



This Is So Contemporary!

It was five years ago. At that time, it was a battle cry. No, a seduction. Or it was a welcome. You entered one of the pavilions at the site of the Venice Biennale, more specifically the German pavilion, and a loose, constantly reassembling group of young and older people, dressed in white shirts and dark trousers, dancing and weaving in constant motion, ran up to the visitors, declaring and chanting in English: “Oh, this is so contemporary, contemporary!” You couldn’t help grinning at the time, maybe feeling a bit rattled, because our canon of knowledge, our superego, the bundle of opinions and beliefs we always carried with us, was still relatively tightly wrapped. And today? **We see a Banksy and a Botticelli in London almost at the same time.** The first from the year 2009 sold at *Sotheby’s* auction for about GBP 10 million, the second from the year 1500 at the *Frieze Masters* fair through *Trinity Fine Art* for the requested GBP 30 million. **Here the British Parliament full of monkeys, there the portrait of the Renaissance scholar Michael Marullus Tarchaviota,** which for now and perhaps forever must remain in Spain as a cultural asset. At the same time, in the *Tate Modern*, the impressive Kara Walker opens her “Fons Americanus” (Fig.), a 13 meter high fountain closely based on Lorenzo Bernini’s 1651 “Fountain of the Four Rivers” on the Piazza Navona in Rome as well as the Victoria Memorial that was unveiled at Buckingham Palace in 1911. The black artist, working with white cement and cork as her medium, no longer depicts those four great rivers, the Danube, the Ganges, the Nile and the Rio de la Plata, nor is she celebrating the rule of the British over the world’s oceans towards America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. Instead we see a looming Venus figure arching backwards, water spurting from her two breasts and her slashed throat. Cement sharks swim about beneath the monument, while inscriptions like “K. West” and the figure of a floating corpse memorializing Emmett Till, a black youth found riddled with bullets in 1955, signalize the great revaluation of contents and values. In 2019, the very long-lasting injustice of slavery, the even longer neglected rights of blacks, and the now highly prominent power of women stand in the foreground. The gallery *Sprüth Magers* is showing six video films, paper works and microfilms by Kara Walker. Her art and her cause are being received with high acclaim. At the same time, her highly successful black colleague Mark Bradford is paying homage to the hellhound Cerberos, guardian of the underworld in Greek mythology, at *Hauser & Wirth* with new, up to fourteen-meter-wide paintings.

Installation view of
Kara Walker:
Fons Americanus, 2019
at the Tate Modern
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Contemporary art almost always means a redefinition of boundaries, a re-exploration of territories, a re-regulation of access, and in that process new standards are inevitably and unambiguously established. Tino Sehgal, who was performing at the German pavilion in Venice along with the painter Thomas Scheibitz in 2014, implemented the idea of the contemporary with a radical attitude of refusal. His work was not to be photographed or published and could only be acquired, via his lawyer if needs be, by oral communication. Unlike many artists today, he had something in mind that is frequently lacking in works by Banksy, Bradford or Walker: the non-hierarchical space of interpersonal encounter. **To be astonished by great art is good; but the kind of participation that builds bridges to other cultures and groups through active exchange—such participation is still missing.** A fighting stance, aiming to overpower by visual and verbal means, holds the foreground in London. Alongside these works, also in London, an early work by Joseph Beuys can be seen in a small new gallery, *Bastian*. It is a tomb sculpture, titled “Couple,” dated 1952–53, where the almost spindly figures of a man and a woman lie quietly side by side. Here, too, the woman had a slashed throat. But she was taller than the man, and she was resting on the wider and longer of the two surfaces. Part of the re-valuation of all values, according to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, is that one must be able to climb on top of one’s own head. In that case one would no longer see and produce new forms of domination. Instead, one would, almost like an innocent child, understand the Other.

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