moment as now and simultaneously ushers it into the past. The name discursively recognizes that moment in already familiar terms, situates it and lays it aside with other contemporary moments now gone, manages it with a retrospective gaze. Contemporariness, Agamben avers, “is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.*”<sup>10</sup> The contemporary peculiarly announces itself as “of its time,” close enough to breathe down time’s neck, but also, as a result, to be tripped up by time, to fall out of step with it.

Connected and separated at once, looking forward while turning back, gliding into the future while standing awkwardly in the past, the historian of the contemporary flails about and falters. This is the humorous balletic spectacle I imagine artist Tino Sehgal was thinking of when he created his work *This Is So Contemporary* (2005), in which he trained museum guards periodically to dance about the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale while singing “This is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary.” “The dance,” as curator and critic Francesco Bonami describes it, “is very simple, nothing elaborate, as if the guards were dancing among friends in a disco.”<sup>11</sup> Sehgal does not allow photo or video documentation of his work, but the few bootleg images of the performance one finds on the Internet show it to have been a rather awkward affair. Not only is the dance rather silly and the song amateurish, but also, as soon as the work is proclaimed

to be “so contemporary,” it is utterly uncontemporary, downright old-fashioned. What is more, the work is now, as I write this, nearly a decade old (it will be older still by the time you read this). To paraphrase Agamben, the locution “I am in this instant contemporary” is contradictory, because the moment in which the subject pronounces it, he is already no longer contemporary.<sup>12</sup> Ridiculously, this is the song and dance that my book seeks to perform, the untenable moment it seeks to occupy. Even worse, I am trying to watch myself as I perform it.

## **Pathology**

This kind of self-awareness is common in scholarship on the contemporary, which is obliged to talk about the present moment while at the same time analyzing why that moment makes talking about it so difficult. By all accounts, there is something very wrong with the present, and it seems to have to do with some crisis, some pathology, in memory or history, or both. Many scholars (such as Michel de Certeau, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Carolyn Steedman, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Andreas Huyssen, and Pierre Nora) have attempted repeatedly over the last forty or more years to diagnose this affliction. Kerwin Lee Klein names the problem the “memory industry” and dates its origins to the early 1980s (a decade that, for some, coincides with the start of what we call the contemporary as a historical period) with the publication of Pierre Nora’s “Between Memory and History.”<sup>13</sup>

Nora, reversing the centuries-long philosophical tradition of repudiating memory and praising history, or the tendency among professional historians since the nineteenth century to consider history a matter of steely masculine objectivity and memory as unreliably feminine, asserts that we are lamentably experiencing a simultaneous loss of memory and an excess of history; the loss of the real and of experience at the hands of representation; the loss of a premodern mode of being in relation to instrumentalized historicism. “No society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own,” he writes.

Not only by volume, not only by new technical means of reproduction and preservation, but also by its superstitious esteem, by its veneration of the trace. Even as traditional memory

disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to furnish some proof to who knows what tribunal of history.<sup>14</sup>

Nora describes contemporary archivization as an obsessive-compulsive reaction against technological advancements. Interestingly, the problem that seems to plague (and that Nora takes to be a unique feature of) his own contemporary (the late 1980s) was already the subject of a similar lament by Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1870s. In his essay “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” Nietzsche describes his own observations as “unfashionable” because they “attempt to understand something in which our age justifiably takes pride—namely, its historical cultivation—as a detriment, an infirmity, a deficiency of the age, and furthermore, because I am even of the opinion that all of us suffer from a debilitating historical fever and that we at the very least need to recognize that we suffer from it.”<sup>15</sup> The culture’s fervid relationship with history, which Nietzsche describes as indicative of the late nineteenth century, seems to have grown more scarlet in the digital age.

Although Andreas Huyssen deploys his terminology differently from Nora (for him, memory and history are not antagonists but nearly synonymous), he arrives at a similar diagnosis. He calls the contemporary condition a “memory boom” and argues that on one hand we are surrounded by mnemonic technologies, memorials, and museums, while on the other we feel an overwhelming sense of historical crisis, the threat of forgetting.<sup>16</sup> “Historical memory today is not what it used to be,” he warns. “It used to mark the relation of a community or a nation to its past, but the boundary between past and present used to be stronger and more stable than it appears to be today.”<sup>17</sup> This shift is, for Huyssen, the sign of a crisis in temporality brought on by high-tech information systems, global capital, museal culture,<sup>18</sup> and the overwhelming expansion of media. The contemporary, *this* Now, is characterized by seemingly infinite amnesia brought about by seemingly infinite memory (such as the decision by the Library of Congress in 2010 to archive every electronic tweet since the microblogging site Twitter was established in 2006). As the

curators of a 2009 exhibition titled *Lost and Found: Crisis of Memory in Contemporary Art* write: “No other period was as obsessed with the idea of memory as we are: it invades our daily lives, recalling our anxious need to continuously retain a huge amount of information; but it also shapes our biggest fears and worries. How many times a day do we feel the need to ‘save’ something: a phone number, a word document, an email, an mp3 piece, or any other ‘file?’”<sup>19</sup>

To write about the contemporary (any contemporary) is difficult enough, but to write about *this* contemporary, when temporality itself has become the subject of inquiry and spirited debate, significantly complicates matters. “I would argue that our obsessions with memory function as a reaction formation against the accelerating technical processes that are transforming our *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) in quite distinct ways,” Huyssen writes.

Memory . . . represents the attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload.<sup>20</sup>

He argues that excess memory is a symptom of our panicked attempts to slow down, to resist, to recover, to claim, to drop an anchor in a chaotic storm of new media. In the eye of that storm, he tells us, lies the dissolution of time and the nonsynchronous. *Huyssen’s* contemporary, the period that he claims manifests what he terms this “sense of crisis” (he was writing in the early nineties), is situated in a former future, the end of the twentieth century on the eve of the new millennium.

On one hand, what he describes seems only to have gotten worse a decade or more into the globalized and techno-driven twenty-first century (Nicolas Bourriaud’s cumbersome terms “altermodern” and “heterochronical,” Agamben’s “dys-chrony,” and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “heterotemporal” are symptomatic of this),<sup>21</sup> while on the other, it seems important to point out, reports of a similar crisis occur at least half a century further back in time to a point just *before* the current



information age. Writing in 1945, engineer Vannevar Bush considered new technologies to be the solution to the crisis of memory rather than its cause. In his famous article “As We May Think” he argues that technology (he proposes the Memex, a protoccomputer) must be brought to bear on the problem of the *then* contemporary researcher’s limited memory in the face of information overload. “There is a growing mountain of research,” he complains. “But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down today as specialization extends. The investigator is staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers—conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear.”<sup>22</sup> Bush is disjoined from his *own* contemporary—roughly the period surrounding World War II—to the degree that he anticipates a future in which machines will help organize and store the mountains of information in which his present is buried. He seems presciently to describe a twenty-first-century phenomenon: the ungraspable nature of the information age and the forgetfulness and temporal disorientation it induces.

At the same time, however, to use Agamben’s phrase, even Bush “arrives too late” for the past. He indulges in anachronism by describing as present something that can be just as easily located in a former age, something from the previous century. For the feeling he describes as so contemporary—being bogged down by commerce and technology and staggered by the speed of life—may be said to coincide just as much with nineteenth-century modernity’s disillusionment with the industrial age as with the Cold War or millennial eras. Thus we might see Nietzsche, Bush, and Huyssen as engaged in an awkward dance called “This Is So Contemporary,” a repeated claiming of temporal disorientation as uniquely characteristic of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century presentness. It is surely no coincidence that this contradictory state of affairs, this pathological condition, has developed at precisely the same moments in which there have been wholesale reexaminations of historical method (for example, Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Hayden White, Dipesh Chakrabarty), contentious debates within the academy, and society at large, about history’s abuses and lapses, truths and lies; historians’ biases and privileges; the purpose and function of the past.<sup>23</sup>

What all that historiographic reexamination suggests is that

history has become, as I will explain more fully in chapter 1, an impossible problem. It is impossible, though, not for the reasons Huyssen and Nora lay out (or not solely for those reasons), not because of epic historical events or trends such as the development of new communications technologies and the resulting archival compulsion. Rather, its impossibility is a consequence of how those events or trends are examined and understood—that is, it may have to do more with the misapplication of historical methods in the present that are mistakenly and stubbornly retained from the past. Such methods privilege stable and coherent origins (even as we question how we understand historical agency, cultural interaction, and the causes of historical change) that consider the past as a fixed ideal to which the historian must return and from which she cannot deviate (even as we pay more attention to the inherent biases and subjectivities of the historian), that adopt linear temporalities (even as our sense of time is undone by new technologies and scientific discoveries), and that enforce the rigid dichotomy between the real and representation (even as we debate how reality is itself a cultural product).

One example of this can be seen where Huyssen describes what he calls the “current transformation of temporal experience,” that is, a profound change in the world, which has jammed or radically altered our natural reception of temporal information. Rather than see temporal experience as subject to interference from specific historical conditions, and time itself as linear, other scholars, such as neuroscientist David Eagleman, describe a revolutionary transformation in our understanding of how the brain experiences (and possibly always has experienced) temporality. Pronouncing time a “rubbery thing,” Eagleman, inspired by the neurobiological experiments into the human perception of time undertaken by physiologist Benjamin Libet in the 1970s, makes the remarkable claim that there is an infinitesimally small yet extremely significant temporal lag between the moment when we experience something and the moment we recognize it as such.<sup>24</sup> During that lag, the brain is assembling all the data of experience into a coherent order, a kind of instantaneous historical narrative, and through that narrative it constructs what we understand reality to be. “We are not conscious of the actual moment of the present,” Libet remarks in tacit agreement with Agamben. “We are

always a little late.”<sup>25</sup> Contemporary reality is thus, from the neurobiological perspective, “a tape-delayed broadcast.”<sup>26</sup> As though he were responding to Huyssen’s and Nora’s assertions about the contemporary preoccupation with memory, Eagleman claims: “Living in the past may seem like a disadvantage, but it’s a cost that the brain is willing to pay. It’s trying to put together the best possible story about what’s going on in the world, and that takes time.”<sup>27</sup> What this means is that, despite some historians’ concerns that the contemporary simply cannot be historicized, that history as such cannot begin until an appropriate space of time (fifty or more years, for example) has elapsed, biologically speaking, we are always already living in historical consciousness.

The implications of this fact were made evident to me early on in my career when I was conducting dissertation research on Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta, who had been killed only six years before I began my doctoral studies. At that time, the published literature on the artist’s work consisted only of two small exhibition catalogs from one-person shows, a few catalogs from group shows, and a handful of newspaper articles and exhibition reviews. Since Mendieta made primarily ephemeral works of earth and body art, there was an archive of slides, photographs, and Super 8 films documenting that work, as well as some sculptural objects, but much of the archive had not yet been organized. It was with some trepidation that I pursued that research topic, because, intimidated as I was at the time by the prevailing art historical view of contemporaneity, I feared that it was not sufficiently historical. To my amazement, I discovered that despite these concerns Mendieta had *already been historicized*, that (like the human brain’s efforts to organize sense perception) her life and work had been fitted into a narrative almost as quickly as it had been experienced. It wasn’t that I arrived too early on the scene, as Meyer and others might fear, but that I arrived too late. The contemporary, as much as we may want to consider it otherwise, is being made history as it happens (which returns us to Agamben’s notion of disjuncture and anachronism). The important question is not whether there is (or should be) contemporary art history, but how. And “how” is the primary concern of this book.

## Prosthesis

Artist Dario Robleto has said that the architectural structures in and around which his works are displayed (handmade frames, cabinets, tables, boxes, shelves, drawers, and plinths)—whether inspired by the museum vitrine or pedestal, the commercial display case or shop-window—are “the stage the artwork is standing on while it performs its song.”<sup>28</sup> One could describe an introduction as a similar type of structure—the pedestal on which the book stands, the frame or stanchion that circumscribes and draws attention to the ideas it contains. The miniature stage on which this book is propped, the inert object that holds it up for view, is the prosthesis, the concept and operation of the prosthetic. And the song that this book keeps trying to sing while it stands uncomfortably on its wooden leg is the one written by Sehgal, “This Is So Contemporary.” Intentionally silly, ironic, but also deeply complex, the song is (in keeping with Robleto’s sensibilities) a ballad in which the singer laments the heartbreak that the very word *contemporary* has created. She tries to understand the temporal disjunctions, the anachronistic contortions in which the historian is caught.

With its song and dance, this book tries to be a history of the contemporary (it tells stories about the recent past of contemporary artists, including Dario Robleto, Matthew Buckingham, Steve McQueen, Ross McElwee, and the performance group Goat Island) while at the same time trying to understand precisely *how* to be a history of the contemporary. It wants to know how it is doing history even as it’s doing it; therefore, like Robleto, it has to think about its own apparatuses, to think about the stage on which it stands. Thus it must begin by articulating what is meant by the prosthesis.

From Robleto’s perspective, the rather grim task of carving for oneself a prosthetic limb serves as a powerful image of the most sincere form of art making. In the Civil War era (a period Robleto has studied seriously), infamous for an extraordinarily high number of surgical amputations, soldiers routinely and pragmatically set about the task of making their own artificial arms and legs. “If you can just get your head around how strange that would be,” he remarks in wonderment, “to remake your own body yourself with a piece of wood and

a knife.”<sup>29</sup> Robleto has investigated the idea of the prosthetic limb in a few of his pieces, most powerfully in *The Creative Potential of Disease* (2004), in which he took an antique doll, originally handcrafted by a convalescing Civil War soldier, and sculpted a replacement leg for it out of femur bone dust and prosthetic alginate (a chemical polymer used in dentistry and medicine to cast body parts). The ragged doll, with its lumpy head crudely carved out of vegetable ivory, its glass-bead eyes with dabs of black paint forming misaligned pupils, its threadbare pant legs and fraying coat sleeves, its tiny scabbard made of rolled paper, is the very image of fragility (Figure 1). Its tiny new leg (a white bone leg designed to replace a lost doll leg made to stand for a human leg) peeks out from beneath a patch of new fabric that Robleto has stitched with white surgical thread to one of its tattered and soiled royal blue pant cuffs (Figure 2).

The doll is mounted on a dark burgundy fabric with a paisley pattern and set within a facsimile of a rectangular nineteenth-century picture frame, its corners decorated with simple flowers (perhaps dogwood blossoms) in bas relief, and its oval opening encircled by a sculpted twig motif. The battered frame, which is cracked in the lower right corner and missing a piece along the left side, was not carved in wood as its model likely was but was cast from melted shrapnel and bullet lead. A sepia-tone patina has been applied to it with a concoction of polyester resin and rust, which imparts an antique appearance.

The Union soldier who made the doll was an amateur artist of astonishing bravery, one who sought to heal his physical and psychological wounds through self-representation, to make a whole body stand as symbolic surrogate for a broken one. Robleto’s obvious affection for this work of folk art and for the soldier’s efforts in crafting it blooms in light of his aesthetic philosophy. In an interview with curator Ian Berry, he explains: “The thing I love about folk medicine is that it’s intimately tied to magic and belief—or to the placebo effect, which is the way contemporary science would explain it. You know how your grandmother gives you a spoon full of some concoction that has no real scientific base to it, but it has some real effect? I love the idea that art can somehow be the medicine on the spoon.”<sup>30</sup> Art is by definition a bit of fakery; the artist is a snake oil salesman, a flim-flam man, a forger, or, more quaintly, a well-meaning grandmother.

All such characters produce unguents and tinctures, the ultimate efficacy of which is a measure of belief more than of science. Robleto marvels at the soldier's crafting of the doll as an act of faith, of belief in the very real effects of simulation, the material consequences of affect. He sees art as prosthetic, as a treatment for the pathologies of history.

Robleto's effort to repair the Civil War doll is a manifestation of the vertiginous queasiness of the contemporary, the hypersensitivity toward and awareness of the past. "I believe my role as an artist is very much like a historian," he has said, a historian whose purpose is to find "these alternative roads of history that tell the same story but in a very different way. They're often things that have been forgotten in time or that have never really been investigated thoroughly."<sup>31</sup> More than simply a revisionist or a researcher following an untrodden path, however, in *The Creative Potential of Disease* the historian is a performer whose work takes the form of an echo, a repetition, of the soldier's original historical act. The artist-historian attempts to repair, to make whole, not just the material integrity of the doll itself but also a gesture from the past. About this work Robleto asks: "Can art finish something that never got finished? Can creative gestures that began at some distant point in the past be handed down like a baton through time and picked up, and can each generation contribute to that action?"<sup>32</sup>

His reference to gestures and actions places Robleto squarely within recent discussions taking place primarily among performance studies scholars about the degree to which the past can be archived in the body, history known through reenactment. Like the artist, scholars such as Joseph Roach, Diana Taylor, Rebecca Schneider, and David Román understand performative reenactment as a crucial form of historical remembrance and as an important tool for those whose pasts are excluded from or do not fit neatly within the traditional archive. As Schneider asserts:

Recurrence, of course, contests tightly stitched Enlightenment claims to the forward-driven linearity of temporality, the continuity of time, and challenges, as well, an attitude toward death as necessarily irrecoverable loss. There is, instead, a certain



FIGURE 1. Dario Robleto, *The Creative Potential of Disease*, 2004. A self-portrait doll made by a Civil War Union soldier amputee while recovering in the hospital, mended and repaired with a modern-day surgeon's surgical needle and thread, new pant leg material made from a modern-day soldier's uniform, cast leg made from femur bone and prosthetic alginate treated with *Balm of a Thousand Foreign Fields*, vegetable ivory, collagen, melted shrapnel and bullet lead, cold-cast steel and zinc, polyester resin, rust. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

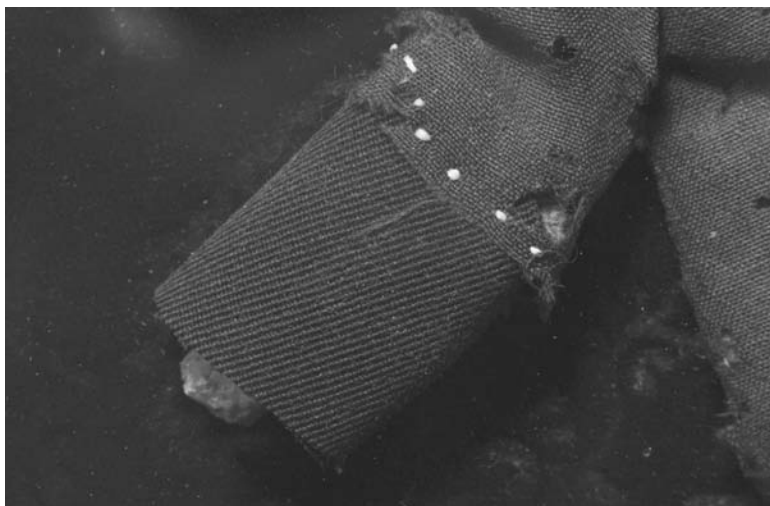


FIGURE 2. Dario Robleto, *The Creative Potential of Disease* (detail), 2004. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

superabundance to reenactment, like a run-on sentence, as if an event in time, refusing to be fully or finally “over” or “gone” or “complete” pulses with a kind of living afterlife in an ecstasy of variables, a million insistent if recalcitrant possibilities for return (doubling as possibilities for error). The zillion details of the act of interpretation in an act of live repetition make the pastness of the past both palpable and a very *present* matter.<sup>33</sup>

Smashing the compass of time’s supposed linearity and disorienting its sense of direction, performative reenactment revives what was thought to be lost, delights in the superabundance of detail, which it plays and replays in endless variation. Robleto’s performance of repetition means that the soldier’s sincere act of self-fashioning, the gesture of sewing a little doll or carving a substitute leg “with a piece of wood and a knife,” is neither over nor gone. It is, as Schneider says, a very present matter.

This is just one sense in which I mean the word *prosthesis* in this book. A prosthesis is, simply put, something we craft to stand in place of something else that is lost, a history, for example, measured, shaped, carved, and polished like a wooden leg and put in place of an



amputated past.<sup>34</sup> More broadly, it might include a representation of something else (a photograph, archived text, or written narrative), a material artifact meant to spur a memory (an album, a lock of hair, a tattered doll), commemorative actions or gestures of both the intentional (staged reenactments) and unintentional variety (the quotidian acts and repetitions that Richard Schechner calls “twice-behaved behavior”).<sup>35</sup> From the Greek meaning the act of placing something after or the act of putting or adding, *prosthesis* refers all at once to material objects, bodies, and words.<sup>36</sup>

Jacques Derrida discusses the prosthetic effect of the written word in his long essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” which performs a close reading of the *Phaedrus* to understand how Western metaphysics was shaped by Plato’s suspicion about writing as inherently false, a mere substitute for the spoken word, and thus evidence only of the speaker’s absence. Taking his cue from Plato’s “brief evocation of Pharmacia at the beginning of the *Phaedrus*,” Derrida explains that writing is a *pharmakon*, a drug that is both poison and cure. Writing is a spur to memory, a means of history, and yet it promotes forgetting, destroys the actual, seduces and corrupts. “What Plato is attacking,” he writes, “is not simply recourse to memory but, within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ; the perversion that consists of replacing a limb by a thing, here substituting the passive, mechanical ‘by-heart’ for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present.”<sup>37</sup> History is thus always a prosthetic act of substitution, and, as such, it is (as Derrida would say) always already contaminated.

This book is not simply *about* the prosthesis; it is prosthetic. Its words stand in place of speech, its stories prop up events and experiences, its illustrations substitute for actual artworks, and as an object it tries to perform in lieu of the contemporary until such time as we know what the contemporary is (or was). At the same time, however, I want it to be active and alive rather than passive or mechanical. If it must set things in place of absent others, let those things be unexpected—not just a carved bit of wood for a leg, but prostheses made of songs, photographs, effigies, ideas, games, and gags. Emotional pain, nostalgia, racism, torture, and love all find their substitutes so that we might know them, but let nothing here be known by-heart.

Later, in his book *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida cites a meaning of the word *prosthesis* now fallen into disuse, which refers to the addition of a letter or syllable at the beginning of a word. Referring to the word's etymological link to "prosody" or the composition of verse, he uses it to refer to language itself. With regard to French, in a sense his native tongue, which was imposed on him as a Maghrebian Jew, he says paradoxically, "I only have one language; it is not mine."<sup>38</sup> This alien tongue, as bruising and uncomfortable and yet integral and necessary as a wooden leg, produces what he calls a "handicapped memory," a sense of the past that cannot but be hobbled.<sup>39</sup> I will have more to say about the specific background and features of Derrida's analysis in the first chapter, but for now his work serves as an ethical conscience for my deployment of the prosthetic. His work is a reminder that, if we are going to think of history as a prosthesis, we must understand the circumstances of its coming into being (Who crafted it? To what body has it been attached? By what force?) and recognize its inherent limitations and political as well as physical discomforts.

This is something Robleto acknowledges and seeks to address in his sculpture. He is concerned about the places where old and new, past and present, original and copy, dead and living connect, and he is cognizant that these sites of connection are always inherently painful, that the prosthesis (whether wooden leg or imposed language, memento or text) contuses and aches.<sup>40</sup> In other words, his work is, as I've said, a medicine prescribed for the pathology of history, but the medicine itself cannot help but produce what Robleto calls "historical trauma," and thus *The Creative Potential of Disease* also contains a balm concocted by the artist and applied to the place where the prosthetic limb is attached. This is a gesture that the artist-historian makes in acknowledgment of his own role in communicating (in at least two senses) history's pathologies.

Prosthesis, as I use it here, and this is crucial, is simultaneously historical (the placing after) and artistic (the representation of one by another). Inasmuch as it involves tactics of making and fashioning, to understand it I must watch artists such as Robleto closely. I inspect his little sculpture to learn how to craft a history about the pathology of history—its losses, phantoms, and delusions. I notice

the white thread on the miniature blue trouser leg, the way that the new patch and the old fabric aren't exactly the same color or the same weave. This is not the work of restoration, a self-concealing labor that finds some pure origin point for an object (or an event) and seamlessly, flawlessly puts it back the way it was. Rather, it is an amalgam that announces itself as such, that makes evident the labor of repair, that exults in anachronism (the ivory and the alginate, the moth-eaten broadcloth and the crisp serge, the bullet lead and the polyester resin). As Michel Foucault remarks, "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."<sup>41</sup> Neither seduced by origins nor driven by the telos, Robleto's is a hand-me-down history, one that gets passed along to and remade by each generation.

The approaches to history by which I am most captivated are all in evidence in this miniature figure, pathetic and moth-eaten, simultaneously rescued and destroyed in the name of art. As I've said, Robleto's emphasis on finishing something that never got finished, carrying forward a gesture from the past, suggests that fundamental to this historical methodology is reenactment, the redoing or repetition of events of the past in the present. Such a principle undermines linear historical temporalities and asserts a view of history in which the past is an always already told and always already repeated story. In addition, for Robleto, the work of repair is synonymous with the work of history, which inherently requires the sewing together of materials from different times so that present and past are imbricated rather than sequential.

His stitching of a pant leg or sculpting of a tiny bone also recalls Georges Didi-Huberman's concern for the continual tearing and mending of knowledge, the unraveling and reknitting of the net. In his study of the discipline of art history, Didi-Huberman describes "the veil that makes thought possible and the rend that makes thought impossible."<sup>42</sup> The veil is that device that shields enough of vision to allow us to see, to focus on the object of our attention. The rend or tear gives us a glimpse of what is beyond our knowing, the too much of seeing. "Such are the stakes," he remarks, "to know, but also to think not-knowledge when it unravels the nets of knowledge."<sup>43</sup>

Viewers often express concern about some of Robleto's seem-

ingly more destructive practices, such as taking a historical artifact like this doll and using it in his art, melting down bullets from actual battlefields, melting down or tearing apart old vinyl records, and soaking the ink out of handwritten letters dating to the Civil War (a concern I will discuss in greater detail in the final chapter). “I think that if you want to really get into what I’m doing,” he says in reply, “you have to let go of a few assumptions, the main one being that alteration equals destruction. . . . I’m drawing on the idea that alteration equals creation. . . . What’s more interesting, a lost and dusty love letter of two lovers long gone and forever outside of public view and imagination, or the artistic reanimation of new life into that letter’s molecules that makes it relevant to us today?”<sup>44</sup> In the defense of his practice, the artist asserts a method I refer to as “hollowing out,” the taking of some artifact of the past (not only the material object, but gesture, song, word, story) and hollowing out its content so as to fill it with something else, something from another period entirely. I will have more to say about the ethics of this practice later on, but for the moment, I simply want to emphasize Robleto’s positive appraisal of the work of alteration, imagination, and creation.

Robleto is of course not the only artist in recent years to engage in history. The significant number of major contemporary art exhibitions that have been organized around this topic testify to its importance: *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2014), *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance* (Guggenheim, New York, 2010), *Yesterday Will Be Better* (Aarau, Germany, 2010), *Lost and Found* (Milan, 2009), *Liquid Archives: Notes on Relations, Ruptures, and Silences* (Munich, 2009), *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York, 2008), *The Sweet Burnt Smell of History* (Panama, 2008), *Not Quite How I Remember It* (Toronto, 2008), *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History* (Mass MoCA, 2007), *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Reenactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance* (Dortmund, Germany, 2005), and the exhibition that seemed to many to embody this trend, Marina Abramović’s famous redoing of five canonical performance pieces from the 1960s and ’70s titled *Seven Easy Pieces* (Guggenheim, New York, 2005).

In an article about the artist Matthew Buckingham for the journal *October*, Mark Godfrey contends that historical representation is the concern of a growing number of contemporary artists who take on the role of historians in their work. (In this he follows Hal Foster, whose article “An Archival Impulse” appeared in 2004.)<sup>45</sup> In addition to examining Buckingham’s art, Godfrey discusses a long list of artist-historians such as Mark Dion, Sam Durant, Renée Green, Fred Wilson, Pierre Huyghe, Steve McQueen, and Walid Raad. “Historical research and representation appear central to contemporary art,” he writes. “There are an increasing number of artists whose practice starts with research in archives.”<sup>46</sup> Along with the mimicry of archival structures and practices, Godfrey enumerates a variety of historiographic approaches taken by artists, such as the referencing of specific locations in which significant historical events took place, the examination of the intersection between the artist’s personal experiences and bygone events, the critique of the commodification of the past, and the performative reenactment of historical occurrences.

Whereas Godfrey’s purpose is to describe and analyze these and other strategies as they appear in an individual artist’s work, the goal of the present volume is of a somewhat different sort. I am not interested in noting a trend in contemporary artistic practice, in defining the parameters of that trend and listing examples of it. Foster already did this when he observed and defined what he calls the “archival impulse at work internationally in contemporary art.”<sup>47</sup> Rather than look at art as its object of study (as is commonly done), something to which the art historian brings a certain amount of expertise and upon which she exercises certain ways of knowing, but at the same time something that does not bear upon her own practice, this book will ask how the work of the artist implicates and interrogates the critic or historian. It asks how to emulate the artist-historian, how to do history differently. In other words, rather than trend spotting, my work here wonders out loud about what it would mean to take these artists’ work seriously *as* history rather than simply as art. What if, for example, instead of calling on Doris Kearns Goodwin to learn about the Civil War, we consulted Kara Walker or Dario Robleto? With the premiere of Steven Spielberg’s film *Lincoln* in 2012, inspired by Goodwin’s biography *Team of Rivals*—a film that she seems enthu-

siastically to have supported, which portrays Lincoln as the black man's hero in quite literally glowing, otherworldly terms—this question becomes more than just a clever conceit.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, the vast majority of art historical scholarship that focuses on the problem of history and its correlate, memory (like Godfrey's and Foster's articles), describes how artists are thinking about the question but is not itself affected by the general crisis in history or by the particular approaches that the artists under examination take.<sup>49</sup> For example, Joan Gibbons, in her book *Contemporary Art and Memory*, offers this perfectly reasonable, but for our purposes limited, explanation of her method:

It seems timely to conduct an overview of the approaches and attitudes that are taken towards memory in contemporary art practices, despite the obvious limitations of surveys (which, after all, have the virtue of leaving room for further study). Indeed, given the amount and variety of attention paid to memory in contemporary art, it is rather surprising that it has been written about only sporadically in relation to particular artists or particular exhibitions. One of my aims in writing this book, therefore, is to bring existing studies together and build on them to form a larger and more comprehensive picture of the varied and numerous forms or roles that memory is given in this arena of cultural practice.<sup>50</sup>

Here Gibbons employs a visual metaphor to describe her work. She is positioned to make an "overview" of events, artists, and works of art arrayed before her. She intends to survey these historical objects and produce a "comprehensive picture." While this is a worthwhile goal and hers is certainly a useful contribution to the literature on the topic, Gibbons does not ask about the role of memory in her own cultural practice; she does not see her own work as itself an act of memory and memorialization. Even in a chapter in which she discusses the work of artists who question the "methods through which knowledge and data, as aspects of memory, are ordered and stored by specialized and authoritative institutions, such as the museum and the archive," she does not consider those artists' work in relation to her own authoritative ordering of knowledge.<sup>51</sup> While it is clear that these

questions lie outside Gibbons's scope, even in those cases (Huysen, for example) where the author's goal is to comment on the broader theoretical problem of how history does and should function, the author usually does not include her own work as an object of study, does not examine his own methods and assumptions. Richard Meyer's book is another important example. Although intelligent and beautifully written, *What Was Contemporary Art?* questions contemporary art history as a subfield precisely because traditional art historical methods cannot always be adapted to it. Throughout his book, Meyer thus reasserts the importance of archival research, close analysis, formal description, and objective distance. My project sets off in a different direction to catch myself in the act of history and to develop new methods, narrative strategies, and art historical models.

To undertake this project means to face a problem—history—the very impossibility of which is a source for creative thought (in the face of its contradictions, we must imagine that it is possible, we must act *as if*). I am aware that there are dangers here, that there are very real stakes in the practice of history and that there is an ethics at work in historical methodologies, training, and expertise. I have examined this question in greater depth in my previous book, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*, which can be thought of as this book's conceptual twin. Whereas the purpose of that book was to examine the witness (of which the historian is a prime example) as a privileged subject position, and to question the assumptions to which that privilege leads, *Becoming Past: History in Contemporary Art* attempts to find new ways for thinking and writing about history. Here I begin from the position that history writing is always a creative act, that we imagine the past whenever we write about it, and that imagination is one of the special provinces of art. "And only when history allows itself to be transformed into a work of art," Nietzsche writes, "into a pure aesthetic structure, can it perhaps retain or even arouse instincts."<sup>52</sup>

In this, my work accords to some degree with that of historian David Lowenthal. I share Lowenthal's simultaneous skepticism about and dedication to history as an academic discipline when he writes that "there can be no certainty that the past ever existed, let alone in the form we now conceive it, but sanity and security require us to be-

lieve that it did.”<sup>53</sup> I also share his interest in imagination as a historiographic tool, though it is clear that he does not take it as seriously as I do. He argues that the difficulties of trying to get into the past, to understand it in its authentic fullness,

seldom deter those entranced by the promise of the past, and whose appetites for thoroughgoing returns are not assuaged by memory, history, or relics. Memories are partial and fleeting, history’s evocations are often unimaginative, many physical remains are decayed or hard to reach or interpret; historical enclaves, whether actual backwaters or contrived reconstructions, seem tame or inauthentic. Thus addicts turn to imaginative voyages that will unlock gates to the past, let them see or roam there at will, and enjoy full-blooded experience of bygone times.<sup>54</sup>

About the imaginative work of what he calls the “tourists” of history, historical “addicts” and “would-be time travelers”—work that includes historical reenactment, science fiction writing, epic poetry, revivalist art practices, and living history—Lowenthal adopts a bemused air. These are people who cannot accept the plain fact that much of the historical past is long gone and inaccessible, or that what does remain of the past is often tedious and decidedly unglamorous.

“We can no more slip back to the past than leap forward to the future,” he declares. “Save in imaginative reconstruction.”<sup>55</sup> By situating imagination as an exception to what he presents as a self-evident truth, Lowenthal places far more negative emphasis on it than I. It is through imaginative reconstruction, I argue, that we *do* slip back to the past and forward into the future. As Schneider suggests, the past is never simply behind us; the future is never simply in front of us. Both categories are, as she delightfully remarks, “sticky.”<sup>56</sup> “Yesterday is forever barred to us,” Lowenthal continues in the same questionable line of thinking; “we have only attenuated memories and fragmentary chronicles of prior experience and can only dream of escaping the confines of the present. But in recent years such nostalgic dreams have become almost habitual, if not epidemic.”<sup>57</sup> Here he sounds a bit like Nora and Huyssen when he characterizes “imaginative reconstruction,” the obsession with the past, as an epidemic. At the same time, however, he recognizes that “we



cannot avoid remaking our heritage, for every act of recognition alters what survives.”<sup>58</sup>

As an art historian, I am most intrigued precisely by the creative voyages that are charted in answer to the contradictions of history, the ways in which history is *always* and by definition a matter of imagination, a matter of remaking. For that reason, I have determined to consult artists on the question of making history. I follow them, watch them work, and see myself implicated in their methods, not because I believe they have all the answers to the question of history’s impossibility (if someone did have the answers, it would no longer be impossible), and certainly not because I believe they are somehow immune to the errors and bias that plague history more generally, but because their work allows me to think creatively about my own practice, to embrace impossibility as potentially generative.

In this book, I examine and attempt to deploy unorthodox historical methodologies that I have witnessed in and distilled from the work of a number of contemporary artists. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. Not only do they often overlap, but they are also primarily a set of diverse strategies for addressing a common concern: for the most part, they seek to disrupt, expand, or reimagine the linear (and often progressive) temporalities on which historical discourse is usually based. In that way, they seek to accommodate the disjuncture and anachronism that are, in Agamben’s view, constitutive of the contemporary, and, simultaneously, they attempt to reckon with our changing understanding of time, the *Now now*. For example, in Robleto’s little doll, repair is a rubric for understanding the work of the historian as an ongoing, nonteleological practice of mending what has been lost, damaged, or worn out in history. This materialist strategy eschews fixed origins; it questions the notion that historical artifacts exist in an ideal state to which they must be safely restored. Repair, in this sense, constitutes not a return but rather an invention on familiar themes. *Reenactment* and *repetition* are two more “re” words on which I rely that describe attempts to see time as “sticky,” to see the past, present, and future as neither distinctly different nor strictly the same. Although, like repair, reenactment and repetition are sometimes thought of as returning to some discrete original, which they attempt to mimic in every detail, I see them as similarly

antilinear, unfaithful to a past that purports to be fully known or fully over with.

These methods have received a lot of scholarly and artistic attention in recent years, but nowhere more complexly and thoughtfully than in Rebecca Schneider's book *Performing Remains*, in which she explains:

I am interested in repetitions, doublings, and the call and response of cross- and inter-authorships. I am interested in the citational "get up" of the before, during, and after of any action *taking place* in or as re-action: the affected effects and after-affects of art/events posed as relative to origin(al)s. I wonder here not only about the "as if" but also about the "what if": what if time (re)turns? What does it *drag* along with it? I am interested in the attempt to literally touch time through the residue of the gesture or the cross-temporality of the pose.<sup>59</sup>

One of the things we learn from Schneider is that repetition and re-enactment are modes of action, forms of doing, and behaviors that, when performed by the historian, can reveal cross-temporal interactions, reverberations, and encumbrances that trouble what we thought we knew about temporal unfolding. Repetition, as she explains in her analysis of Santayana's constantly misquoted phrase ("Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"), is not in fact something we are condemned to do by virtue of mnemonic weakness or error, but rather something that remembering itself demands.<sup>60</sup> In the following pages, we will see that these historiographic strategies, these "re" words, sometimes go by other, no less familiar names, such as *anachronism*, or involve familiar figures such as the stand-in. Or they may make their appearance in other more awkward phrases such as *hollowing out*, *the skip*, *mnemonic deferral*, *temporal dissidence*, and *unending*.

In addition to their rethinking temporality by seeing even disparate historical events as potentially repeating one another and by eliminating progressive models of historical development, repair, repetition, reenactment, and their correlates help us think about how historical knowledge is disseminated outside of standard (and often privileged) sites such as archives, museums, universities, and

libraries. They make it possible to study those who have been excluded from the archive, those whose histories are not to be found there, and create history out of performative actions, oral narratives, and ways of being.

These strategies also allow us to think critically about an array of suspect scholarly habits, such as the ways in which historians, by establishing causality (one event or action causing and therefore presumably preceding another), assume a particular form of time. Inspired by Christine Ross's excellent study *The Past Is the Present; It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, I ask, instead of lining them up neatly, always in train—past, present, and future—what if we could study the future in order to know the past? In addition, these “re” words permit us to see more clearly how we circumscribe our objects of study—by period, by geography, by documented relationships—and too hastily lay to one side that which we deem to be irrelevant. What if instead we indulged in a narrative malfunction and allowed our study of the past to skip, like the skip in a vinyl record, from one track to another, from one past to another? What truths might we discover in the incorrect version of the past? Moreover, these experimental methodologies provide a lens through which to inspect the presumptions we make about different subjects' relationships to their own presents and pasts—one of which is that everyone is equally able to claim an untroubled relation to the then and to the now. With a more prodigious view of time, a more capacious picture of what we mean by the past, might we also begin to question the economy of scarcity in which history operates, its tendency to see historical artifacts as rare, precious, in need of conservation and entombment in the archive? Finally, these strategies may also endow us with ears to hear our own stories, to attend to how we arrive at conclusions, write the endings (happy or sad) of our own narratives.

With these methods in mind, the book's chapters investigate a range of historical problems, such as the difficulty of memory and misremembering, the structure of narrative, the excising of the other from the archive or from our stories about the past, and the relation between documentary and fictional accounts of history. In the first chapter, which thinks in greater detail about repair, repetition, and

hollowing out, I discuss a performance by Goat Island titled *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*. I argue that the group's work provides alternatives to entrenched historical practices and that the group's theory of repair (outlined in the book *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island*) can be productively adapted to the task of history. I discuss different forms of prosthetics, including a bioartificial heart, and examine each for the ways in which it frees history from its belief in fixed origins, linear temporalities, and the strict division between the real and its representation.

The second chapter, which involves repetition and reenactment, considers the historical methodologies manifest in a film by English artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen called *Deadpan* (1997). In the film McQueen repeats a stunt that Buster Keaton performed in his 1928 film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* in which the wall of a house falls over onto Keaton but he emerges uninjured through a second-story window. Because McQueen's version of the stunt is displayed on a repeating film loop, the viewer sees the stunt enacted over and over again. In this chapter I marshal philosopher Gilles Deleuze's book *Difference and Repetition* to argue that repetition (and therefore McQueen's film) is an unorthodox archive, one that is preserved not in static documents from the past but in a continually renewed present. Placing McQueen's film in dialogue with an older work, a repeating video by Bruce Nauman, I also ponder how reenactment as methodology, what Schneider calls body-to-body transmission, remembers or forgets race, remembers or forgets the specificity of the bodies it references.

In chapter 3, I consider the historiographic philosophies of science fiction writer and memoirist Samuel Delany and documentary filmmaker Ross McElwee, especially their concern with the relation between fictional and factual accounts of the past. I think about how their work productively skips in time and place to produce profound historical revelations about race and sexuality and the relation between history and the paternal. The fourth chapter carries the question of race forward by contemplating artist Matthew Buckingham's 1996 film *Amos Fortune Road*, which focuses on the relation between factual and fictional representations of the past by looking at the archival record of the life of Amos Fortune, an African slave who purchased his own freedom in 1770. In this chapter I argue that, in

response to the historiographic problems of discerning fact from fiction and delineating past from present, Buckingham hollows out Fortune's eighteenth-century history and fills it with parallel events from the present. Rather than attempting to get at the pure truth of Fortune's life (which is elusive despite an abundance of archival documentation), Buckingham usefully subjects history to doubt and lines up two historical narratives in the same space, skips between the present and the past.

In the fifth chapter, I study Goat Island's final performance, *The Lastmaker* (2007–9), which sought creatively to serve as an ending for the group, whose members officially disbanded in 2009. I consider Claire Bishop's critique of the performance, in which she accused it of failing to be contemporary, and use this as a jumping-off point to examine a particular scene in which Mark Jeffery impersonates queer British comedian Larry Grayson in the guise of Saint Francis of Assisi. Bishop's response to *The Lastmaker* offers the opportunity to think critically about the degree to which different subjects have access to the contemporary, and to ask whether all subjects are automatically able to claim some part of the now. Jeffery's performance (re)enacts what Elizabeth Freeman calls "temporal dissidence," a refusal of the contemporary by minoritarian subjects for whom the present is untenable.<sup>61</sup>

Dario Robleto reappears in chapter 6, in which I study a series of works he has created that represent for me a maternal form of historiography, an understanding of the word *history* as figured in the relationship between child and mother. Unlike in chapter 3, in which I focus on the father as a metaphor for the demands of the historical past, here I'm interested in how the maternal relation, to the degree that it exists in a field of excess—overflowing with childhood artifacts, nostalgia, memories, sentiment, and affect—challenges history's typical economy of scarcity. In each of these chapters, I attempt not only to write *about* these artists and artworks but also to emulate some aspect of their practice. I attempt to *do* history differently.

In the book's conclusion, I revisit *The Lastmaker* to understand how it attempts to rewrite the conventional historical narrative, to reimagine its linearity and tidy conclusions; how it purposefully failed to bring Goat Island's work to a final conclusion but opened it

up to the future. The performance thus served as a treatise on temporality and how a conclusion can be the start of something else, in the same way (so *Goat Island* tells us) that the end of a runway opens onto flight. As a mirror reflection of the prosthesis with which the book begins, the conclusion considers the shoemaker's last (the wooden form upon which a shoe is built and stitched) as a stand-in, not for something lost but for something always in the process of being found.

## Introduction

1. Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 683.
2. Notice how easily the word *recent* pops up here. Meyer's book came out after I initially finished this book manuscript and sent it out for peer review. But in that short time, his work took on a pastness, which is less and less recent with each passing day.
3. Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 12.
4. Jones, "Introduction."
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. Meyer surveys these concerns in the introduction to *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 1–35.
7. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 47, 41.
8. Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 31.
9. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 48.
10. *Ibid.*, 41.
11. Bonami, "Tino Sehgal," 48.
12. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 49.
13. Klein, "On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse," 127.
14. Nora, "Between Memory and History," 13–14.
15. Nietzsche, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," 86.
16. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 21.
17. *Ibid.*, 1.
18. Huyssen takes this term from Hermann Lübbe.
19. Iovane and Ramos, *Oggetti smarriti*, 99.
20. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 7.
21. Bourriaud, *Altermodern*, 12, 20; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.
22. Bush, "As We May Think," 102.

23. Klein dates the entanglement of memory and history to the 1970s. Klein, "On the Emergence of *Memory*."

24. David Eagleman, quoted in Bilger, "The Possibilian," 60.

25. Benjamin Libet, quoted in *ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. Eagleman, quoted in *ibid.*

28. Robleto, "Medicine on the Spoon," 273.

29. Robleto, public lecture, Visiting Artists Lecture Series, Department of Art, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, October 5, 2006.

30. Robleto, "Medicine on the Spoon," 275.

31. Robleto, postlecture discussion, Department of Art, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, October 5, 2006.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 29–30.

34. While I will discuss some actual prosthetic devices in the course of this book, I mean to think about the prosthesis metaphorically and linguistically rather than literally. I am aware that there is a burgeoning literature on disability studies that is keenly interested in prosthetics as it attempts to think critically about the "disabled," a category of subjecthood that is discursively, economically, culturally, and politically produced. My work here is more indebted to Derrida and his study of language and representation.

35. Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 36.

36. *OED Online*, s.v. "prosthesis," accessed June 28, 2011, <http://www.oed.com>.

37. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 108.

38. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 1.

39. *Ibid.*, 54.

40. Robleto, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 2, 2011. "Balm Of A Thousand Foreign Fields was my attempt at making an actual medicinal balm that was meant to treat my idea of historical trauma. I use real folk medicine thinking and traditions in it. I have applied this balm to the spot where the new leg bone I constructed physically attaches to the hip area under the uniform. I know you are sensitive to where things 'connect' as I am, so this section of the sculpture, although unseen under the uniform, is crucial to the whole point of the piece because this is where the two timelines actually connect. One of the number one problems of prosthetic technology, even to this day, is where the new limb connects to the body because of the pain and abrasions this can cause. It is quite shocking to me when I reflect on and see the prosthetic technology of older wars and how painful these limbs were to wear. So where the flesh meets the foreign material I found to be an essential



metaphor as well as the actual prosthetic. The balm I made is meant to metaphorically heal this problem but also practically since it is in balm form and acts as a lubricant in this area to ease the pain of the connection.”

41. Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, 142.

42. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, xxvi.

43. *Ibid.*, 7.

44. Robleto, “Medicine on the Spoon,” 264–65.

45. Foster, “An Archival Impulse.”

46. Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” 142.

47. Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 3.

48. For a brilliant reading of the seemingly unending portrayals of Abraham Lincoln in contemporary American culture, see Schneider, *Performing Remains*.

49. Lisa Saltzman’s book *Making Memory Matter* is another example. The book uses Pliny’s ancient story of the origins of art as a frame in which to position memorial practices in contemporary art. By retelling the story of the ancient potter Butades, whose daughter traced the shadow of her departing lover on the wall, Saltzman sets up a study of contemporary artists who, like the famous Corinthian maiden, create memorials using light, shadows, and architectural structures. While she discusses the problem of memory and the memorialization of traumatic experiences, she does not comment on her own act of historicizing the artists and artworks to which her study is addressed.

50. Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory*, 7.

51. *Ibid.*, 118.

52. Nietzsche, “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” 132.

53. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, xxii.

54. *Ibid.*, 21.

55. *Ibid.*, 4.

56. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 36–37.

57. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 4.

58. *Ibid.*, 412.

59. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 2.

60. *Ibid.*, 40.

61. Freeman, *Time Binds*.

## 1. Wooden Legs

1. Matthew Goulish, “Response,” in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 128.

2. Lin Hixson, “Minor Repair,” in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 130.