



## How to Navigate the Art World

It's easy to mock the contemporary art world, but do so at your peril: You'll miss some truly good stuff. A new book shows how to be discerning without being dismissive.

“For heaven’s sake, madam, what is a vibration?”

That is the protagonist, Jep Gambardella in Paolo Sorrentino’s fantastic film *La Grande Belleza* (The Great Beauty) interviewing the performance artist Talia Concept. Concept has just fed him some mumbo jumbo about her performance that entailed child angels wrapping her in a veil, then her standing up to reveal her vagina scalded with a sickle and hammer, running into a pillar and smashing her head, falling and writhing before finally standing up and yelling, “I don’t love you!”

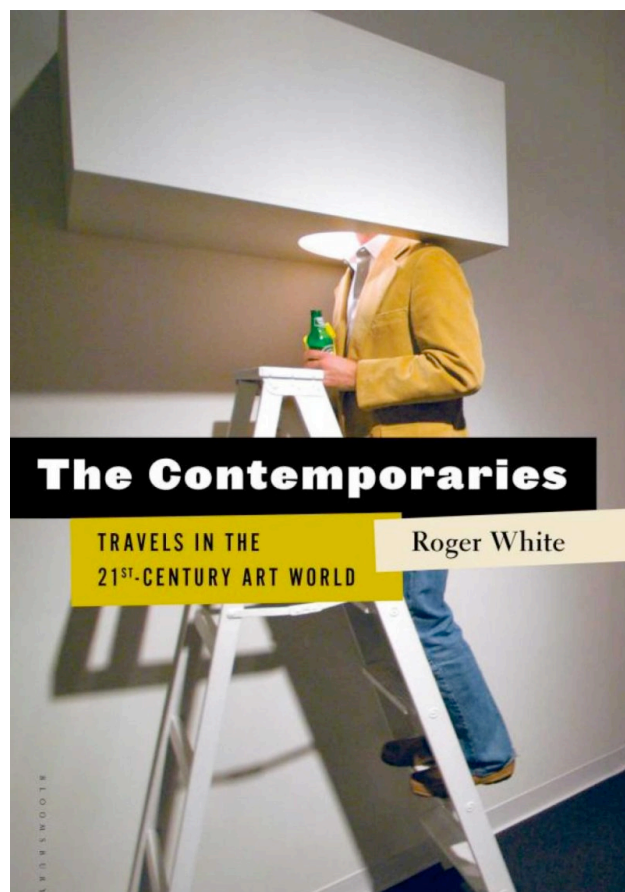
When Gambardella asks her what she reads, she responds, “I don’t need to read, I live on vibrations, extra-sensory ones.” When he asks her to explain, she rambles on about everything from conflictuality to her mom’s abusive boyfriend, when all Gambardella wants to know is what the heck she means by “vibrations.”

The exchange has become emblematic of how many people see the current art world—inexplicable, full of a lot of hot air, and people birthing paint-filled eggs and eating

their hips.

At the same time, the art world can feel like that first time you walk into a high-end luxury store—everything is out of your reach, you're not quite sure where to start, and there are a whole lot of venomous people judging your every move.

Enter Roger White, author of the delicious new book *The Contemporaries: Travels in the 21st Century Art World*. Astute and conversational, White's writing unveils the current state of the art academy, the studio, and the art market through the careers of the artists Dana Schutz, Mary Walling Blackburn, and Stephen Kaltenbach.



What becomes abundantly clear is that while the art world is certainly full of its fair share of

absurdity, there are people producing work worth talking about, and there are people who actually do understand it.

The second issue that becomes clear, is that the starving artist really is dead. While there are the issues of student loans, non-unionized studio workers, and lack of credit—that those are the obstacles is a sign of just how much has changed. The art world may involve troublesome creative types, but, explains White, “contemporary art is what passes through the institutional wickets of the school, the market, the art press, and the museum.”

The book opens with its strongest section—the academy. White takes the reader through his time as a critic for the graduate school at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), one of the premier art schools in the world. Art school, however, is not a haven for society’s misunderstood artistic misanthropes. “The minute we’d set foot in our first seminar room, we were all already inside the industry,” writes White. The students are already building their career portfolios, learning how to speak about their work so that galleries will want to work with them, and some are even hiring undergraduates to complete the labor on their visions.

According to White, art school really is the only game in town for aspiring artists, and “more artists now come through art programs in the United States each year than were produced by the city-states of Florence and Venice during the entire

fifteenth century.”

As White goes from one student thesis to the next, the reader gets a glimpse not only at the work of the country’s top art students, but also how somebody who supposedly understands this “stuff” approaches it. We watch as he tries to write metaphors, issues like deskilling (if something badly made was intentional or not), and the stereotypes (SoHo-in-the-’80s black, East Village alternative of bright, clashing colors). We get to watch critics work their way through a piece of art. Immediate responses range from “The past life of these materials is the least interesting thing to me” to another critic declaring about fake flowers, “These are very female things.”

There is a lot of mind-numbing chatter that represents the worst of the inscrutable navel-gazing we associate with the art world. There is a debate about whether or not something “posits something about its ability to posit something.” One critic tells a student, “You have to make better paintings fail.” One exchange between student and critic involves the critic demanding, “What does that paint can stand for, in that painting?” When the student doesn’t reply, the critic continues, “Stop squirming! Is there a political implication to this paint can or not?”

The book also covers the hot button issue of the artist’s studio. Many artists, most notably Jeff Koons, employ large numbers of studio assistants who are the ones who actually produce the artwork

the artists put their names on. While that is an issue that I still find difficult to agree with, White does a good job of explaining the mindset behind it. It has a long tradition, including some of history's more illustrious painters like Rubens, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Other art forms don't require the artist with the vision to actually make the object at question—Frank Gehry doesn't build his buildings. And then there is the practical element of the studio system providing a constant source of jobs and networking opportunities for young artists. White also makes the interesting point that if one considers the “most common charge leveled against art since the turn of the twentieth century—my two year old could make that!” the whole point is that what is visionary about the art isn't the actual manufacture of it.

While less engaging, the sections on artists Dana Schutz, Mary Walling Blackburn, and Stephen Kaltenbach are still informative as they track the different ways each has worked his or her way through the contemporary art world. They read more as stand-alone essays or profiles on the artists, but are a good way for White to rescue the art world from a lot of the ridicule it faces as these are artists he clearly holds in esteem.

And the art world does need rescuing—certainly White's book has plenty of juicy anecdotes that demonstrate his awareness of the industry's current reputation. There is the assistant who was offered a Christmas bonus of one of his employer's paintings, which would be worth tens of thousands

of dollars. “But there was a catch,” confesses White, “the assistant had to make the painting himself, start to finish, on his own time. The artist would then come in at the end [and] scribble his signature.”

Then there is the German artist Martin Kippenberger, who made his assistant complete a series of giant paintings, only to crumple them and shove them in a dumpster—which was then the piece shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The artist that takes the prize, however, is Nam June Paik. According to one of Paik’s former assistants, a European collector visited the studio to buy one of his pieces. “The trouble was that the studio hadn’t built it yet,” writes White. “They went into crisis mode and completed the sculpture just in time for the visit—which did indeed lead to purchase.” The best part? “Paik never laid eyes on the piece.”

White’s book is not, nor does it intend to be, an exhaustive survey of the contemporary art world. As he notes in the beginning, he focused solely on the U.S. But at a time when most of us probably find it more fulfilling to consider work by past generations, in part because so much of contemporary art can seem like unapproachable BS, White’s book is an excellent foray into a world that is still worth our consideration.

