In 1891, Oscar Wilde described an artist as “the creator of beautiful things” [1]. In our modern world today, artists create much more than simply 'beautiful things', and aesthetic appeal is now not the only important aspect of an artwork. 'Art' is a single word in the English vocabulary which can neither be fully defined nor understood, as its meaning has changed over time and its definition altered across different cultures and generations. However, what can clearly be distinguished is the difference between 'traditional' art and contemporary art. Traditional art is the term usually given to those artworks (mostly painting and sculpture) of a pre-modernism context, artworks which reflect people and events of a certain era, artworks which are aesthetically pleasing and highly proficient in technical ability. Traditional art is the art associated with high society, and renowned artists such as Michelangelo, da Vinci and Van Gogh are 'Old Masters' often linked to traditional art. But art has changed over time, because of changes in artists' intentions, audience reaction, and responses to the changes occurring in today's world. Contemporary art is the term used to categorise these recent changes in art, which have occurred mostly in the past two decades or so. But as with all art styles and historic periods, one cannot put a definite date on when contemporary art emerged. Is not Marcel Duchamp's famous "Fountain" [2] a very contemporary view on what art can be?

Art is now considered as all human movement and action, and performance artists such as Mariko Mori have proven that performance art is a viable art form. Her mixed media artwork “Nirvana” [3] is an example of how Mori has also combined technology with performance to produce an evocative and dramatic video work. Art also does not necessarily depict life or objects realistically any more - Chinese artist Xu Bing has used text to convey his thoughts, in a rather abstract way. His artworks belong to the structural frame, such as “A Book from the Sky” [4], which is essentially a network of signs and symbols. Conceptual artists such as Jeff Koons and Shiro Matsui have shown to the world that the meaning of an artwork can take precedence over its aesthetic appeal, and Koon's "Rabbit" [5] and Matsui's “Parascope 1” [6] are both examples of how they have achieved this. Contemporary Japanese artist Miwa Yanagi is interested in her surroundings, and has reflected in her artworks how she believes that society has changed. “Midnight Awakening Dream” [7], recently shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art's “Neo Tokyo” (meaning New Tokyo) is an artwork which expresses deep emotion and questions Japan's obsession with consumerism.

Mariko Mori's “Nirvana” [3] is an artwork which consists of many components - photography, video performance, digital works, sculpture and even fashion design in her performance piece. This artwork shows very clearly how contemporary art practice allows for almost any medium to be used to create an artwork. With the new age of high technology currently in our hands, artists have been able to digitally compose images with the help of computers and high quality printing techniques. Mori has taken advantage of high technology in “Nirvana”, and created a number of digital images such as a lotus encased in a glass capsule, filled with clouds (“Enlightenment Capsule” [3]). In the three-dimensional video performance (viewers were required to wear special glasses to view the film), Mori filmed herself in a costume she designed, and appears floating in the soft-hued sky. She is holding a crystal in the form of a lotus bud, a symbol frequently exhibited in Buddhist images.
Mori's performance is a choreographed dance combined with Mudra, which are typical Buddhist hand positions, and evokes particular states of mind in the viewer and brings about many religious connotations. Even the video's soundtrack has been carefully composed to reinforce the notion of a passage through various states of being, that ends in pure whiteness.

Many artworks now involve the need for an audience to be present, to complete the artwork, and artists often make artworks with the audience in mind. “Nirvana” is an installation which, as a whole, creates a meditative environment that provides the audience with a sense of tranquillity and transcendence. Meditative traditions of Japanese and other non-western art and culture are brought into question by Mori's acceptance of both modern technology and meditated imagery: “...everything is two-sided. People are used to images being manipulated, and being manipulated themselves, by images” (Mori).

As well as the medium of “Nirvana” providing a change to traditional art concepts, Mori's subject matter and her method of depicting it is also very contemporary. Nirvana means “perfect bliss attained by the extinction of individuality”. (The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary, 9th Edition). The artist has explored the traditional ideas and ways of thinking found in the Buddhist religion, and has also added her own insights as to what she believes about religion: “My interest is not just looking back to traditional ideas or culture. I try to take in not only the present...I try to develop my own future vision and utopian ideas - my own interpretations of tradition” (Mori). In this sense, Mori can be analysed in the post-modern frame as she has attempted to re-present ideas about the Buddhist tradition in a modern and new light.

A lot of contemporary art can be observed through the post-modern frame. As well as re-presenting certain issues in society, contemporary artists have also appropriated past texts and recontextualised them to suit modern society. For example, Yasumasa Morimura's “Blinded by the Light” is an appropriation of Pieter Bruegel's “The Parable of the Blind”. Bruegel's artwork has been appropriated in two ways. Firstly, Morimura's artwork is a photograph, whilst Bruegil's is an oil painting, to emphasise the modern nature of Morimura's artwork. Secondly, Morimura has made the subjects in his photographs both physically and metaphorically blinded, saying that society has blinded itself. For instance, one of the six people is blinded by consumerism and shopping, and another is a soldier blinded by his own hand grenades, symbolic for violence.

Morimura is but one of many current contemporary artists who have made a statement about society. Jeff Koons is an American artist who places extremely banal, everyday objects in a gallery setting. Koons can be viewed through the cultural frame, as he is making a comment about our society, in particular the effects of consumerism; and he is also a post-modern artist as his artmaking practice involves taking objects out of one context and putting them into another. His artwork “Rabbit” is one such example. It is part of a series called “Statuary - a panoramic view of society”, and is a 40-centimetre tall stainless steel rabbit with the appearance of an inflatable toy. With “Rabbit”, Koons is questioning the idea of consumerism - these inflatable toys are such a common, everyday item found in shops. He is also looking at the idea of deception - rabbits are commonly associated with their warm, soft, furry
texture, but in this artwork, Koons has made the rabbit out of cold, hard metal, and it provides a stark contrast. “Rabbit” shows how contemporary art has allowed for artworks to be based primarily on concept or meaning: “My work has no aesthetic values, other than the aesthetics of communication.”

Often with conceptual art, the viewer completes the artwork. If the viewer is not present, the artwork becomes meaningless and 'not art': “If Koons cannot make the viewer see his objects as symbols, if he cannot lead them into the realm of thoughts and emotions, the objects remain mute physical things, not art.”

“Rabbit” is a piece of conceptual art which, when there is no viewer present, becomes a piece of metal fabricated to look like a rabbit. “Rabbit” is intended to provoke the viewer's thoughts and emotions, and to make us realise that this instantly recognizable, manufactured object was transformed from another context. Sometimes even animals are used to complete the artwork, such as Andreas Slominski’s “Licking a stamp”, where a zoo-keeper held out stamps for a giraffe to lick, and Carsten Höller's “A house for pigs and humans”. In the latter artwork, the artist/agricultural scientist built a compound for humans and pigs, and the two species were separated by a glass pane. Thus a study of the pigs' life and human behaviour was produced.

Jeff Koons once made a comment which pinpoints the nature of contemporary art: “The only thing the art world does need is people to lead it beyond its parameters.” Koons is saying that contemporary art is art which can be anything people want it to be. Artists are the ones who create artworks that astound the art world by being unique, clever, different. The audience, whether it be the general public or the art world, are the ones who say whether or not an artwork is really 'art' or not. Recently a boulder at one of Sydney’s beaches was spray-painted fluoro-pink with polka dots. It was probably done in an attempt to create humour and to put colour in an otherwise dull area. Is this art though? It would seem that it is just a mindless prank done to annoy the residents near the area. But one might say that this shocked reaction to the 'vandalism' is part of the 'artwork'. That is one of the great debates which contemporary art has revealed - who chooses what is art, and under what circumstances?

Another reason which makes Koons' work contemporary is that he does not create the artworks themselves. After he has thought of a concept, he employs craftsmen and artisans to make his objects such as in “Rabbit”, but he is the one who directs the craftsmen to do exactly what he wants them to do and which materials to use. Traditional views of art said that an artwork was the creation of a sole artist; they had to physically create the artwork.

Shiro Matsui is another contemporary Japanese artist, who also requires an audience to complete his works. One such example is his recent work titled “Parascope 1” which was shown at the 2002 Sydney Festival in the Queen Victoria Building. The artwork itself is a large funnel shape made out of yellow spandex, designed with the QVB’s specific architecture in mind. Matsui's main purpose for all his works, including “Parascope 1”, is to explore the idea of internal and external space, and how we as humans interact with this space. “Parascope 1” is a funnel stretched over two levels, and when a viewer on the top level looks down into the funnel, they are immersed in the space of the lower level. This is the same for a viewer on the bottom level looking up into the funnel. Thus there is a physical link.
between the two levels, and viewers are made more aware of their physical environment. Matsui’s “Parascope 1” shows that the concept of an artwork is the artwork itself, that contemporary art has redefined what art should tell an audience.

Miwa Yanagi’s large panoramic photographs are about Japan’s consumeristic society, and she challenges her society’s views on this topic. In this respect, she is very similar to Jeff Koons as they both question society's attitudes. However, they are very different in the sense that while Koons works mostly in the post-modern frame, Yanagi’s works have risen primarily from a cultural influence. “Midnight Awakening Dream” is a photographic triptych that show several elevator girls wandering in a futuristic world of consumer pleasure. Like Mariko Mori, Yanagi has used computer technology to manipulate and enhance the photographs she has taken, to produce highly evocative and dream-like settings.

Her work can be seen as one which challenges the roles of traditional art and also traditional photography. “Midnight Awakening Dream” is different to traditional art, as Yanagi is making a point against society, that the Japanese in particular have gone too far and as a result, consumerism has taken over their lives. Yanagi’s photographic techniques are different to that of traditional photography, as she is not only concerned with the aesthetic qualities of her works. In fact, her main concern is the juxtaposition of significant ideas, such as the brightly coloured elevator girls in the nightmarish settings, the neatness of the elevator girls' identical skirt suits, hats and gloves contrasted with the chaotic mess of shopping bags and clothes in the third part of the triptych, and the reality of the setting and girls but the fantastical atmosphere created with the high contrast of light. “Midnight Awakening Dream” also has slightly macabre, dark elements which are rarely seen in traditional photography.

A very significant change in art is that artists often integrate text with their artworks. Chinese artist Xu Bing is one such person who uses text in his artworks as part of their meaning. “A Book from the Sky” is an installation made up of a set of four hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls that carry a huge body of text which resemble Chinese characters, but is in face unintelligible. Bing invented four thousand individual characters which do not make any sense, and questions human written communication and parodies Chinese texts. Gillian Wearing uses text in a different way, by going up to strangers on the street and asking them to write down their exact thoughts at that moment in time on a piece of cardboard. She then photographs them holding up their thoughts: “Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what someone else wants you to say.”

Art in the last two decades has broadened its scope and now includes all forms of human creative output - design, theatre, media, advertising, architecture, cinema, dance and music. There is often a societal role, and can be about communication, have therapeutic values and functions. Miwa Yanagi, Mariko Mori, Shiro Matsui and Yasumasa Morimura are just some of the numerous contemporary Japanese artists who have recently emerged, showing that contemporary art encompasses all cultures east and west. Contemporary artists can be viewed in the conceptual frames: all are post-modern as they have used new and fresh ways of interpreting past texts or current texts; some focus on the cultural frame by questioning society's attitudes to certain issues; whilst others use abstract or minimalist methods of dealing with their thoughts, by producing a network of signs and symbols that is part of the structural frame. Contemporary art also connects the artist, artwork, audience and world...
together - the artist expresses his views of the world in his/her artworks, and the audience either physically completes the work or interprets it. Put simply, contemporary art has completely demolished all barriers that once existed with traditional art, and artists now have the freedom to express whatever they want in whatever form they require.