

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Clearing the Slate: MoMA's Contemporary Reboot

by [Thomas Micchelli](#) on April 4, 2015



Rirkrit Tiravanija “untitled (the days of this society is numbered / December 7, 2012)” (2014), synthetic

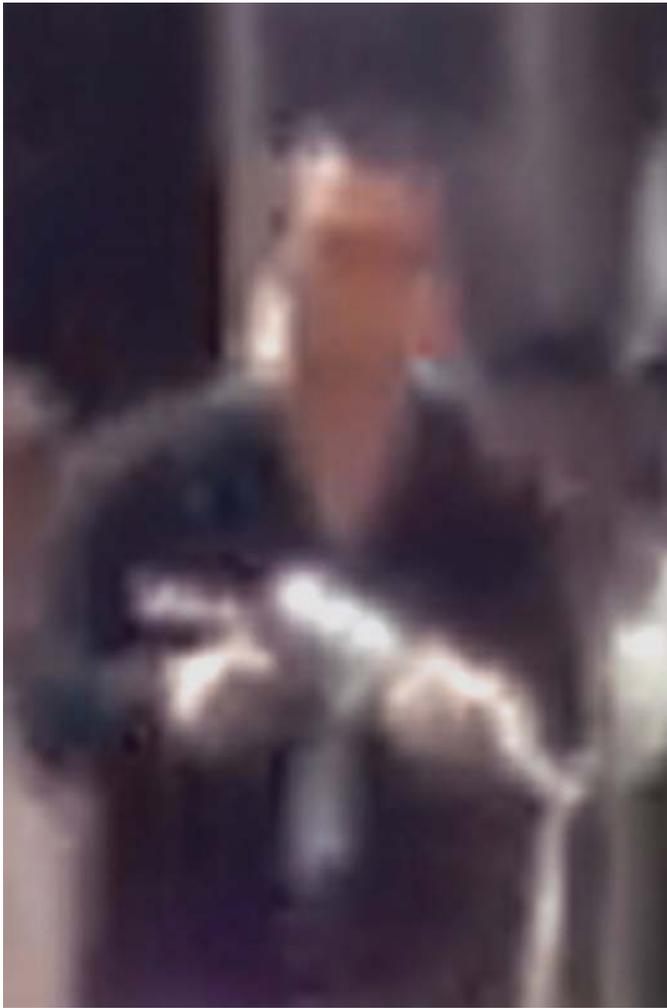
polymer paint and newspaper on linen, 87 × 84 1/2 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Drawings and Prints Fund, 2014 (© 2015 Rirkrit Tiravanija. All images courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York)

A few months after having been roundly [trounced](#) for *The Forever Now: Painting in an Atemporal World*, its attempt to assess the current state of painting, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened a reinstatement of its contemporary collection on the same day as its *Björk fiasco*.

Needless to say, the museum's fresh take on recent art, [Scenes for a New Heritage: Contemporary Art from the Collection](#), has been pretty much lost in the fray, which is too bad. It's a large, ambitious, well-paced, and beautifully installed showcase that offers a global perspective without the clutter of the current Triennial at the New Museum, delivering an array of new art that's both smart and a pleasure to look at.

Not everything hits the mark (Cady Noland's "THE AMERICAN TRIP," 1988, featuring a pirate flag, a U.S. flag, a pair of handcuffs and a blind person's cane, is both inert and obvious) but for the most part, the reinstatement succeeds in melding spectacle with curatorial rigor, avoiding the predetermined narratives of *The Forever Now* and the faux-populism that has been the target of much of the criticism of *Björk*.

The opening room doesn't bode entirely well, since the first thing that hits your eye is Rirkrit Tiravanija's ungrammatically titled "untitled (the days of this society is numbered / December 7, 2012)" (2014), in which the eponymous, mistranslated pronouncement from Guy Debord is stenciled in capital letters across a grid of Thai magazine pages from the eponymous date — the 85th birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who has been on the throne since 1946.



Rabih Mroué. “The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups” (detail) (2012), seven pigmented inkjet prints; each 51 3/16 x 35 7/16 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty First Century, 2013 (©2015 Rabih Mroué, courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery)

The work’s blunt message is an ironic comment on the king’s ill health and Thailand’s precarious future in light of the excessive public celebrations that were held to mark the day. Pedigreed in Debord and steeped in the visual/verbal strategies of Ed Ruscha and Richard Prince, “the days of this society is numbered” looks tailor-made for MoMA’s longstanding emphasis on aesthetic lineage, but remarkably, it’s one of the few pieces that seems to wear such a conventional stamp of institutional approval.

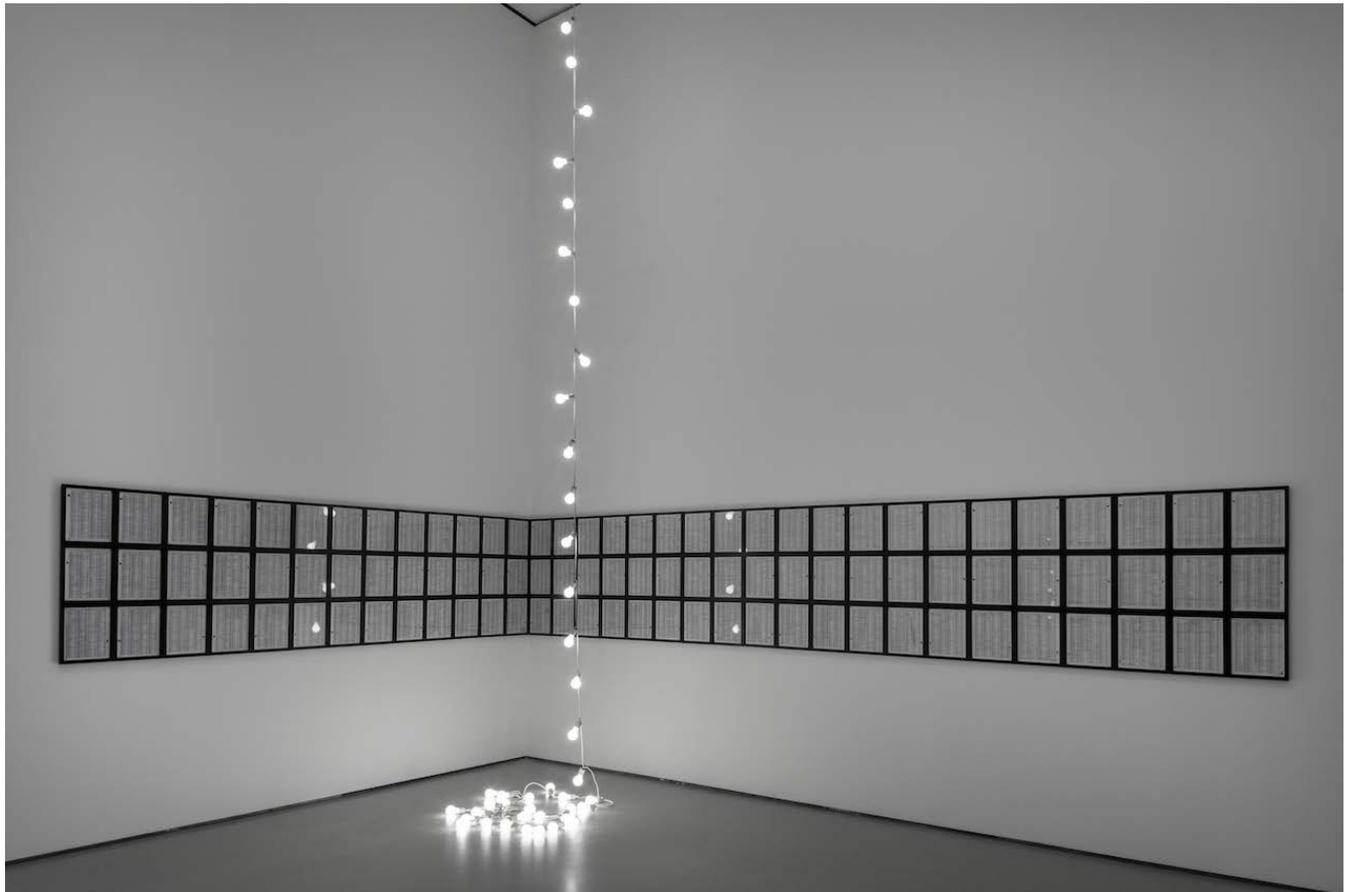
To the left of “the days of this society ... ” is On Kawara’s “One Million Years” (1999), a book with columns of dates in tiny print (evidently to make space for one million of them) and an audio component of voices reading the dates aloud; and on the right is Mladen Stilinović’s “Exploitation of the Dead” (1984–90), an installation of small paintings in synthetic polymer and oil paint on wood, wood paneling, cardboard, paper, tape and other humble materials.

If these works, as Ken Johnson remarked in his lukewarm *New York Times* [review](#), “parody, with slacker attitude, paintings from the early years of Russian Modernism as well as Soviet-style symbolism,” their affinities are not bothersome in the way Tiravanija’s stenciled collage

is, perhaps because they are pleasingly artless in themselves, or perhaps because their abject materials provide a piquant commentary on personal and political history as much as they do on art history.

On Kawara's piece, by contrast, seems enclosed in its own world, a feeling accentuated by the relatively small scale of the book — you could cradle it in your hands — and the vitrine that contains it. The voices reading the dates had reached the 5000s while I was there, an impossible number for an impossible-to-imagine future. And yet, that far-off millennium is out there, waiting, and will arrive in a geological blink. The sensation of onrushing time, coupled with the fact of the artist's death last year, brings an outsized poignancy to this modest work, a memorial to our moment.

There's much looking back in the galleries that follow, often in sorrow as well as anger. Doris Salcedo's exquisite "Atrabiliarios" (1992–93), consisting of shoes placed inside six wall niches, sealed behind translucent cow bladder scrims so that they appear distanced, blurred and ghostly, commemorates the disappeared of her native Colombia. Around the corner, what at first blush looks like a formal exercise in minimalist blandness — 195 pages of a telephone book in a black-framed grid — turns out to be "Memorial" (2009) by Luis Camnitzer, a Uruguayan artist born in 1937, in which he digitally altered pages of the Montevideo phone book to include two hundred names of those who disappeared between 1973 and 1985 during his country's military dictatorship. It is impossible to discern which names have been altered among the thousands listed — the artist's agency in restoring the identities of the murdered becomes, instead, another instance of loss.



Installation view of "Scenes for a New Heritage: Contemporary Works from the Collection," The Museum of Modern Art, 2015 (Photo by Thomas Griesel. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

In the middle of the same room housing Camnitzer's "Memorial" hangs Felix Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (Toronto) (1992), a string of light bulbs attached to the ceiling and trailing to the floor. Wrapped in associations of the AIDS epidemic, which took the artist's life, the piece carries a particular potency in the relatively small room, shedding an unnaturally bright light on two very dark periods of recent history.

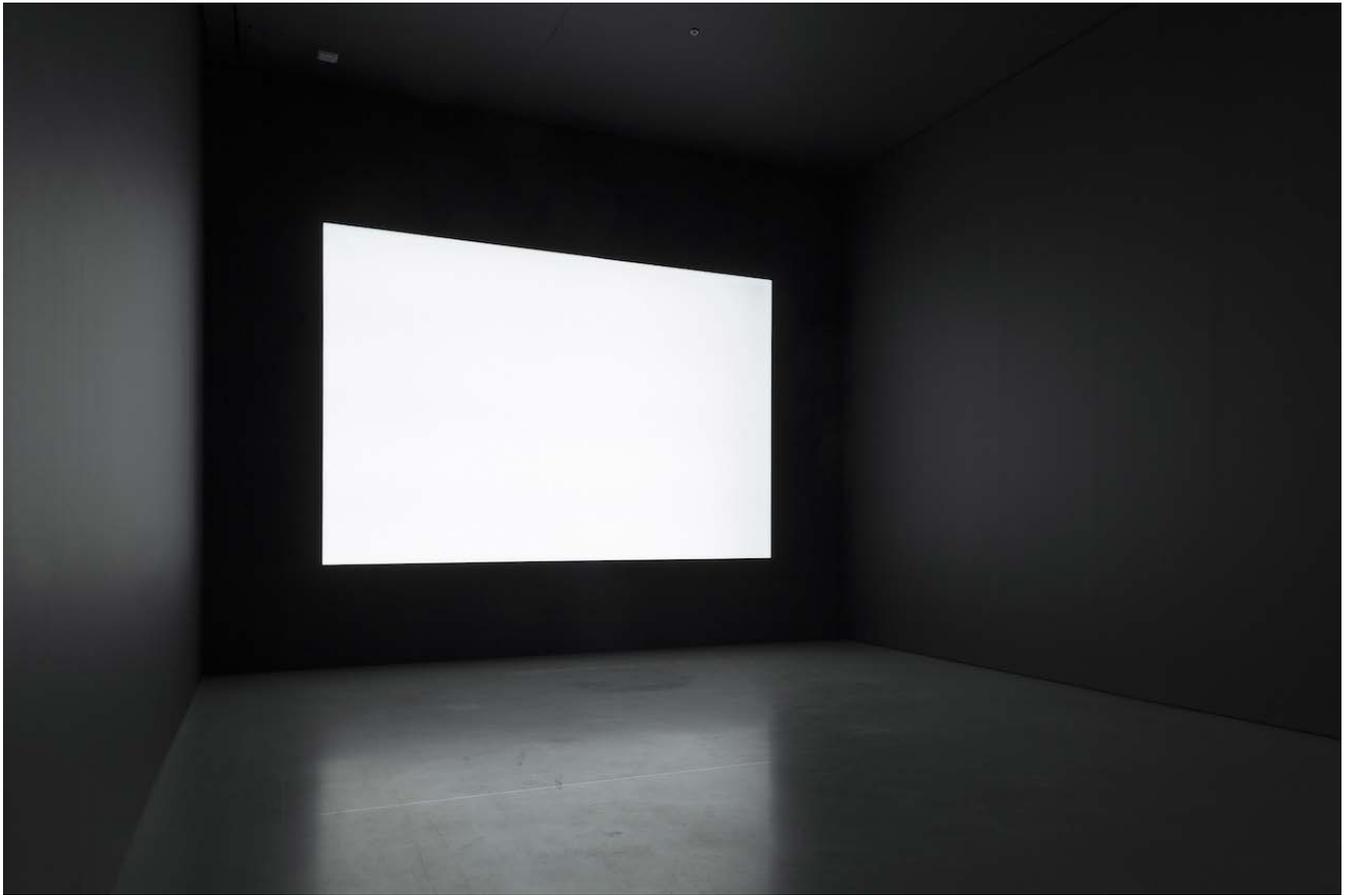
The understated pairing of these two works — with Camnitzer's piece reasserting the conceptual context of Gonzalez-Torres' elegiac sculpture, while the latter, through its warm, bright light, enlivens the barely differentiated digital prints in black frames — typifies the reinstallation's curatorial approach, which emphasizes contrast, primarily in scale and material, and intuitive groupings that enhance the content of the works

The large second room, between the galleries holding the Tiravanija and the Gonzalez-Torres, contains an enormous, fairly nasty black-and-white mural by Kara Walker; David Maljković's jokey video/sculpture installation presenting three short films from his *Scene for a new heritage* series, from which MoMA's reinstallation takes its title; Noland's previously mentioned assemblage of flags and other objects; and Salcedo's entombed shoes. Each work represents a shift in tone, while its political dimension subtly augments what's around it.

A number of pieces proceed from a social or political point of departure, among them: Allan Sekula's "Fish Story, Chapter One" (1988-1995), an evocative photography-and-text series on seaports in the global economy; Feng Mengbo's room-size, primitive video game, "Long March: Restart" (2008), where you can pick up a controller and play a Red Army soldier; "The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups" (2012), in which the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué presents chilling, blurred blowups of cellphone photos taken by Arab Spring protestors of security forces aiming weapons at them. Some of these protestors, the wall text intimates, were killed.

The selection, however, avoids the trap of preaching to the converted, which has tripped up many a Whitney Biennial. In his review, Johnson takes note of the display's indirect politics, asking, "What more can art do about the mess we've made of things? Nothing in the exhibition offers any ambitious proposals. To critique, bear witness and decry is as far as it goes."

But the resignation, if you will, of the artwork in the face of a world spinning out of control — critiquing and bearing witness rather than submitting a vision of the future — is what is refreshing about the display. It signals the termination of utopian Modernism but in a way that is much more expansive, more multilayered, than the constricted view offered by *The Forever Now*. The title *Scenes for a New Heritage* should not be taken ironically but as a marker of contemporary art's unfolding into the real world, partaking of the moment while remaining enough apart from it to offer clarity and resolution.



Alfredo Jaar, "Lament of the Images" (2002), plexiglass text panels, light wall, and mixed media; dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Latin American and Caribbean Fund, 2010 (Photo by Thomas Griesel. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Perhaps this is no better evidenced than in Alfredo Jaar's "Lament of the Images" (2002). Jaar, whose long career has chronicled war, genocide and exploitation, infuses this work not with polemics but with an extreme form of lyricism.

You enter a narrow corridor where backlit Plexiglas panels offer three compelling narratives about whiteness and blindness: Nelson Mandela's imprisonment and hard labor in Robben Island's limestone quarry under a blinding sun; Bill Gates' purchase of the Bettmann and United Press International archives, consisting of 17 million images, and their subsequent burial deep underground in a limestone vault for the sake of preservation, after Gates's company Corbis digitized "less than 2 percent of them"; and the Defense Department's decision to buy exclusive rights to commercial satellite images of the Afghanistan theater of war, effectively "preventing western media from seeing the effects of the bombing and eliminating the possibility of independent verification or refutation of government claims." The last words of the Afghanistan text are "There is nothing left to see."

Turn the corner, and you're confronted with a large panel of blindingly bright light (there are warnings to the photosensitive at the entrance to the installation). Simultaneously brutal and breathtaking, the punishing intensity of the white light may be, as the artist apparently intends, a lament for the willful blindness of political, military and economic leaders, but it is also a spectacle that's both severely minimal and deliriously excessive.

It's an absence that, by dint of its fierceness, becomes an overwhelming presence. All there is

to see is a clean slate, offering nothing and everything.

[Scenes for a New Heritage: Contemporary Art from the Collection](#) continues at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through March 31, 2016