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Editors

What is Contemporary Art? Issue One

About a year ago, while trying to develop a wiki archive for contemporary art at e-flux, we encountered a small technical problem in deciding how to implement a simple menu structure to allow readers to navigate such an archive. We thought first to organize it according to movement. Yet there have been no significant movements in the past twenty years, and artists have not been interested in organizing themselves around any. By medium? But contemporary artists work with their materials in a variety of different, and more often hybrid, ways. By geographic region? Well, that approach is probably better suited to the CIA. In the end, we found that no objective structure or criterion exists with which to organize artistic activity from the past twenty years or so, and the question of how to structure such an archive—to make it intelligible—proved to be so difficult to address that it completely derailed the project for the time being.

Of course, we accept that a primary source of the hesitation in developing any kind of comprehensive strategy for understanding art that emerged in the past two decades is a general assumption that it is still in its emergent stage. Meanwhile, however, the work produced during this time has made its way into museum collections, academies, and auctions—forming a very concrete context for art production with parameters that are somehow taken for granted but not actually explained as such.

So it first has to be acknowledged that much of the activity responsible for the current condition of art is no longer under development, but has assumed a fully mature form—and yet it still somehow refuses to be historicized as such. Or are we simply not trying hard enough? Perhaps it is time to approach the notion of contemporary art as a fully formed cultural project with certain defined parameters, complete with logics of inclusion and exclusion not so different from those of the modernist project. There is a lot of work to be done here. How do we begin to recognize these parameters that have already been established? At the same time, there is some agency in the idea that they remain open: how can we also take advantage of this to develop our own criteria for browsing and historicizing recent activity in a way that affirms the possibilities of contemporary art's still-incompleteness, of its complex ability to play host to many narratives and trajectories without necessarily having to absorb them into a central logic or determined discourse—at least before it forms a historical narrative and logic of exclusion that we would much rather disavow?

In this sense we are looking at two distinct approaches to contemporaneity: one that has already been fully institutionalized, and another that still evades definition.

This is the first of a two-part issue of *e-flux journal* devoted to the question "What is Contemporary Art?" as it was addressed in a public lecture series of the same name

organized by Anton Vidokle at ShContemporary, Shanghai in September 2009. Special thanks go to Colin Chinnery, Liam Gillick, and all who contributed to the series: Zdenka Badovinac, Hu Fang, Hal Foster, Boris Groys, Jörg Heiser, Carol Yinghua Lu, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta), Dieter Roelstraete, Martha Rosler, Gao Shiming, and Jan Verwoert.

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

X

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Zdenka Badovinac

Contemporaneity as Points of Connection

When the editors of *e-flux journal* invited me to write about contemporaneity, they suggested that I take my own professional experience as a starting point. And it seems that, in order to understand contemporaneity, we cannot neglect the particularity of various approaches. Contemporary theory, however, and especially Badiouan theory, teaches that this can lead us astray and we should rather devote ourselves to thinking about a new understanding of universality. For this reason, I have tried to place my own particular story—which is linked to the broader context of Eastern Europe and, more narrowly, to my work at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana—in connection with other, related experiences, especially those linked to the issues surrounding the Global South. One might even suggest that sharing various points of connection is, in fact, one of the key concepts of contemporaneity.

I. Narratives in the Plural

If we can no longer speak of the evolution of art over the course of history, we can certainly speak about the evolution of its accessibility. Accessibility to art increased exponentially in the twentieth century, primarily through the power of reproduction and the work of museums open to the general public. The democratization of art is, certainly, one of the important aspirations of modernity, although in many ways this is still limited to educating from above and the selective standards that entails. But today this enlightenment model is already being threatened by knowledge penetrating from below. I am speaking especially about current processes that oppose the various hegemonic models created by Western modernity. In this essay, I use the word "contemporaneity" as an alternative concept to modernity—a term which I do not connect with any specific time period.

"'Modernity' is not a historical period but a discursive rhetoric, that is, a persuasive discourse promising progress, civilization and happiness."[1] This is how Walter Mignolo describes modernity, especially with regard to its darker side, which he calls "coloniality." For theorists of decoloniality, "coloniality" is something that still persists today, and in opposition to the processes of decolonization.[2] The distinguishing features of coloniality, which link the issues surrounding the Global South, may also apply, at least in part, to Eastern Europe. Despite the fact that socialism was itself a unique project of modernity with its own globalization project, its own colonialism, and its own (pop) culture and art, the socialist countries, like other parts of the world, were hardly immune to Westernizing processes.

If attitudes in both East and West influenced each other mutually during the Cold War, then today the various interminglings of their processes can only testify to a further accelerated global dimension. To many, therefore, it seems that "planetary negotiations, discussions

between agents from different cultures" are today taking place unhindered.[3] For this reason, too, it is becoming increasingly important to ask how great a share a given space really inhabits in the global exchange of ideas, and to what degree this exchange reflects the polarization of the world into Global North and Global South.

When we think about contemporaneity, then, we must by no means overlook the question of participation, both in global exchanges and in particular spheres of life. Irit Rogoff describes contemporaneity as a sense of participation in discussions about unstructured forms of knowledge:

> "Contemporaneity" is our subject—not as a historical period, not as an explicit body of materials, not as a mode of proximity or relevance to the subjects we are talking about, but rather as a conjunction. "Contemporaneity" for us means that in the contemporary moment there is a certain number of shared issues and urgencies, a certain critical currency, but perhaps most importantly a performative enablement—a loosening of frames all around us, which means we can move around more freely, employ and deploy a range of theoretical, methodological and performative rhetoric and modes of operation, inhabit terrains that may not have previously made us welcome or, more importantly, which we would not have known how to inhabit productively.[4]

Although Rogoff is speaking here primarily about the interlacing territories of various fields of knowledge that are connected by a shared sense of urgency with regard to certain common questions, we could apply a similar model to the exchange of knowledge between various geopolitical territories. Access to different kinds of knowledge through various points of connection as well as the possibility of participating in common debates may be counted as part of the same set of concerns that characterize concepts of decolonization. Issues of access and participation in various processes of knowledge are also shaping, to an increasing degree, the basic features that define the imaginary of contemporary art.

In "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" Hal Foster discusses the need to create a new narrative that, following the psychoanalytical model, would treat neo-avant-garde art concepts in terms of their repeating the unfinished work of the artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century. Foster writes:

> The status of Duchamp as well as *Les Demoiselles* is a retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings, and so it goes across the dialogical space-time of avant-garde practice and institutional reception.[5]

The mature art system and its market contributed crucially to the fact that a given artwork could become part of history through countless cycles of repetition. Regardless of how we define the repetitions of the historic avant-garde vis-à-vis those of the neo-avant-garde—merely as farce or as the full, if deferred, realization of the avant-garde's potential—the story remains embedded in the logic of that same art system. The hegemonic art system, with its museums, theory, and market, makes possible the repetition of artistic concepts over various historical periods.

But that which the system assimilates must conform to its standards. If, as Foster writes, the institution of art was something the artists of the historic avant-garde wished only to do away with, and something that was in fact analyzed by the neo-avant-gardists, then it must be made clear that this applies above all to the Western space. Even if, for instance, the Russian avant-gardists wanted to burn down everything old, including the bourgeois institutions, we do not see in the works of their heirs in the East any kind of repetition in the sense of an institutional critique, at least not to the same degree as we have in the West. For the Eastern neo-avant-garde movements, the primary target of their attack was ideology and not the art system, which even today has, for all practical purposes, not yet developed in the East in any form comparable to that of the West. So when we speak of a new narrative that would be more suitable to the present and to the global situation, we can only speak of narratives in the plural.

While the concept of the plurality of narratives can be connected with the idea of the unfinished nature of the historic avant-gardes, it should, however, be linked first and foremost to the unfinished project of decoloniality. The production of local bodies of knowledge, which include the genealogies of local avant-gardes, is a precondition for establishing any "planetary negotiations" on an equal basis. We could relate such thinking to the notion of "transmodernity" put forward by the proponents of decolonialist theory.[6] The decolonialists oppose the concept of transmodernity to the Western concepts of postmodernity and altermodernity, as well as to such notions as alternative modernities, subaltern modernities, and peripheral modernities. In Mignolo's view, all these concepts still maintain "the centrality of Euro-American modernity or, if you wish, assume one 'modernity of reference' and put themselves in subordinate positions."[7]

We would be very mistaken if we in any way supposed that emancipatory ideas come only from the non-Western world. This would be like saying that socialism was solely the project of the East. Susan Buck-Morss has nicely stated that this was not the case: "The historical

experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question."[8]

No single place can claim exclusive rights to emancipatory knowledge, which is important to the entire planet. It is true, however, that certain spaces have more potential to instrumentalize knowledge than others. Those that are in a better position in this regard also, therefore, contribute more to the positive or negative development of global society. Spaces with a weaker infrastructure, which might otherwise serve the ongoing structuring and distribution of local knowledge, are here in a disadvantaged position. The most these spaces can do is seek connections with other, similar conditions in the struggle for greater participation in the global exchange. That something of this sort is already happening can be seen in the congruity between various theoretical concepts, such as the notion of pluri-versality that Mignolo describes: "Pluri-versality requires . . . *connectors*, connectors among projects . . . moving, advancing, unfolding in the same direction (departing from the colonial matrix of power), but following singular paths emerging from *local histories*."[9]

II. Self-Definition

In my day-to-day work, much of what I do involves questions around defining contemporaneity within the field of art, with regard to both artistic practices and the spaces where art is presented. Over the past twenty years I have constantly been forced to consider these questions by, among other things, the specific nature of the Slovene space, which at the beginning of my professional career in the second half of the 1980s, was entirely dominated by representatives of the modernist orthodoxy. In addition, the specific needs of the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, where I have served as director for over a decade and a half, have also led me to a more intensive examination of the issues surrounding contemporaneity. This institution's various acute needs have culminated today in the idea of a museum of contemporary art, which will become a reality, we expect, in a little more than eighteen months. In the remainder of this text, if I discuss my own experiences in this country of two million people, it is only because I believe they are, in a way, symptomatic—an example of the praxis of what are called "peripheral spaces" and an illustration of all that I have presented above on a more general, theoretical level.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when I became the director of the Moderna galerija, I found myself in a situation where I had to adopt a clear and unequivocal stance on many different issues—not only because of the importance of the position I had assumed, but also because of the particular nature of the moment we were living in. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Moderna galerija had become the central art institution of a new country, whose birth had been accompanied by a ten-day war, a war that had then shifted to the rest of the Balkans, where it continued for the next several years. The proximity of war, the old/new nationalisms, the blurring of the progressive ideas of communism and the equating of communism with fascism, the increasing emulation of the West, and the beginnings of a new liberal economy—all of this helped to create the spirit of the time, which was already so different from that of the late eighties, when I had started working at the Moderna galerija.

Along with my colleagues, especially Igor Zabel, with whom I had worked for many years, I asked myself how a museum can move forward in its work when it has been primarily dedicated to a national art—an art that, as even the most ambitious studies took pains to stress, lagged eternally behind Western art. The prevailing criticism and theory would, sometimes quite crudely, place our art in the "universal" Western context and blithely neglect anything that was associated with our own avant-garde traditions and the very powerful processes of self-contextualization that had been happening in artistic practices in Slovenia, particularly throughout the 1980s. And I am not even speaking here of the near-total absence of a critical theory that could place these relations in broader political and social contexts—a critical theory of which even today we find no trace, at least in the way art history is taught. A great lack of self-confidence, which at times borders on servility toward the West, exists not only in Slovenia but in all the so-called peripheral spaces; this was, and still is, responsible for everything we might designate, at least conditionally, as coloniality. How do we remedy such a situation? How do we improve our self-image?

These and similar questions encouraged us to find a different way of defining the priorities of our work. Our museum, founded in 1948 in a country which had that same year, through Tito's Cominform dispute with Stalin, taken a stand against Soviet colonialism, now began to consider a "third way": a break with the socialist tradition of national museums, a refusal to accept the "universal" Western example, and a search for a museum model that would suit its own time and space. For us, the imperative of contemporaneity became the idea that we ourselves would be the producers of our own knowledge and, as much as possible, that we would stop being the passive recipients of Western ideas. In this process we relied, right from the start, on the experiences of artists and small non-institutional spaces that had, especially in the eighties in Slovenia, developed particular strategies for self-organization, alternative networking, and operating internationally, and that were significantly more successful at doing this than the official cultural policy was. I could say, then, that in our future operations we would use knowledge that came "from below," and in doing so, we often refused to heed the demands and expectations that came not only from the official cultural policy but also from a certain general standard of institutional behavior. Our understanding of contemporaneity was also dictated by our interest in other

spaces that had till then been shut out of the artistic "universe" and with which we shared a number of similar priorities in the new historical moment. And it was our similar priorities with these spaces that saw our directives come together in new conjunctions, which we also started to understand as our principal international context.

Throughout the 1990s, then, the Moderna galerija put together a number of projects connected with the Balkans and, more generally, Eastern Europe. In 2000, we also inaugurated the first museum collection of Eastern European art, which was later followed by a series of shows we called Arteast Exhibitions. The objectives of this program were, and still are, connected above all to the idea that Eastern Europe must contextualize itself as soon as possible, that it must become the subject of its own historicization and not merely an object for the more powerful Western institutions. On the basis of my experience with these issues, I have on a number of occasions already pointed to two possible ways for Eastern European art to be musealized. The first is based on the mere inclusion of non-Western art, through its best examples, in the master narrative and in the hegemonic institutions; the second way has been to offer more possibilities for local institutions to produce knowledge about their own history, and thus indirectly influence the global art system. Of course, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive; the only question is which of them will end up becoming dominant in the future.

When I talk about the Moderna galerija as a museum of contemporary art, however, this is not merely in the sense of the topics discussed above, but also in the very concrete sense of the actual reorganization of its work. The Moderna galerija was founded as a museum of modern art, but after more than sixty years, its official mission became too narrow and its physical space too small. Years ago, in order to solve its space problems, the Moderna galerija acquired a second building for its use, one that was in need of a total renovation. Thus the museum was forced to reorganize its activities between two separate locations. This led to the idea of a division not only between two locations but also between a museum of modern art and a museum of contemporary art, housed in two separate buildings, which in turn led to an urgent need to focus on questions around the relationship between the modern and the contemporary.

At a time when museums of modern art are increasingly becoming museums of what are now historical styles from the twentieth century, an art that has been accumulated over decades, the museum of contemporary art needs a new definition. Above all, contemporaneity needs its own museum, just as, in the early twentieth century, modern art—the art that was then contemporary to its time—needed its own museum. In a certain way, the Moderna galerija was lucky. Circumstances of various kinds have always forced us to continually define our position toward contemporaneity and thus, in a way, to defend it. From my own experience, then, I would summarize the definition of the museum of contemporary art—which is different from the museum of modern art—as follows:

If the museum of modern art served certain universal paradigms, a master narrative, and the hegemonic goals of the big Western institutions, then the museum of contemporary art must serve the needs of local spaces so that they can enter as equals into dialogues with other spaces. In order for conditions to be at all possible for designing a museum of contemporary art as I describe it here, local spaces must determine their own work priorities, which cannot be universal. The pursuit of these principal objectives is necessary if a given space is to rid itself of backwardness and provincialism and become truly timely, and not merely concurrent with the West. The museum of contemporary art must make possible the perception of art as it has developed in various contexts. And here I am thinking not only of the various artistic movements that developed within different social realities, but also of the manner of presenting art in such a space. A museum of this kind can no longer be merely a museum of art. It must also be a museum of history, a museum of a diversity of narrations and their presentation. The white cube is just one of a number of possible models for this museum. Most important here are, above all, the points of connection between the various surfaces of the cube.

Mangelos, Manifest About Energy, no. 000, 1977–78.

X

Translated from the Slovene by Rawley Grau

Zdenka Badovinac has been director of Moderna galerija / the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, since 1993. She has curated numerous exhibitions presenting both Slovenian and international artists, and initiated the first collection of Eastern European art, Moderna galerija's 2000+ Arteast Collection. She has been systematically dealing with the processes of redefining history and with the questions of different avant-garde traditions of contemporary art, starting with the exhibition "Body and the East—From the 1960s to the Present" (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1998; Exit Art, New York, 2001). She continued in 2000 with the first public display of the 2000+ Arteast Collection: "2000+ Arteast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West" (Moderna galerija, 2000); and then with a series of Arteast Exhibitions, mostly at Moderna galerija: "Form-Specific" (2003); "7 Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow" (2004; co-curated with Victor Misiano and Igor Zabel); "Interrupted Histories" (2006); "Arteast Collection 2000+23" (2006); "The Schengen Women" (Galerija Skuc, Ljubljana, part of the *Hosting Moderna galerija !* project, 2008). Her other major projects include "unlimited.nl-3" (DeAppel, Amsterdam, 2000), "(un)gemalt, Sammlung Essl, Kunst der Gegenwart" (Klosterneuburg/Vienna, 2002), "ev+a 2004, Imagine Limerick, Open&Invited" (various exhibition venues, Limerick, 2004); "Democracies/the Tirana Biennale" (Tirana, 2005). She was Slovenian Commissioner at the Venice Biennale (1993–1997, 2005) and Austrian Commissioner at the Sao Paulo Biennial (2002).

1
Marina Gržinić and Walter Mignolo, "De-linking Epistemology from Capital and Pluri-Versality: A Conversation with Walter Mignolo, Part 3," *Reartikulacija* , no. 6 (2009), 7; https://web.archive.org/web/20120312224937/http://www.reartikulacija.org/RE6/ENG/decoloniality6_ENG_mign.html .

2
As Ramón Grosfoguel explains: "Peripheral nation-states and non-European people live today under the regime of 'global coloniality' imposed by the United States through the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the Pentagon, and NATO. . . I use the word 'colonialism' to refer to 'colonial situations' enforced by the presence of a colonial administration such as the period of classical colonialism. . . . I use 'coloniality' to address 'colonial situations' in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system. By 'colonial situations' I mean the cultural, political, sexual, and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racial/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations." "Transmodernity, Border Thinking, and Global Coloniality: Decolonizing Political Economy and Postcolonial Studies," *Eurozine* , April 7, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20130407195052/https://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2008-07-04-grosfoguel-en.pdf .

3
Nicolas Bourriaud, "Altermodern Manifesto," written for the 2009 Tate Triennial (Tate Britain, London), https://web.archive.org/web/20120228202535/https://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm .

4
Irit Rogoff, "Academy as Potentiality," in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, ed. Angelika Nollert and Irit Rogoff (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006); available online at https://designopendata.wordpress.com/portfolio/academy-as-potentiality-2007-irit-rogoff/ . This book was published as part of an international series of exhibitions and projects initiated by the Siemens Arts Program in cooperation with the Kunstverein in Hamburg, Goldsmiths College in London, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerp, and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.

5
Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde and the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 8.

6
"Transmodernity is the Latin American philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel's utopian project to transcend the Eurocentric version of modernity... Instead of a single modernity centred in Europe and imposed as a global design to the rest of the world, Dussel argues for a multiplicity of decolonial critical responses to Eurocentered modernity from the subaltern cultures and epistemic location of colonized people around the world." In Grosfoguel, "Transmodernity, Border Thinking, and Global Coloniality."

7
Walter Mignolo, "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity," in *Modernologies: Contemporary Artists Researching Modernity and Modernism* , ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009), 42; available online at https://monoskop.org/images/a/a6/Mignolo_Walter_2009_Coloniality_The_Darker_Side_of_Modernity.pdf . As an example of "altermodernity," Mignolo cites Bourriaud's "Altermodern Manifesto" (see note 3).

8
Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), xii.

9
Marina Gržinić and Walter Mignolo, "De-linking Epistemology from Capital and Pluri-Versality: A Conversation with Walter Mignolo, Part 2," *Reartikulacija* , no. 5 (2008), 21; https://web.archive.org/web/20130623072245/http://www.reartikulacija.org/RE5/ENG/decoloniality5_ENG_mign.html .

Boris Groys

Comrades of Time

1

Contemporary art deserves its name insofar as it manifests its own contemporaneity—and this is not simply a matter of being recently made or displayed. Thus, the question "What is contemporary art?" implicates the question "What is the contemporary?" How could the contemporary as such be shown?

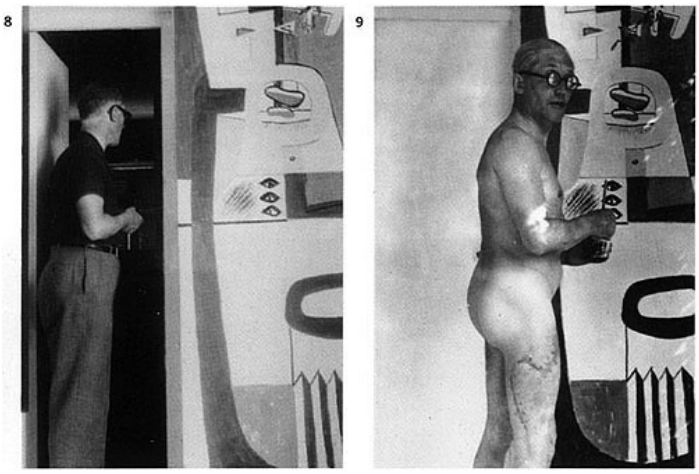
Being contemporary can be understood as being immediately present, as being here-and-now. In this sense, art seems to be truly contemporary if it is perceived as being authentic, as being able to capture and express the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted by past traditions or strategies aiming at success in the future. Meanwhile, however, we are familiar with the critique of presence, especially as formulated by Jacques Derrida, who has shown—convincingly enough—that the present is originally corrupted by past and future, that there is always absence at the heart of presence, and that history, including art history, cannot be interpreted, to use Derrida's expression, as "a procession of presences."[1]

But rather than further analyze the workings of Derrida's deconstruction, I would like to take a step back, and to ask: What is it about the present—the here-and-now—that so interests us? Already Wittgenstein was highly ironical about his philosophical colleagues who from time to time suddenly turned to contemplation of the present, instead of simply minding their own business and going about their everyday lives. For Wittgenstein, the passive contemplation of the present, of the immediately given, is an unnatural occupation dictated by the metaphysical tradition, which ignores the flow of everyday life—the flow that always overflows the present without privileging it in any way. According to Wittgenstein, the interest in the present is simply a philosophical—and maybe also artistic— *déformation professionnelle*, a metaphysical sickness that should be cured by philosophical critique.[2]

That is why I find the following question especially relevant for our present discussion: How does the present manifest itself in our everyday experience—before it begins to be a matter of metaphysical speculation or philosophical critique?

Now, it seems to me that the present is initially something that hinders us in our realization of everyday (or non-everyday) projects, something that prevents our smooth transition from the past to the future, something that obstructs us, makes our hopes and plans become not opportune, not up-to-date, or simply impossible to realize. Time and again, we are obliged to say: Yes, it is a good project but at the moment we have no money, no time, no energy, and so forth, to realize it. Or: This tradition is a wonderful one, but at the moment there is no interest in it and nobody wants to continue it. Or: This utopia is beautiful but, unfortunately, today no one believes in

utopias, and so on. The present is a moment in time when we decide to lower our expectations of the future or to abandon some of the dear traditions of the past in order to pass through the narrow gate of the here-and-now.



Le Corbusier painting on the white walls of Eileen Gray's E-1027.

Ernst Jünger famously said that modernity—the time of projects and plans, par excellence—taught us to travel with light luggage (*mit leichtem Gepäck*). In order to move further down the narrow path of the present, modernity shed all that seemed too heavy, too loaded with meaning, mimesis, traditional criteria of mastery, inherited ethical and aesthetic conventions, and so forth. Modern reductionism is a strategy for surviving the difficult journey through the present. Art, literature, music, and philosophy have survived the twentieth century because they threw out all unnecessary baggage. At the same time, these radical reductions also reveal a kind of hidden truth that transcends their immediate effectiveness. They show that one can give up a great deal—traditions, hopes, skills, and ideas—and still continue one's project in this reduced form. This truth also made the modernist reductions transculturally efficient—crossing a cultural border is in many ways like crossing the limit of the present.

Thus, during the period of modernity the power of the present could be detected only indirectly, through the traces of reduction left on the body of art and, more generally, on the body of culture. The present as such was mostly seen in the context of modernity as something negative, as something that should be overcome in the name of the future, something that slows down the realization of our projects, something that delays the coming of the future. One of the slogans of the Soviet era was "Time, forward!" Ilf and Petrov, two Soviet novelists of the 1920s, aptly parodied this modern feeling with the slogan "Comrades, sleep faster!" Indeed, in those times one actually would have preferred to sleep through the present—to fall asleep in the past and to wake up at the endpoint of progress, after the arrival of the radiant future.

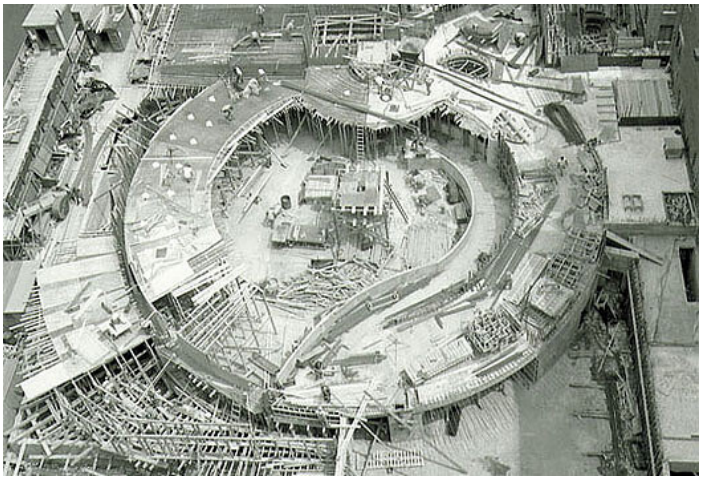
Lenin's embalmed/mummified body, permanently exhibited in the Lenin Mausoleum, Moscow, since 1924.

2

But when we begin to question our projects, to doubt or reformulate them, the present, the contemporary, becomes important, even central for us. This is because the contemporary is actually constituted by doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision—by the need for prolonged reflection, for a delay. We want to postpone our decisions and actions in order to have more time for analysis, reflection, and consideration. And that is precisely what the contemporary is—a prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay. Søren Kierkegaard famously asked what it would mean to be a contemporary of Christ, to which his answer was: It would mean to hesitate in accepting Christ as Savior.[3] The acceptance of Christianity necessarily leaves Christ in the past. In fact, Descartes already defined the present as a time of doubt—of doubt that is expected to eventually open a future full of clear and distinct, evident thoughts.

Now, one can argue that we are at this historical moment in precisely such a situation, because ours is a time in which we reconsider—not abandon, not reject, but analyze and reconsider—the modern projects. The most immediate reason for this reconsideration is, of course, the abandonment of the Communist project in Russia and Eastern Europe. Politically and culturally, the Communist project dominated the twentieth century. There was the Cold War, there were Communist parties in the West, dissident movements in the East, progressive revolutions, conservative revolutions, discussions about pure and engaged art—in most cases these projects, programs, and movements were interconnected by their opposition to each other. But now they can and should be reconsidered in their entirety. Thus, contemporary art can be seen as art that is involved in the reconsideration of the modern projects. One can say that we now live in a time of indecision, of delay—a boring time. Now, Martin Heidegger has interpreted boredom precisely as a

precondition for our ability to experience the presence of the present—to experience the world as a whole by being bored equally by all its aspects, by not being captivated by this specific goal or that one, such as was the case in the context of the modern projects.[4]



Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral ramp for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum under construction in New York in 1958. Photography: William H. Short/Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

Hesitation with regard to the modern projects mainly has to do with a growing disbelief in their promises. Classical modernity believed in the ability of the future to realize the promises of past and present—even after the death of God, even after the loss of faith in the immortality of the soul. The notion of a permanent art collection says it all: archive, library, and museum promised secular permanency, a material infinitude that substituted the religious promise of resurrection and eternal life. During the period of modernity, the "body of work" replaced the soul as the potentially immortal part of the Self. Foucault famously called such modern sites in which time was accumulated rather than simply being lost, heterotopias.[5] Politically, we can speak about modern utopias as post-historical spaces of accumulated time, in which the finiteness of the present was seen as being potentially compensated for by the infinite time of the realized project: that of an artwork, or a political utopia. Of course, this realization obliterates time invested in this realization, in the production of a certain product—when the final product is realized, the time that was used for its production disappears. However, the time lost in realizing the product was compensated for in modernity by a historical narrative that somehow restored it—being a narrative that glorified the lives of the artists, scientists, or revolutionaries that worked for the future.

But today, this promise of an infinite future holding the results of our work has lost its plausibility. Museums have become the sites of temporary exhibitions rather than spaces for permanent collections. The future is ever newly planned—the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten—names and events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future—of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control. The only thing that we can be certain about in our present is that these historical narratives will proliferate tomorrow as they are proliferating now—and that we will react to them with the same sense of disbelief. Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future. We simply lose our time, without being able to invest it securely, to accumulate it, whether utopically or heterotopically. The loss of the infinite historical perspective generates the phenomenon of unproductive, wasted time. However, one can also interpret this wasted time more positively, as excessive time—as time that attests to our life as pure being-in-time, beyond its use within the framework of modern economic and political projects.

As an example let us consider the animation by Francis Alÿs, *Song for Lupita* (1998). In this work, we find an activity with no beginning and no end, no definite result or product: a woman pouring water from one vessel to another, and then back. We are confronted with a pure and repetitive ritual of wasting time—a secular ritual beyond any claim of magical power, beyond any religious tradition or cultural convention.

One is reminded here of Camus' Sisyphus, a proto-contemporary-artist whose aimless, senseless task of repeatedly rolling a boulder up a hill can be seen as a prototype for contemporary time-based art. This non-productive practice, this excess of time caught in a non-historical pattern of eternal repetition constitutes for Camus the true image of what we call "lifetime"—a period irreducible to any "meaning of life," any "life achievement," any historical relevance. The notion of repetition here becomes central. The inherent repetitiveness of contemporary time-based art distinguishes it sharply from happenings and performances of the 1960s. A documented activity is not any more a unique, isolated performance—an individual, authentic, original event that takes place in the here-and-now. Rather, this activity is itself repetitive—even before it was documented by, let us say, a video running in a loop. Thus, the repetitive gesture designed by Alÿs functions as a programmatically impersonal one—it can be repeated by anyone, recorded, then repeated again. Here, the living human being loses its difference from its media image. The opposition between living organism and dead mechanism is made irrelevant by the originally mechanical, repetitive, and purposeless character of the documented gesture.

Francis Alÿs characterizes such a wasted, non-teleological

Francis Alÿs, Song for Lupita, 1998, detail. Pencil on tracing paper.

time that does not lead to any result, any endpoint, any climax as the time of rehearsal. An example he offers—his video *Politics of Rehearsal* (2007), which centers on a striptease rehearsal—is in some sense a rehearsal of a rehearsal, insofar as the sexual desire provoked by the striptease remains unfulfilled even in the case of a "true" striptease. In the video, the rehearsal is accompanied by a commentary by the artist, who interprets the scenario as the model of modernity, always leaving its promise unfulfilled. For the artist, the time of modernity is the time of permanent modernization, never really achieving its goals of becoming truly modern and never satisfying the desire that it has provoked. In this sense, the process of modernization begins to be seen as wasted, excessive time that can and should be documented—precisely because it never led to any real result. In another work, Alÿs presents the labor of a shoe cleaner as an example of a kind of work that does not produce any value in the Marxist sense of the term, because the time spent cleaning shoes cannot result in any kind of final product as required by Marx's theory of value.

But it is precisely because such a wasted, suspended, non-historical time cannot be accumulated and absorbed by its product that it can be repeated—impersonally and potentially infinitely. Already Nietzsche has stated that the only possibility for imagining the infinite after the death of God, after the end of transcendence, is to be found in the eternal return of the same. And Georges Bataille thematized the repetitive excess of time, the unproductive waste of time, as the only possibility of escape from the modern ideology of progress. Certainly, both Nietzsche and Bataille perceived repetition as something naturally given. But in his book *Difference and Repetition* (1968) Gilles Deleuze speaks of literal repetition as being radically artificial and, in this sense, in conflict with everything natural, living, changing, and developing, including natural law and moral law.[6] Hence, practicing literal repetition can be seen as initiating a rupture in the continuity of life by creating a non-historical excess of time through art. And this is the point at which art can indeed become truly contemporary.

4

Here I would like to mobilize a somewhat different meaning of the word "contemporary." To be con-temporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be "with time" rather than "in time." "Con-temporary" in German is "zeitgenössisch." As *Genosse* means "comrade," to be con-temporary—*zeitgenössisch*—can thus be understood as being a "comrade of time"—as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has difficulties. And under the conditions of our contemporary product-oriented civilization, time does indeed have problems when it is perceived as being unproductive, wasted, meaningless. Such unproductive time is excluded from historical narratives, endangered by the prospect of

Francis Alÿs, Still from The Politics of Rehearsal , 2005. DVD documentary, 29.54 min.

complete erasure. This is precisely the moment when time-based art can help time, to collaborate, become a comrade of time—because time-based art is, in fact, art-based time.

It is the rather traditional artworks (paintings, statues, and so forth) that can be understood as being time-based, because they are made with the expectation that they will have time—even a lot of time, if they are to be included in museums or in important private collections. But time-based art is not based on time as a solid foundation, as a guaranteed perspective; rather, time-based art documents time that is in danger of being lost as a result of its unproductive character—a character of pure life, or, as Giorgio Agamben would put it, "bare life."[7] But this change in the relationship between art and time also changes the temporality of art itself. Art ceases to be present, to create the effect of presence—but it also ceases to be "in the present," understood as the uniqueness of the here-and-now. Rather, art begins to document a repetitive, indefinite, maybe even infinite present—a present that was always already there, and can be prolonged into the indefinite future.

A work of art is traditionally understood as something that wholly embodies art, lending it an immediately visible presence. When we go to an art exhibition we generally assume that whatever is there on display—paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, readymades, or installations—must be art. The individual artworks can of course in one way or another make reference to things that they are not, maybe to real-world objects or to certain political issues, but they are not thought to refer to art, because they themselves are art. However, this traditional assumption has proven to be increasingly misleading. Besides displaying works of art, present-day art spaces also confront us with the documentation of art. We see pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations—in other words, the same forms and media

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1991. Clocks, paint on wall. overall 14 x 28 x 2 3/4" (35.6 x 71.2 x 7 cm).

in which art is commonly presented. But when it comes to art documentation, art is no longer presented through these media, but is simply referred to. For art documentation is *per definitionem* not art. Precisely by merely referring to art, art documentation makes it quite clear that art itself is no longer immediately present, but rather absent and hidden. Thus, it is interesting to compare traditional film and contemporary time-based art—which has its roots in film—to better understand what has happened to art and also to our life.

From its beginnings, film pretended to be able to document and represent life in a way that was inaccessible to the traditional arts. Indeed, as a medium of motion, film has frequently displayed its superiority over other media, whose greatest accomplishments are preserved in the form of immobile cultural treasures and monuments, by staging and celebrating the destruction of these monuments. This tendency also demonstrates film's adherence to the typically modern faith in the superiority of *vita activa* over *vita contemplativa.* In this respect, film manifests its complicity with the philosophies of *praxis*, of *Lebensdrang*, of *élan vital*, and of desire; it demonstrates its collusion with ideas that, in the footsteps of Marx and Nietzsche, fired the imagination of European humanity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries—in other words, during the very period that gave birth to film as a medium. This was the era when the hitherto prevailing attitude of passive contemplation was discredited and displaced by celebration of the potent movements of material forces. While the vita contemplativa was for a very long time perceived as an ideal form of human existence, it came to be despised and rejected throughout the period of modernity as a manifestation of the weakness of life, a lack of energy. And playing a central role in the new worship of vita activa was film. From its very inception, film has celebrated all that moves at high speeds—trains, cars, airplanes—but also all that goes beneath the surface—blades, bombs, bullets.

However, while film as such is a celebration of movement, in comparison to traditional art forms, it paradoxically drives the audience to new extremes of physical immobility. While it is possible to move one's body with relative freedom while reading or viewing an exhibition, the viewer in a movie theater is put in the dark and glued to a seat. The moviegoer's peculiar situation in fact resembles a grandiose parody of the very vita contemplativa that film itself denounces, because cinema embodies precisely the vita contemplativa as it would appear from the perspective of its most radical critic—an uncompromising Nietzschean, let us say—namely as the product of frustrated desire, lack of personal initiative, an example of compensatory consolation and a sign of an individual's inadequacy in real life. This is the starting point of many modern critiques of film. Sergei Eisenstein, for instance, was exemplary in the way he combined aesthetic shock with political propaganda in an attempt to mobilize the viewer and liberate him from his passive, contemplative condition.

The ideology of modernity—in all of its forms—was directed against contemplation, against spectatorship, against the passivity of the masses paralyzed by the spectacle of modern life. Throughout modernity we can identify this conflict between passive consumption of mass culture and an activist opposition to it—political, aesthetic, or a mixture of the two. Progressive, modern art has constituted itself during the period of modernity in opposition to such passive consumption, whether of political propaganda or commercial kitsch. We know these activist reactions—from the different avant-gardes of the early twentieth century to Clement Greenberg (Avant-Garde and Kitsch), Adorno (Cultural Industry), or Guy Debord (Society of the Spectacle), whose themes and rhetorical figures continue to resound throughout the current debate on our culture.[8] For Debord, the entire world has become a movie theater in which people are completely isolated from one another and from real life, and consequently condemned to an existence of utter passivity.

However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, art entered a new era—one of mass artistic production, and not only mass art consumption. To make a video and put it on display via the Internet became an easy operation, accessible to almost everyone. The practice of self-documentation has today become a mass practice and even a mass obsession. Contemporary means of communications and networks like Facebook, YouTube, Second Life, and Twitter give global populations the possibility to present their photos, videos, and texts in a way that cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptual artwork, including time-based artworks. And that means that contemporary art has today become

a mass-cultural practice. So the question arises: How can a contemporary artist survive this popular success of contemporary art? Or, how can the artist survive in a world in which everyone can, after all, become an artist? In order to make visible himself or herself in the contemporary context of mass artistic production, the artist needs a spectator who can overlook the immeasurable quantity of artistic production and formulate an aesthetic judgment that would single out this particular artist from the mass of other artists. Now, it is obvious that such a spectator does not exist—it could be God, but we have already been informed of the fact that God is dead. If contemporary society is, therefore, still a society of spectacle, then it seems to be a spectacle without spectators.

Ma Yuan (active 1190-1225), On a Mountain Path in Spring, Ink and color on silk. Southern Sung.

On the other hand, spectatorship today—vita contemplativa—has also become quite different from what it was before. Here again the subject of contemplation can no longer rely on having infinite time resources, infinite time perspectives—the expectation that was constitutive for Platonic, Christian, or Buddhist traditions of contemplation. Contemporary spectators are spectators on the move; primarily, they are travelers. Contemporary vita contemplativa coincides with permanent active circulation. The act of contemplation itself functions today as a repetitive gesture that can not and does not lead to any result—to any conclusive and well-founded aesthetic judgment, for example.

Traditionally, in our culture we had two fundamentally different modes of contemplation at our disposal to give us control over the time we spent looking at images: the immobilization of the image in the exhibition space, and the immobilization of the viewer in the movie theater. Yet both modes collapse when moving images are transferred to museums or exhibition spaces. The images will continue to move—but so too will the viewer. As a rule, under the conditions of a regular exhibition visit, it is impossible to watch a video or film from beginning to end if the film or video is relatively long—especially if there are many such time-based works in the same exhibition space. And in fact such an endeavor would be misplaced. To see a film or a video in its entirety, one has to go to a cinema or to remain in front of his or her personal computer. The whole point of visiting an exhibition of time-based art is to take a look at it and then another look and another look—but not to see it in its entirety. Here, one can say that the act of contemplation itself is put in a loop.

Time-based art as shown in exhibition spaces is a cool medium, to use the notion introduced by Marshall McLuhan.[9] According to McLuhan, hot media lead to social fragmentation: when reading a book, you are alone and in a focused state of mind. And in a conventional exhibition, you wander alone from one object to the next, equally focused—separated from the outside reality, in inner isolation. McLuhan thought that only electronic media such as television are able to overcome the isolation of the individual spectator. But this analysis of McLuhan's cannot be applied to the most important electronic medium of today—the Internet. At first sight, the Internet seems to be as cool, if not cooler, than television, because it activates users, seducing, or even forcing them into active participation. However, sitting in front of the computer and using the Internet, you are alone—and extremely focused. If the Internet is participatory, it is so in the same sense that literary space is. Here and there, anything that enters these spaces is noticed by other participants, provoking reactions from them, which in turn provoke further reactions, and so forth. However, this active participation takes place solely within the user's imagination, leaving his or her body unmoved.

By contrast, the exhibition space that includes time-based art is cool because it makes focusing on individual exhibits unnecessary or even impossible. This is why such a space is also capable of including all sorts of hot media—text, music, individual images—thus making them cool off. Cool contemplation has no goal of producing an aesthetic judgment or choice. Cool contemplation is simply the permanent repetition of the gesture of looking, an awareness of the lack of time necessary to make an informed judgment through comprehensive contemplation. Here, time-based art demonstrates the "bad infinity" of wasted, excessive time that cannot be absorbed by the spectator. However, at the same time, it removes from vita contemplativa the modern stigma of passivity. In this sense one can say that the documentation of time-based art erases the difference between vita activa and vita contemplativa. Here again time-based art turns a scarcity of time into an excess of time—and demonstrates itself to be a collaborator, a comrade of time, its true con-temporary.

X

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1
Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), 377.

2
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus L ogico-Philosophicus* , trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), 6.45.

3
See Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

4
See Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Existence and Being* , ed. W. Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co, 1949), 325–349.

5
See http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html .

6
See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* , trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, [1968] 2004)

7
See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* , 1st ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

8
See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Oakland: AKPress, 2005).

9
Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

Jörg Heiser

Torture and Remedy: The End of -isms and the Beginning Hegemony of the Impure

There is a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the often blunt commodification of art (and the processes of branding and generating wealth connected with it), and, on the other, the extremely heterogeneous, fragile practice of creating art. In fact, a good part of what makes an artist succumb to blunt commodification is the sheer anxiety caused by that heterogeneous fragility. Producing easily marketable, no-questions-asked work can offer a (deceptive) security no longer provided by classical avant-garde panache. There is no clearly distinguishable movement in sight that would lead out of this apparent deadlock. Given this, what are the options, the cracks of light in the otherwise uniformly dark, dystopian vision of poor, anxious artists doing irrelevant work for the rich? The answer to this question, as I will argue, is that today there is a kind of movement whose point is *not* to be clearly distinguishable, not to be "pure" anymore, not to allow itself to be historicized that way.

But before making that argument, it's necessary to understand what the last clearly distinguishable movements were, and why there now are none. The last period in visual arts that produced such movements was the 1960s: Pop Art, Minimal Art, and Conceptual Art. These movements were "distinguishable" because they were defined by a small set of methodological operations that could be identified as innovative in comparison to other achievements in art, whether earlier or contemporaneous. In other words, they were avant-gardes. Still, defining the "essence" and "newness" of these movements, or deciding whose work belongs clearly enough to any of them, has remained an often ideologically charged issue for many artists, critics, and scholars alike. And many of them have abandoned the very idea of a "movement." Usually they have done so in the name of either idiosyncrasy or the genius of the individual artist. Or they have done so, on the contrary, in the name of a more totalized idea of creative collectivity that supposedly "transcends" the limits of an "-ism" or mere "style."

But whether or not you're against the idea of movements no longer seems to be the problem. From the 1970s on, it has been difficult or next to impossible to clearly identify them in the first place. Everything became "neo-this" or "post-that," or a pronounced crossbreed between previous movements. Around the early 1980s in Europe and the U.S., "neo-expressionist" painting set out to reinvigorate older ideas of artistic intensity and immediacy, but—to generalize—remained less about changing the way you painted than about changing the way you presented yourself doing so. The method—paint fast, wittily—was considered a direct outpouring of a (usually masculine) rebellious attitude. At around the same time, neo-conceptual or appropriation artists such as Richard Prince or Sherrie Levine built on the achievements of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, on the ideas of the readymade, of appropriating existing cultural artifacts as art, and of making intelligent artistic

use of reproduction technologies. But regardless of their qualities as individual artists, the question remains whether they truly advanced or departed from these pioneers with that methodology. The same could be said of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija or Philippe Parreno who, from the mid 1990s on, have been associated with the catch phrase "Relational Aesthetics": did their artistic evocations of social situations (whether cooking in a gallery or buying the rights to a Japanese anime character), their deconstructions of the categories of "artwork" and "exhibition," really move beyond the achievements of the 1960s? After all, already in 1969 a conceptual artist, for example, offered a reward of $1,100 for information leading to the arrest of a bank robber wanted by the FBI (Douglas Huebler, *Duration Piece No. 15, Global*). In the contemporary Chinese context, similar questions can probably be asked about the "Cynical Realism," "Political Pop," or "Gaudy Art" styles of the 1990s: besides their aspirations to subvert through satirical, ironical, or grotesque figurative representation and their indisputable pioneering importance for the establishment of a new art scene, what did they really achieve methodologically in comparison to earlier movements?

In any case, rather than evoking the sense (or illusion?) of something radically new, these post- and neo- or cross-breed-movements, for better or worse, all seemed to be about re-investigating the heritage of previous movements (if seen generously), or about devouring their corpses (if seen nihilistically). Or is that all a retroactive illusion? Were the 1960s movements, which were equally concerned with historical predecessors, maybe more clever in concealing that fact? Were the postwar movements, as theoreticians such as German literary critic Peter Bürger have argued, merely recycling the early twentieth-century avant-gardes?[1] And what does this mean for ideas of shock, radicality, and criticality? And can we still meaningfully categorize art in this way today?

Before we can explore all of these questions further, there are two points that need to be clarified. The first concerns the three aforementioned 1960s movements: we need to understand how exactly it became possible to give each a simple, singular name: Pop, Minimal, Concept. What does that tell us about their nature and continuing influence? The second point is that the seeming disappearance of clearly distinguishable movements is not at all exclusive to visual art, as similar developments can be discerned in other realms such as music, philosophy, and politics. In other words, a more fundamental sea change seems to be at work.

Pop/Minimal/Concept

So what is it that made Pop, Minimal, and Concept such appealing one-name signifiers? And why is it that we can no longer come up with anything as succinct and to the point in "labeling" broader developments in art? There is not enough space here to develop a full history of these terms, much less discuss the full range of artists and movements associated with them. So in order to answer this question, it's worth examining the meanings of these one-name labels as such, and what those meanings might tell us about what decisive factors distinguish an artistic movement.

Window of the Gagosian Store NYC, opened in October 2009.

The term "Pop Art" was invented in Britain in the mid 1950s. It was first used in conversation between members of the Independent Group: a number of artists, architects, writers, and critics who held meetings at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, seeking to challenge prevailing notions of modern art. The artist Eduardo Paolozzi, a Scottish-born son of Italian immigrants, at the first meeting in 1952, showed a series of collages composed mostly of found elements from American mass culture. One of them included the word "pop," placed on a cloud emerging from a revolver, followed by an exclamation mark, cut out of a comic strip and collaged onto the cover of a magazine of erotic pulp stories called "Intimate Confessions." So the word is onomatopoetic: it emulates the sound of a shot, or of a bubble bursting—pop! The sound of a sudden release of energy,

light rather than heavy. The association of this energy with light entertainment is made even clearer in the other seminal collage from the early days of Pop Art: Richard Hamilton's *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956). The collaged living room scene, similar to Paolozzi's work, ironically alludes to romance and sex in a slapstick collision of clichés of masculinity and femininity. The bodybuilder placed in the middle holds what looks like a tennis racket, but is in fact a huge lollipop inscribed with the capital letters "POP" -- which also happens to be the colloquialism for "lollypop." This English term dates back to the eighteenthcentury, and initially referred to soft candy. It may have derived from "lolly" (tongue) and "pop" (slap).[2] The first references to the lollipop as hard candy on a stick dates to the early twentieth century, when it became possible to mass-produce them.[3] The term "soda pop," for sweet soft drinks such as Coca-Cola, also presumably stems from this period—probably earning its name from the sound one hears when opening the bottle. Either way, what we have here is a conversion between light-hearted pleasure and craving desire: the connection between innocent sweetness and bluntly sexual connotations, which the works by both Paolozzi and Hamilton do more than just allude to. In the latter's case, the lollipop, through its placement at the crotch of the muscular man, becomes a grotesquely bulbous phallus. The origins of Dada and Surrealism are here, but so is the new teenage culture of rock 'n' roll that moves and shakes and sexualizes the bodies of a much broader populace.

The art critic Lawrence Alloway is often credited with having first come up with the term "Pop Art." But he identified the movement without using the term. In his 1958 essay "The Arts and the Mass Media," though he speaks of "mass popular art," he does not address fine arts to any great extent.[4] Rather, he argues much more broadly for the validity of popular culture itself, thus paving the way for this new art. In any case, here we have the more obvious, technical meaning of the word "pop"—as an abbreviation, simply, for popular: the culture of, and for, the many. But the onomatopoetic meaning of "pop!"—the sound of a conversion between light-hearted innocence and almost violent desire—permeates this technical meaning. This culture of and for the many is not merely defined by quantity but also by a particular quality, a kind of instantly inflating and deflating delight, like the refreshing sound of a bottle opening, or the silly "pop" of a deflating balloon, a quality for which it is praised or scorned, sometimes both at once—Pop!

The Pop artists transferred this instantaneousness into the realm of art, turning slight delight into eternalized epiphany. But this "transfiguration of the commonplace," to use Arthur Danto's phrase, does not turn Pop artists into priests of this transfiguration.[5] Rather, they are just exceptional, or exemplary, in singling out the occurrences of this delight-as-epiphany. This decidedly marks the shift from the first British Pop art of Paolozzi and Hamilton, still in the tradition of the Dada/Surrealist collage (as Peter Bürger had suspected), and that of Andy Warhol's substitution of collage with serialization. In doing this, Warhol is not just applying one more clever idea; he erases the "artistic" exemplification of composition still present in collage to expose the artist as simply, or merely, an exemplary or substitutional consumer—someone who makes a picture choice. At the same time, he also erases "comment": while a collage still suggests a meaning and an opinion, serialization—by leaving elements to collide suggestively—dissolves meaning and opinion into ambiguity. One could suspect that Warhol *celebrates* the Coca-Cola bottle or Marilyn Monroe by serializing their image in silkscreen, but does that apply to the newspaper image of an electric chair as well? In either case, the mechanistic approach is the point. The sudden inflating/deflating "pop" sound represents our passiveness in the moment we are caught unaware vis-à-vis the commodity: our opinion or choice in regard to these images (a choice often structurally preconditioned by what is made available in our society in the first place) is no more than that of a consumer, a reader, a viewer. But even if we do not really like them, we have to admit that they affect us. At this point, the artist is no longer the producer, as opposed to the viewer, but the exemplary viewer and the exemplary consumer—a particular kind of consumer: the "classical" consumer who has a relatively stable set of choices and references that are part of his social identity (I'll return below to the definition of the "consumer"). If Pop celebrates anything, it is not commodities as such, but this totalized identification of the artist with the role of the spectator/consumer confronted with commodities.

Andy Warhol, Camouflage, 1986, in Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.

Minimal

When Minimal art first emerged in the U.S., it seemed to be the antidote to all of this. No visual icons of the commodity world, just plain surfaces, reduced geometries. The term was arguably first used by the critic Richard

Wollheim in an essay entitled "Minimal Art," published in 1965.[6] But it took years for it to catch on. Other terms such as Rejective art, ABC art, Specific Objects, Reductivism, and Primary Structures were launched. Only the last two, like "Minimal," place the emphasis on simplification. "Rejective" emphasizes the departure from any kind of comforting "illusionist space," story, or allegory in this kind of work; "ABC" its steady, simplistic seriality; and "specific object" its departure from the traditional categories of painting and sculpture.

But why did "Minimal Art" catch on? First of all, because it resonated with phenomena in other disciplines that seemed motivated by similar concerns—"minimalism" was something happening in music and dance, and arguably in film and literature, as well. What these movements share according to that view, however, is not merely an ideal of reductive form, but also a methodology of allowing things to stand or speak for themselves in an unpretentious, matter-of-fact way, that is, without the claim of a grand genius mind purveying them; without the display of handicraft; replacing lyrical or dramatic movement with serial movement; and maybe most importantly: providing a structure in which production and reception can interact. In the serial music of someone like Terry Riley, the performers often have more to do than just "interpret"; or the "actual" performing is done with a recording, while listeners have to possibly be more acutely active to immerse themselves in the space-time continuum of the music. But it's also apparent in the idea most notably put forth by the minimal artist Robert Morris that the crucial point of minimal art is to establish a spatial relation between viewer and object, heightening the viewer's self-awareness.[7] An entire discussion has centered on the value of this emphasis on the viewer-work relation as opposed to qualities supposedly intrinsic to the work itself. But that discussion of evaluation aside, there is a *structural* kernel to all these aspects of minimal art. Pop art freeze-frames what consumers of popular culture experience into an iconic abstraction; minimal art, on the contrary, establishes simple structures that are like model scenarios for how aesthetic experience occurs in the first place. This happens almost literally in the sense of what Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible": establishing a form or manner in which something can appear, or "lend itself to participation."[8] Pop art hypostatized the receptive realm of consumption, while minimal art hypostatized the transitory realm of distribution or circulation—the realm where relations between production and consumption, object and viewer are negotiated. To substantialize or eternalize such a relational realm seems a contradiction in terms, but it's not: what minimal artists offer in the way of viewer participation is an exemplary, simplified, model case. Its "minimal" quality is what makes its status as a model case apparent.

Concept

The term "Concept Art" was arguably first used by Henry Flynt, a writer and musician loosely associated with the Fluxus movement. In 1961 he wrote that the material of this kind of art consists of "concepts," just as sound is the material of music.[9] But it probably wasn't until around 1968 that the term " *Conceptual* art" had fully established itself. Famously, Sol LeWitt stated: "the idea is the machine that makes the art."[10]

2. The piece may be fabricated.

3. The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.[11]

Henry Flynt in 1963. Photo by Diane Wakoski.

Conceptual art in this sense mimics what an industrial designer or engineer might do: they design a brilliant new car, and even if the company decides not to build it, or no one wants to buy it, the design has come into existence and might have an influence on other designers and engineers. Of course this comparison is a little unfair, because the point of Conceptual art is precisely to take the *utilization* of ideas towards a sellable "product"—whether a shelf or a car—out of the equation. The idea itself is what is supposed to count.

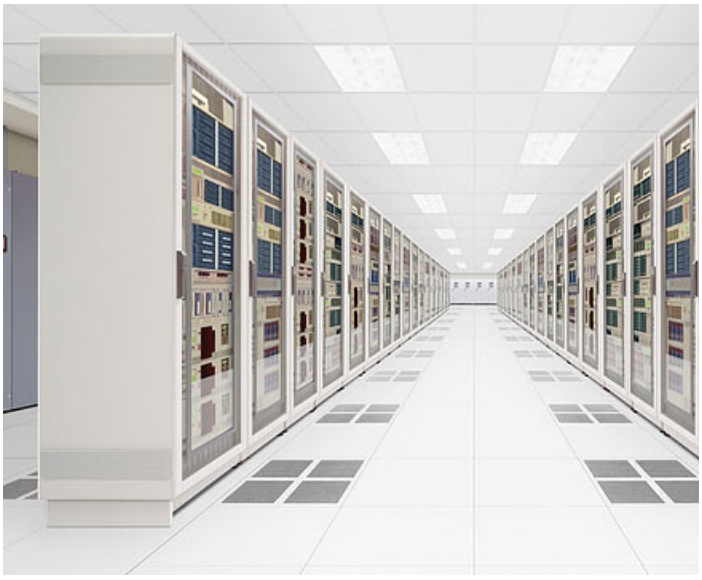
Many conceptual artists would read the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, attracted to the way he combined clearheaded analysis of language and logic with a playful, deadpan style of writing. A good example—though not by an artist whose work is "purely" conceptual—is Bruce Nauman's adaption of a phrase from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: he cast the sentence "A Rose has no Teeth" in lead, like a memorial

plaque, and fixed it to a tree in a park (1966); later, he made copies in plastic and sent them to people in the mail. Wittgenstein had used the sentence in a comparison with the sentence "A baby has no teeth"—the problem he was concerned with being that grammar alone can't distinguish plausible from implausible statements. Nauman's reaction complicates the matter by casting an absurd-seeming sentence in lead, as if a poetics could emerge that suddenly highlights the actual profundity of the sentence "a rose has no teeth." It's as if Nauman were saying: what seems like a faulty design—an absurd sentence—can actually be turned into something interesting. The conceptual artists, on the idea level, turned nothing into something; and on the physical level, turned something into nothing (even Nauman's lead plaque would eventually be overgrown by the tree).

The conceptual artist—whether concerned about art alone, or about the social and political sphere as well—impersonated the unashamedly absurd producer: a figure that is half-smart engineer, half-eccentric dilettante. In any case, emphasis is placed on highlighting the idea as anticipating—and prior to—any physical manifestation, the circulation and reception of a work. LeWitt's "the idea is the machine that makes the art" in this sense also marks the heyday of industrialization, the devaluation of handicraft, and the dawning of an era in which indeed ideas—or at least information—are the "means of production" rather than actual machines. This can obviously lead to all kinds of suspicions: was conceptual art merely celebrating the new capitalist culture, the fetish of information and communication technology, the de-subjectivation of production and administration? I think these suspicions are beside the point as long as they generalize about the whole movement—because ultimately the problem is not that you produce but *what* you produce; not that you have an idea, but *what kind* of idea.

Production, Distribution, Consumption

But in any case, in my own admittedly schematic characterization, these three movements of the 1960s captured the basic economic triad of production, distribution, and consumption. Conceptual art is about the production of ideas that in turn produce the art; Pop art is an artistic exploration of the standards of the contemporary spectator's experience; and minimal art is about structural parameters of space, materiality, geometry, and so on, that form the conditions under which aesthetic experiences that might lead to ideas can occur. Distribution or circulation are the realms in which production is both engendered in the first place (the means of production needs to be distributed before production can take place), and negotiated and compartmentalized in regard to consumption or reception. My argument however is not that these three artistic movements were simply illustrating the three basic



Server farm.

aspects of the socioeconomic reproduction of society. Rather, I'm arguing that they are a seismic detector for a point in time when these realms became intermingled more radically than ever before.

It was already hard enough to distinguish production, distribution, and consumption from one another, since each reflects certain aspects of the other two. Any production is also a kind of consumption (for example, of resources), and consumption is also a kind of production (because without use the product is not "completed"); and distribution or circulation produce and consume simultaneously as well. Still, on a common-sense level, we sort of know the approximate difference. Yet in the age of the Internet, of financial markets so complex that the players themselves don't fully understand its mechanisms, and of thoroughly global economic interdependence, it has become almost impossible to keep them apart. Information circulates so quickly, at such a high rate, and in such quantities that to sort it all out becomes a kind of production process in itself. The fusion of production and consumption has been heralded many times, by accentuating the classical way in which any production is a consumption of sorts, and consumption is always also a way of producing. But consumers of social networking Web sites such as Facebook *are* actually producing something beyond the mere completion or re-contextualization of a product given to them. And distribution or circulation is the very tool of that production. Whether this production is considered beneficial or not depends on many factors that need to be evaluated, which is not my concern here. Rather, I'm concerned with the effects this essentially technological and economic development has on the idea of distinguishable movements.

Classical avant-gardes were about generations in quarrel:

Pop art, Minimal, and Conceptual art were not least rejections of the earlier Abstract Expressionism. But today, the idea of generations succeeding each other becomes blurred; as soon as you are willing to enter the circulation, it is possible to re-launch. Avant-gardes, in an odd way, were dependent on information, but also on a *lack* of information: a kind of productive ignorance of the contradiction of their rejections of previous generations, for example. This has become harder and harder: the more these contradictions have been discussed, the more it has become impossible to make the same "productive" mistakes again.

So are we dealing here with a kind of "saturation" of the idea that art could progress? A kind of historic accumulation of already-achieved expansions and reinventions of what art could be, leaving us feeling stranded amidst the flotsam of these previous achievements piling up in the museums, the libraries, and on the Internet? Evidence that this might be the case comes courtesy of the observation that this experience is not exclusive to art. In pop music, the last "explosions" of new styles were punk in the 1970s and hip-hop and techno in the 1980s; since then, a myriad of styles have been circulating, but none has had a comparable impact. In philosophy, the age of schools seems to be over, too; since the death of Jacques Derrida in 2004, all of the influential movements seem actually to be hybrids of earlier movements, even if they ironically argue for purity and against hybridity, and so on.

But is this really a problem? It is insofar as we demand that art (or philosophy, or pop music) completely re-invent itself once more. The thing is that this re-invention has become seemingly impossible because all these previous re-inventions were built on the possibility of expansion, and once the globe has been saturated with expansion, the only way forward seems to be to shrink backwards.

But we shouldn't forget the well-known allegation against modernism, that it hypostatizes progress and invention, and thus perpetuates the capitalist ideology of newness. The allegation against postmodernism in turn is that it hypostatizes eclecticism and heterogeneity, late capitalism's ideology of pick-'n'-mix consumerism. I think both these allegations are hampered, if not outright wrong.

As for the allegation against modernism: the allegation erases a crucial difference between mere novelty and actual innovation that holds true both for the avant-gardes and for capitalism. You might hate capitalism, its cold mechanical production of success and annihilation, but you can't ignore that in its history there have been innovations that exceeded, sometimes excessively, its own logic—one could for example argue that the Marxist tradition is a kind of critique that capitalism inevitably had to produce; or think, again, of the Internet, which on the one hand is a brilliant marketing device, but is at the same time a brilliant means of sabotaging that very marketing, if necessary. As Boris Groys has argued, "newness" is the negotiation of the division between what is considered profane and what is considered valuable.[12]

A similar thing can be said about art movements: at face value, they might "just" be about a stylistic innovation; but in fact they can foster "real" structural innovation, sometimes almost as a collateral effect. Think of how conceptual art has changed the way art is made; the "style" of, for example, writing up propositions with a typewriter may seem dated now, but nevertheless the conceptual methodology remains silently present in a great deal of art made today.

Just as method is not merely style, idea is not merely novelty. But how do we detect the difference? For a true idea in the "classic sense" to emerge, there are usually two contradictory telltale signs: it is met with rage and rejection, or it is completely ignored. In terms of European science, one could think of Giordano Bruno, who argued that the universe is endless and the stars we see are all distant suns. We know today that he was completely right, but in 1600 he was burned at the stake by the Church in Rome. In modern art, just to take two obvious examples: the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* in 1913 caused a riot, and the first presentation of Marcel Duchamp's *The Fountain* (1917), the famous urinal as readymade, went completely unnoticed—people simply didn't perceive it as a work of art.

Innovative concepts today are still met with rejection and ignorance, or a mixture of both. But usually the information is too readily available and there are too many players for things *not* to find an audience—the most outrageous or unthinkable things will be accepted even if only by a relatively small group, and in this sense, rage and rejection have been replaced by a kind of generalized indifference.

But should that indifference be held against art? Should art try to violently break through indifference by again provoking rage and rejection? Some artists in recent years have tried to do so, usually by way of breaking age-old taboos such as the peace of the dead, or cannibalism. I can think of two obvious Chinese examples: Zhu Yu, who allegedly ate a fetus (*Eating People*, 2000), and Xiao Yu, who exhibited the head of a dead fetus (*Ruan*, 2002). But things that shock can, instead of being avant-garde, be utterly conventional: in the sense that they do nothing but provoke shock based on the *existing* moral or juridical structure. Meanwhile, things that are applauded might be so for the wrong reasons—not for their innovative kernel but for their conventional shell. To answer the question of whether indifference should be held against art: I don't think so. The value of art is not defined by immediate reaction, its true achievement may only be realized much later, in hindsight. So the tell-tale signs of a "new" idea—that it is met with rejection, ignorance, or both—don't really work in a global environment of

mass-media saturation. Boris Groys was right in arguing that acceptance of innovation depends on cultural archiving—one can only distinguish and appreciate the new in relation to the old.[13] But what if that archive becomes so vast that it can't be held in check, if it extends beyond any single human being's capacity? Art has grown exponentially both through time and around the globe. Artistic innovation, it seems, can only be taken forward if it's not so much about finding that one tiny *thing* that hasn't entered the archive of cultural knowledge yet (the fetus meal, for instance), but about finding an innovative way of making use of that archive, or of settling into its cracks and uncharted assets. Innovation for a long time probably relied as much on information as it did on ignorance, or rather the luck of overlooking the right things. It's become rather hard not to be relatively well-informed in a field when, via the Internet and growing archives, almost everything is available at hand.

The rock band Gogol Bordello are described as "a multi-ethnic Gypsy punk band from the Lower East Side of New York."

Just as mere stylistic novelty needs to be distinguished from true structural innovation in the modernist conception, so with postmodernism does true heterogeneity needs to be distinguished from faux heterogeneity. Until quite recently, we could to some extent trust intuition: we knew the difference between a merely folkloristic, superficial demonstration of eclectic pastiche or multicultural harmony, and an actual cross-fertilization of different strands of cultural tradition. It becomes apparent in gesture, in the details of pronunciation, in the actual knowledge. The Internet, however, has changed this. Just as much as it blurs the line between the "now" of novelty and newness and the infinite depth of history and archive, it also blurs the line between fake heterogeneity and true heterogeneity. It has made it possible to produce atomized mutant hybrids between the two: people who are great enough fans will be able to find film footage and sound recordings and images and scholarly discussion of virtually anything on the Internet.

Up until the 1990s, in pop music, we discussed so-called crossovers between two different genres such as heavy metal and hip-hop, or punk and reggae. Today, young bands from, say, Brooklyn, New York, happily tap into *hundreds* of sources, New Wave and cheesy middle-of-the-road pop and African beats and Brazilian bossa nova and English folk rock and what have you. In art, it's similar. A few years ago, I wrote an article and made an exhibition on what I called "Romantic Conceptualism," detecting a strand of conceptual art that had been present from its inception in the 1960s, but had only become fully apparent through the contemporary work made in its wake. In other words, artists had been looking at the monolithic-seeming last avant-gardes of Pop, Minimal, and Concept and had started to notice contradictions and seemingly peripheral figures, which they explored and put center stage. In the case of Romantic Conceptualism, the work of artists such as Bas Jan Ader seemed to call conceptual art's apparent emphasis on cool rationalism into question. With regard to the 1990s and up until very recently, one can speak similarly of Psychedelic Minimalism, Libidinal Minimalism, Pop Abstraction. Not to forget the many re-evaluations of older avant-gardes: looking at constructivist or surrealist legacies with, for example, the new political landscape of Eastern Europe in mind, or re-evaluating gender and sexual orientation.

To some extent, I think that phase is over. Now these re-readings have basically been done. The upper echelons of the art business may have always preferred label clarity—an immediately recognizable visual style—and while this attitude may persist, it will be less than ever before where innovation actually occurs. Further mutations and atomizations will take place that not only question the distinctions and contradictions between genres and styles, but structurally evaporate the very notion of genre and style. This is actually less "new" than it may seem: since the 1960s, there have been artists such as Bruce Nauman or Mike Kelley or Rosemarie Trockel who absorbed an enormous variety of methodologies, ideas, and styles into their practice. Ai Weiwei is arguably another example. I would argue that this kind of approach, for the first time, will become fully hegemonic. Does that mean all will be ruled by indifference—anything goes, you can present any absurd, multiple combination of things as art? No; it just raises the bar. Amidst the sea of possibilities, in order not to drown, you have to make yourself a raft of whatever you find. It's not the cleanest raft that counts, but the one that takes you the furthest. There are artists such as Ming Wong, a Berlin-based Singaporean artist making wildly eclectic but super-succinct "mutated" remakes of all sorts of scenes from film history; or Roee Rosen, an Israeli artist who—besides actually breaking taboos, in the guise of role-play and parody—leaves no stone unturned in mixing

Roee Rosen, Justine Frank, Homage to Goya, 1927. Gouache on paper, 58x38.5 cm.

up genres and disciplines and political forms of expression and ways of embarrassing yourself, all to further the cause of art. When I see that kind of work, I think it proves that the perversely hybrid nature of today's cultural and political landscape has had an effect on the tendency of art to settle into one aspect of the triad of production, distribution, and consumption I previously described—now, it seems all three are turned into a wildly whirling medley, and again it's hard to resist the comparison to the Internet's effect of equally blurring the lines between production, distribution, and consumption more radically and fundamentally than ever before.

In an article I wrote a few years ago about Richard Artschwager—another predecessor of today's freestyle mutationalism—I tried to explain his odd position at the edges of Pop, Minimal, and Concept with an allegory involving people in an office building.[14] In 1981, Artschwager had realized an installation called *Janus* in the Hayden Gallery at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It made the viewers feel as if they were in a chrome-framed, oak Formica elevator. On pressing the buttons in a panel in the wall, small lights lit up one by one accompanied by the rushing sound of an elevator in motion till the desired floor had been reached. On the basis of this work, it was possible to liken Artschwager's position in the context of Pop, Minimal, and Concept art to that of an elevator in a New York office building, the kind one sees in the opening scene of Billy Wilder's comedy *The Apartment*. Pop artists hang around on the streets and in the lobby, some have their noses pressed against the show windows of boutiques, some are leafing through fashion journals at the newsstand or buying themselves a hot dog at the kiosk. The eyes of the minimalists sweep indifferently across the scene, then travel along the flat and monochromatic grid of the facade all the way to the opaque paneling of the executives' upper floors. The conceptualists are already looking around in the accounts-and-planning department when Artschwager's elevator, paneled with Formica and resonant with surreal Muzak, glides past all the floors—from the lobby past the accounts-and-planning department to the executive floor and down again. Where are the young contemporary artists in this scene? They are taking on all of the roles available, as if they were on loan from a temporary employment company. They are the plumbers and window cleaners, the visiting CEO landing on the roof in a helicopter, the bike courier, the tourists who go up to the top-floor panorama restaurant. Whether this is all a travesty, or actually leads to something, will hopefully be clearer in a few years' time. In any case, the diagnosis of a "corruption" of art by its conditions in capitalist society is to be taken as a starting point, not as the reason to bewail a final stage.

Still from The Apartment, 1960, directed by Billy Wilder.

According to Marx, the fetish commodity, as if by magic, renders the work that went into producing it invisible. In contrast, luxury products often highlight the specialized handicraft that went into producing them. Maybe one of art's jobs is to continue finding ways to position itself like a stoppage in the gap between these two versions of the object, playing them off against each other, even by way of repudiating objecthood itself. This also means preventing

consumption and production from being presented as a seamless continuum. Against this background, denouncing the "now" as mere novelty is fruitless: it erases the question of what *is* new, the undeniable existence of, for example, new ways of waging war or torturing, or, just as well, new cures and remedies against diseases. The fact we have to face is that art, probably, is torture and remedy in one.

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1
See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* , trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

2
See "lollipop," Online Etymology Dictionary, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=lollipop . Alternatively, it may be a word of Gypsy origin related to the Roma tradition of selling apples dipped in red candy and placed on a stick, the term for which is "loli phaba" (red apple).

3
See "The History of Lollipop Candy," CandyFavorites.com, http://www.candyfavorites.com/shop/catalog-lollipop-history.php .

4
Lawrence Alloway, "The Arts and the Mass Media," *Architectural Design* 28 (February 1958): 34–35.

5
See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

6
Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art," *Arts Magazine* (January 1965): 26–32.

7
Robert Morris: "[O]ne is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from varying positions and under varying conditions." Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture II," *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (October 1966): 21.

8
See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London, New York: Continuum, 2006).

9
See http://www.henryflynt.org/meta_tech/crystal.html .

10
Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10, (Summer 1967), 78–83.

11
Reproduced in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* , ed. Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1992), 894.

12
Boris Groys, "On the New" in *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 22–42.

13
Boris Groys, "Multiple Authorship" in *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 92–100.

14
Jörg Heiser, "Elevator. Richard Artschwager in the Context of Minimal, Pop and Concept Art," *Richard Artschwager: The Hydraulic Doorcheck* , ed. Peter Noever (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Koenig and MAK Vienna, 2003), 49–60.

Hu Fang

New Species of Spaces

Bo wu zhi (History of Nature), compiled by Zhang Hua during the Western Jìn Dynasty (265–316), is the first study of natural history in China. In this ten-volume book, Zhang recorded geographic features of the landscape, animals, biographies, myths and ancient history, immortals and ancient alchemy, and so on. He placed all that could not be categorized into a special section entitled "The Miscellaneous."

If we take the whole world to be a book, then we are today lost in its multiple narratives and countless miscellanea. If we take it as a medium through which to reflect and explore the world, this book is no longer able to keep up with the speed at which narratives now unfold in it.

> As a central building in the community, cinema is the largest luminous architectural body. Lights and film are cast in the sky of community, and linked with lights of city, of course, cast on bodies and faces from the bottom-up, as like the final scene in Genesis. A bustling city appears before us, and accomplishments under foot, there is an impassable and high aloft feel. . .

— Beijing-based real estate ad magazine *Contemporary MOMA*, No.8

The Linked Hybrid building, also known as 当代MOMA (Contemporary MOMA) is a residential building complex designed by American architect Steven Holl for Beijing. This huge residential container is more like an epochal allegory of the imaged space of reality. It proclaims:

1. Reality will become a set in a film.
2. Residents will be the stars of the film.
3. The architect will become the film's director.

In this way, architects and developers encourage people to participate in the creative process of "seeing" and "being seen" in the performance of contemporary life.

If seeing is an act of consciousness, then today such an activity seems to create its own reality: the mirror. Through his works, Dan Graham revealed the significant psychological effects of the semi-reflective glass used in shopping centers and office buildings on people, particularly at moments when one's own reflected image fuses with that of the goods displayed behind the glass. This fusion produces an entirely new self-image. While of course Graham shows that this new self-image is of someone who wants to purchase the goods behind the

window, he also touches upon the most fundamental cultural condition of urban life, namely that urban living space has become a continuous system of self-reflection in which "I" can never perceive the existence of other people beyond my own mirrored image, just as the city itself cannot perceive any other parts of the world, but only its own reflection.

People experience an endless carnival within a cycle of their own mirrored images, and the city lives within its own mirrors endlessly. This is the beginning of exhausted self-experience.

Do we still have a real relationship with reality?

> He withdraws his eyes from the flashing computer screen back to the gray horizon beyond the glass wall, where thick clouds are lit by a gloomy sunset, where high-rises extend one after another into the endless distance like reproducing cells, together creating our living borders through rapid replication and continuous hybrids.
>
> Pressing the keyboard, a theme park weaves, accumulates, rotates, and diffuses in color.
>
> In a city of constant destruction and reconstruction, history has been superimposed constantly, and to a point where it is so blurred that it can no longer be seen.

—Hu Fang, *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* [1]

In a novel I wrote entitled *Garden of Mirrored Flowers*, I began to imagine the figure of an architect who gradually found the maze of life revealing itself to him as he constructed a theme park called "Garden of Mirrored Flowers."

In contrast to Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," the maze of life in *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* could perhaps be a direct contact with reality itself, with the novel serving as a "documentary" of it—a collection of those traces in reality, such as television advertisements, stock market summaries, cell phone messages, shopping lists, and so on, which are always shown as dramatic events. From political performances to economic crises, the production of reality in the form of a story seems to occur in abundance today.

Thus, this novel becomes a "script" of reality, as the Russian writer Victor Pelevin suggests with regard to the Russian literary tradition in the preface to the Chinese edition of *Generation "."* "In Russia, the writers do not write novels, but scripts."

In this case, "I" am not the author of the novel, but rather, reality writes its own novel by my hand. This reality then grows increasingly surrealistic and begins to overflow, becoming saturated to a point where it is emptied of its own value.

If we agree that our reality becomes increasingly like the thoughts secreted by an insane collective mind, then can we even see this reality?

> Spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified . . . To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself.

—Georges Perec [2]

In the misty mist, you pass through a jungle or a mountain. At one point, the road forks: to the left is the first life; to the right, the second life.

Without Cao Fei / China Tracy's *I.mirror*, I would not have encountered a life called Second Life, where there appear to be new concepts of life and death, new histories and new worldviews. But soon we will find Second Life to be not an entirely new world, but rather the same life as the first one.

I.mirror shows the beautiful landscape at the end of the world's wilderness; it is not about the future, but is a metaphor for daily life and the politics of the present. [3]

In other words, the aesthetics of the future are not mysterious.

They exist along a blurry border between reality and fantasy, and will disappear over the horizon just as life will. But artists will be more engaged in life—no longer as a solidified reality with an original single meaning, but as a continuous flowing process.

I observe in the artistic works of the individuals around me—Cao Fei, Ming Wong, Xu Tan, Pak Sheung Chuen, Yang Fudong, Zheng Guogu—the recognition of a complex relationship between art and reality: art no longer operates in a laboratory of artists, but as intuitive and active participation in the possibility of life. In this sense, I think our question for art shall concern what it can "become," but not what it "is," and we can say that, from the beginning, the purpose of such creation will not be to produce something that becomes a work, but that acts as a force to be integrated in many different contexts. Such creativity shall and will continuously raise questions with regard to social life and stimulate our consciousness of

life in general, as well as our actions.

These individuals regard life itself as a process of experimentation and develop their own unique ways of perceiving the world. As opposed to an unconscious involvement, these figures always have the ability to "intend" movement in a certain direction, which is to say that they are always likely to construct a dynamic relationship *between* and *around*, to generate an integration of multiple relationships through their art practices, making the work itself a kind of *Post-fact*: both the result of a transformation and a proposal, which will in turn touch, and deeply influence the relevant groups, and reality itself. Based on such a premise—that is, if we regard the practice of art as a reconstruction of a relationship to life (such a relationship is no longer a definite social determination, but a fundamental and philosophical understanding)—it must be bound to the direction of its spaces and groups, and become a proposal for constructing the possibility of life.

These different forms of creativity with different orientations respectively become different spaces, but they also suggest the existence of a truly diverse, new species of space—one that will inspire a new space for life.

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1
Hu Fang, *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* (Guangzhou, China: Vitamin Creative Space, 2009).

2
Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* , ed. and trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 6.

3
See "China Tracy: i.Mirror," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vcR7OkzHkI .

Carol Yinghua Lu

Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds

I was recently invited by the editors of *Afterall* to contribute to a book they are preparing on the monumental 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" with a text reflecting on the impact of this exhibition on the practice of Chinese artists. On that occasion I had a discussion with Chinese critic Fei Dawei, who had introduced the curator of the show, Jean-Hubert Martin, to many of the key artists of the '85 movement in China prior to the exhibition and worked as one of its regional advisors. As one of the earliest attempts to exhibit contemporary art from non-Western parts of the world in the West and to deal with the possibility of multiculturalism, this exhibition set an important precedent for many projects to come with its ambition of offering a global vision for contemporary art.

What concerned Fei and the many artists Martin encountered on his visit to China was the question of how to formulate the image of the contemporary in Chinese art. For this purpose, Fei deliberately set up studio visits for Martin to first meet with artists such as Wu Guanzhong, who worked in the modernist tradition or were part of the official art circuit in China, before leading him to meet the artists and critics of the '85 movement. At that time, both Fei and the artists consistently tried to convince Martin that contemporary art was something unfolding in the most lively manner in the country and that it represented the most current climate of artistic thinking and energy in the country—not folk art, not traditional art.

This visit left a strong impression on Martin. In the end, Chinese artists Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang were invited to participate in the exhibition, which also featured, for example, tribal art from Africa. It was a fortunate setup for Chinese contemporary artists—the relevance of their practice, which had previously developed in isolation, bound to circulate only within China, was situated and viewed in an international context for the very first time. This would also have a lasting impact on how Chinese contemporary art would be represented in the many exhibitions and occasions that followed in the West.

In 2006, German art historian Hans Belting pioneered a project entitled "Global Art and the Museum" in an attempt to document the global changes in contemporary art and its institutions. Acknowledging the fact that economic globalization has—along with its own institutional practices—taken contemporary art practice beyond the restrictions of national borders, he states:

> With the new geography of auction houses, the art trade acts on a global scale, art museums, by contrast, operate within a national or urban framework in which they encounter the most diverse audiences. While art collecting has become en vogue on an unprecedented scale, it often lacks a common notion of art. Contemporary art also invades former ethnographic

Cyprien Tokoudagba, Voodoo Pantheon. The sculpture group shows the Voodoo gods Zangbeto (with Horns, in the background), and Legba, sitting naked, judging a sinner. The group was originally crafted for "Magiciens de la terre" in 1989. from here.

> museums, which are forced to remap their areas of collecting. As yet, the novelty of the situation defies any safe categories. 1

This ongoing project, consisting of a series of panel discussions, lectures, conferences, and publications, will lead to an exhibition at the ZKM in 2011 (whose vision to present what could possibly be the global image of contemporary art today is an enormous challenge in itself). Belting, who back in 1983 proposed the end of art history and the end of art's historical narrative, has again stressed in this context that the German perspective is a local one, and that Western art history is a time-based and culture-specific concept whose sensitivity and relevance to other periods of time and cultures should always be re-examined. A workshop he led on global art at the ZKM this past summer proposed a paradigm shift; we were reminded to no longer think about the West as the singular model to be applied worldwide, but to reflect on how to expand this model using experiences from elsewhere, or even to approach art from the perspective of a multitude of models.

As a participant in the workshop, I became more aware of my own specific local context, which is China, a country whose own position in challenging and redefining multiculturalism and global contemporality, both back in 1989 and twenty years later in 2009, has always been in question. Perhaps it's not simply a matter of creativity and what artworks are being produced, it's also a matter of perspective and methodology: how to view the works produced in this context and, more importantly, how to develop a way of working that is perceptive with regard not only to the works but also to their context, one that is closer to the works' internal complexities and constant transfigurations than to their external features and general applications.

In the following text, I would like to respond to the question "what is contemporary art?" through a historical self-reflection and by looking at the specific scenario in China through a very local perspective.

Even though China was absent from much of modernism's chronological progression, it has followed a unique track and used a set of coordinates that fuse Western and Chinese experiences. Today's Chinese artists are more than ever before deeply entrenched in an ever-evolving and gradually more autonomous system of art production and circulation, invigorated simultaneously by the continuous inflow of international knowledge and capital, but even more so by the sheer excess of local interest, investment, and imagination.

Artists, dealers, galleries, museums, art magazines, auction houses, biennials, and art fairs are interwoven into a tighter and tighter network, eagerly replicating the mature model established in the West, while continuously and uninhibitedly adapting it to the practical and philosophical needs of specific local conditions. The unparalleled imaginativeness and potential of this local system constantly defines and redefines the method of working here.

Incidentally or not, just prior to the opening of "Magiciens de la terre" in 1989, a regrettable transition occurred in China that resounded throughout many folds of public life, fundamentally shaping the collective political, social, cultural, and psychological landscape of China with a series of disheartening closures and departures. Cultural, spiritual, and artistic aspirations became secondary to a quickly spreading and highly infectious mood of market optimism and global trade. Economic development became an effective instrument for diverting people's attention from intellectual pursuits and enlightenment. The disregard for knowledge and intellectual pursuits planted during the Cultural Revolution continued to manifest itself in a new wave of brainless entertainment. Ignorance became understood by many as a fashionable state of being.

Meanwhile, 1989 generated many drastic turns in terms of intellectual dynamics as well as personal choices. It was the year when the preceding decade of ideological opening-up and cultural enlightenment came to an abrupt and disillusioning end. Yet the prospect of a new beginning for everyone remained irresistible, offering instant and tangible compensations and achievements. The market economy introduced a system of quantification and evaluation according to materialistic value. A pragmatic and functionalist mindset was firmly established.

A 1991 correspondence between Beijing-based art critic and curator Li Xianting and Paris-based curator Fei Dawei, both of whom were involved in the curating and organization of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in February of 1989, clearly revealed their differences, not only in their geographical positions but more profoundly in their intellectual judgments and value systems. In 1991, Li Xianting wrote:

> Once art leaves its cultural motherland, it will surely die out. Exiled culture and arts have always happened in the macro cultural background in Europe. You [the artists and critics travelling abroad] represent new issues. What I want to know are opinions from every party. Although they were working against the same overall background, Warhol and Beuys each carried their respective cultural identities. Of course this is discussed on the condition that we acknowledge the new international system of value. Nationality is not the kind promoted by the government, but it does exist. We can't follow the postmodernist styles in the contemporary West using the so-called principle of modernism. In the world today, nothing can be considered avant-garde. No matter what you do, it always appears to be familiar. [2]

At a time when international companies already spread their wings all over the world, speculating upon and investing in a near future when they would reap the benefits of building and becoming part of a global market, some Chinese intellectuals still clung to the idea of cultural locality, in doubt of this "new international system of value." Such claims sounded extremely nationalistic and profoundly arrogant, lacking in curiosity or desire to understand the outside world. Unable to picture the West as an equal partner in cultural exchange, Li spoke about the West as both irrelevant and, at the same time, an impossible standard for the Chinese art world to emulate and be on par with. He certainly touched upon the issue of the impossibility of a contemporary avant-garde with his statement "no matter what you do, it always appears to be familiar," which remains a relevant point that constantly shakes up our decisions and judgments today.

Here I quote Li Xianting again:

> But we all cherish your activities abroad. Maybe every kind of effort has its value. We are all cornerstones and nothing (we do) would be worth international attention. Do you really believe that you yourself have had an impact on the Western art world? [3]

In this condescending letter, Li Xianting was not only referring to Fei Dawei but to a group of Chinese artists and intellectuals who left China in the 1980s and '90s to pursue their careers in foreign countries. Among them were Huang Yongping, Chen Zhen, Wang Du, and Hou Hanru in Paris; Cai Guoqiang in Japan; Xu Bing, Zhang Huan, and Ai Weiwei in New York, and so on.

The fad of buying and exhibiting Chinese art on an international level didn't really speak to the quality of artistic thinking and working in the country, but instead indicated the growing importance of Chinese economic and social power. The consequences of this dimension of the Chinese art world are strongly felt today with the fall of the Chinese art market. It was a necessity of the so-called "cultural multiplicity" that the West was pursuing for their society to help sustain and glorify their global market activities. Chinese contemporary art was simply a souvenir one had to have to showcase one's international lifestyle. But the question of how actual contemporary art practice in China is relevant and valuable to that of the Western world remains unanswered.

Since the 1990s, a newly developed and unconstrained art market took over the Chinese art world as it was still in its infancy, before it had achieved the institutional diversity that characterizes longer-established art infrastructures in other countries. As a result, contemporary art in China has become almost entirely dependent on market forces, which have set themselves up as the dominant, and virtually the only system of evaluating and crediting artworks and the success of artists. The vibrancy of the market gave a huge boost to the confidence and ambition of the players and fed into the "bigger means better" frenzy. There were bountiful resources available to open galleries of 1,000 square meters, stage expensive productions, mount large-scale exhibitions, produce bulky catalogues, and host luxurious opening-night parties. All of a sudden, everything was possible. Artists responded to such optimism with attempts at mega-productions. Artworks and art practices were discussed and received, not from an artistic and conceptual point of view, but on the basis of misplaced criteria such as size, production budget, market price, and the preferences of collectors.

Concerning artistic production itself, the advancement of contemporary art practice in China hasn't followed the linear logic of Western art history. Intellectual development was basically stagnant and taken hostage by political movements during the preceding decades of Communist rule. This situation worsened with the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which severed not only the link between the country's intellectual life and the outside world, but also the bloodline that connected it with its own history and cultural traditions. Education was suspended and knowledge and ideas were dismissed.

Thus, when the country reopened its doors and resumed its interest in culture at the end of the 1970s, there was already a great discrepancy between what was going on in

the heads of Chinese artists and intellectuals and what was happening in the rest of the world. Chinese artists rushed to assimilate disjointed and sometimes misinterpreted information and adapted it to the social, historical, and cultural specificity of the country in order to shape their own methodology. Modernism, postmodernism, classical philosophy, eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, liberalism, anti-imperialism, and other intellectual movements from the Western world were introduced into China all at once to become parallel and mixed influences on the practices of artists.

The 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition can be considered a rather extensive and reliable gauge of the mixture of styles and thinking that contemporary Chinese artists were keenly exploring during the 1980s. All of it, however, was charged with a great sense of randomness, which was telling with regard to the intellectual state of the artists. Their system of knowledge was fragmented. On one hand, they suffered from the missed opportunity for education during the Cultural Revolution and from a missing link to the traditions that were wiped out by it. On the other hand, the sudden shift from having one type of visual and cultural experience (the omnipresent revolutionary realism) to being exposed to a dazzling diversity of aesthetic and conceptual possibilities presented the artists with the challenge of having to decide what to choose. Often the choice was made based upon an instinct or an attitude, and this would become the operational basis on which artists would form their own artistic structure and language.

Although parallel practices continued to exist from the 1990s up to the present day, the international interest and art market have been mostly focused on works that prioritize socially and politically charged subject matter over stylistic experimentation and conceptual investigation. Artists that created cynical realist, social realist, political Pop that feeds into a kind of collective imagination of a Chinese society have been gaining so much recognition since the early nineties that the artists even strove to minimize technological and formal complexity in order to focus the attention of the viewer on the depicted content. Their method of referring to social content has become the central theme that runs through their entire practice and leaves little room for anything else.

Li Xianting, who wrote the above-quoted letter in 1991, was an important figure in the 1980s whose editorial work in art publications such as *Meishu* (Fine Arts) gave crucial visibility and endorsement to promising young artists and artist groups. It was a time when artists and critics seemed to venture hand-in-hand into completely new territory, later overlooked by the political hype of proceeding years. This new territory involved recovering the normal need to express and experiment artistically without being bound by ideological or political obligations. Formal and conceptual investigations were considered to be a matter of intellectual awakening.

The "China/Avant-Garde" show was less a thematic group exhibition than a platform and occasion, as well as a valid context, for an outburst of emotional and spiritual energy pent up in the previous decades.

Just two years after the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, reality seemed much farther away. Contemporary art somehow took a back seat to what the country was occupied primarily with, namely, economic development. There were considerably fewer chances to exhibit publicly within China, and those who had been actively involved in the 1980s took the time to reflect on building group dynamics and collective ways of working such as through political activism, which offered a source of emotional comfort and courage. Artists and critics were also pondering and searching for a new future in the absence of a clear model to follow. It would take a few more years before the knowledge, understanding, and capital from the Western art structure, along with what Li called "the International system of value," would trickle down to have an effect on the formation of the art system in China.

It was around this time, in 1991, when Li wrote the letter to Fei quoted above. It reflected a rather conservative and functionalist mindset, one that rejected and critiqued the position of those artists and intellectuals who worked outside of China. He attributed the temporary inactivity of Chinese artists residing overseas to the fact that they were outside of their context. Fei pointedly responded by saying that the inability to respond to new contexts was deeply rooted in the education and ideology these artists were subjected to in China, and argued that only when the artists were able to surpass their given cultural and social contexts would they be able to truly succeed internationally. As Fei himself put it:

> Most Chinese artists who have left China couldn't fully realize their talents as they did back in China. Besides the issues of language and practical life, the main reason was precisely the particular intellectual quality and way of thinking that were cultivated in their intellectual native land. It prevents them from entering the contemporary cultural issues in a new context. This kind of creative "drought" comes from the inability of these artists to turn what they have learned in their own country into something that can transcend the cultural gap and continue to be effective. Yet this "inability" is exactly the result of the long-term influence of the closed and conservative cultural spirit unique to Chinese society. Thus, I think what you said might be reversed: "Art must die out without leaving its cultural motherland."
>
> Naturally, what I meant by "leaving" is that art must have a side that transcends its native culture in order to develop. The world today is in the era of globalized

> culture and openness. We can only truly discover our own uniqueness and enable our native culture to gain momentum by perceiving and being involved in those common issues that transcend culture . . . To reflect on ourselves while keeping the door closed is like a person facing himself in a mirror. No matter how he thinks of himself, it is eventually making himself believe in himself. Although this can be regarded as "sticking to one's native culture," it is actually no more than a self-tortured psychological habit developed in a long-term situation of being closed-minded. In my view, only when the "native culture" walks out of its "native culture," can it become the real "native culture." It's time to reverse what Lu Xun proposed in the thirties, "what is more national is more international" into "what is more international is more national."
>
> What we are doing, and what we want to do, is to gradually place issues brought from the Chinese context into the larger cultural background of the world, in a lively and creative way, so that it can set in motion a process of becoming "common" and "extensive." [4]

There was a great deal of idealist passion as well as critical understanding of one's own cultural context running through Fei's appeal. Cultural specificity shouldn't be a defining trait of one's existence and thinking; it can however be valuable when placed in an international context to be scrutinized and renewed, in constant interaction and dialogue with an external cultural sphere.

Throughout the past two decades, under the influence of the art market, an infrastructure for contemporary art has slowly taken shape. Yet although it bears all the familiar characteristics of a mature art system—with galleries, contemporary art museums, art magazines, collections, art centers, archives, and so on—a lot of them are just forms without real substance. Art magazines run informational articles, which are rarely critical, and feature neither reviews nor art criticism. Art museums operate by renting out exhibition spaces and filling programs with paying shows, completely lacking in curatorial framework or presentation. Art centers accept shows supported by gallery money or the investment of private art dealers and so-called collectors (who are actually speculators). Art archives and triennials are initiated, funded, and curated by private gallerists who seek to feature their own represented artists in a broader and apparently more authoritative context. Art historians compile bulky histories of contemporary art heavily informed and influenced by their close circle of contacts.

While these roles in the scene are often very blurry, the more profound and problematic aspect is that no matter what motivation or scheme lies behind all of these institutions, the quality of their projects is always the lowest priority, and almost always compromised.

It's interesting to observe this dynamic in the art scene by examining the way Chinese society is organized. In recent years, the interest in individuality that has arisen from a capitalist economy has met with a strong tradition of surrendering one's own desires to those of a collective situation. Collectivism is about the loss of individual desires, as well as of individual responsibility.

As for the Chinese artists based abroad, it would take longer for them to be recognized. However, the functionalist and results-oriented mentality prevalent in China was also hindering leading critics like Li himself, who was once among those making headway by looking beyond his given reality. Less than two decades later, many of the "exiled" artists who left China to live and work abroad in the 1980s and '90s have gradually returned to major cities in China, many with admirable international careers behind them. More importantly, these figures brought back not only their practice and artistic ideas, updated and shaped by their time overseas, but also a formidable number of possibilities for influencing the art scene within China.

Zhang Huan, Berlin Buddha, 2007. Aluminium, 370 x 260 x 290 cm.

In the case of Zhang Huan, an artist who lived in New York between 1998 and 2005, he had left China for the United States after gaining prominence in the performance art movement of early nineties China. Once in New York, it didn't take long for him to be invited to perform and work with important American and international institutions. He proved able not only to overcome the constraint of cultural contexts, but also to transition effortlessly between two cultures, in either direction. In 2005 he moved back to Shanghai and established a fifteen-acre studio and production center on the outskirts of the city. Zhang's continuing international success is the object of envy for many local artists and his way of working has certainly

presented a new model for the local art scene. Here, he hired and trained skilled workers and technicians from various regions across the country, whose technical competence complemented his own thinking. This sophisticated and well-managed production workshop churned out a great number of Zhang's physically imposing oversized sculptures.

Although made in China, Zhang's current works are rarely exhibited inside the country, even though he exhibits actively and sells work on an international level. His first solo exhibition in China, planned last year for the Shanghai Museum of Art, was eventually cancelled due to sensitive content. The last decade of market inflation has given a lot of people false confidence and false belief in the sustainability of the local system. Here the lack of criticality and intellectual scrutiny is replaced by an overemphasis on networking, the formation of personal alliances, and the necessity of strategic maneuvering in order to tease a primitive market appetite. It is this very way of being that characterizes the local art system, which seems to have a hard time finding a way to contextualize, understand, and present the international artistic language and practice of Zhang Huan. He remains an enigma for the art scene in China today.

Meanwhile, many people in the Chinese art scene are still perplexed and constrained by doubts of a general and primitive nature. One afternoon when I walked through the art district of Beijing, the few people I ran into—gallerists, directors of art spaces—coincidentally told me the same thing: now that the market is down, they want to discover new talent and work with young artists. This is as much an illusion as the idea that older and more established artists are no longer active or involved, and have thus lost their value. Like anywhere else, people are obsessed with youth and emerging talent, yet the difference is that the Chinese art structure hasn't diversified enough to gain the intellectual and theoretical momentum necessary to address the ongoing practice of already established artists and their relevance. The roles of the institutions are not clearly defined and everyone is competing for the same resources, while being simultaneously unable to develop a stable discourse through which to position the actual work.

What Fei Dawei argued almost two decades ago is unfortunately still a valid premise and goal for those of us working in China: how do we examine and activate our own cultural conditions and contexts in a global discourse, rather than emphasize our own uniqueness and become burdened by it? It's not international attention that will release us, but our self-discipline and critical engagement with our own practices and ideas that will possibly make us active participants in the global art scene, artists who do not lose sight of the rest of the world. Maybe it's less relevant to ask what is "Chinese art" than to think about what is contemporary in our own particular context and how it relates to the larger context of the world.

Ai Weiwei, White House, 1999. From the series "Finger," B/W Print, Edition of 10, 51 x 61 cm / 90 x 127 cm.

It seems that we are living in a contemporary world just like everyone else, and we have the same kind of exposure to news and information and entertainment; if we look hard enough, we find that we drink the same kind of coffee and are sensitive to similar kinds of things. But for many of us living in China, it's as if we are only beginning to make the journey to the contemporary. For China, the 1960s and '70s were periods of temporary suspension and removal from the modernist movements—and more importantly, from the transition from the modern to the contemporary—that took place in other parts of the world, and this distance proved to be devastating. In the past few decades, we have slowly built up a degree of confidence and resources, sufficient perhaps to finally examine the same sets of concerns and issues on the same level, and to finally make the transition to the contemporary.

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An Exhibition of International Artists" in Tang Contemporary, Beijing. She has co-taught the 2007 summer course for BA and MA art and architecture students from the California College of Art, acted as the art consultant for the Olympic Museum Lausanne on a major exhibition about China, and is on the jury for Pro Helvetia Swiss Arts Council for selecting cultural projects for its "China 2008–2010" program.

Dieter Roelstraete

What is Not Contemporary Art?: The View from Jena

> Ask not what contemporary art is, but what contemporary art should be.
>
> —Oksana Pasaiko, 2009

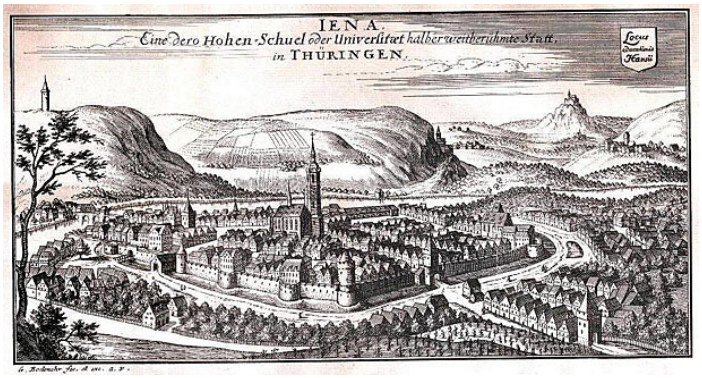
I.

"What is *contemporary* art?" is (clearly) not the same question as "What is *art*?" The former basically asks us to define what is particularly "contemporary" about art—not, significantly enough, what is particularly artistic about it. The question of what is "contemporary" about contemporary art seems straightforward enough: answering it would simply require our invoking *all* the art that is being made now—but of course there is more.

Now, answering the question as to what is particularly *artistic* about art (contemporary or not) is famously impossible, and it belongs to the specific condition of contemporary art (or at least of the contemporary art *world*, which may or may not be the same[1]) to have made the very act of asking this question not just impossible, but also unreasonable, even irresponsible—a show of poor taste or, worse still, of irreversible disconnect from the daily practice of (contemporary) art. Contributing to, or participating in, something that does not tolerate definition or other forms of circumscription (so being part of something that is ultimately unknowable: *not knowing what we're doing*) is one of the ways in which "culture" in general essentially reproduces itself. This is an important nuance to distinguish, for it necessarily means that *contemporary* art belongs to the general field of "culture," whereas art does not (that is to say, not necessarily). And this, in turn, is not necessarily a good thing; in fact, it may be a bad thing. It probably *is* a bad thing. Alain Badiou, in his introduction to *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, remarks that

> the contemporary world is doubly hostile to truth procedures. This hostility betrays itself through nominal occlusions: where the name of a truth procedure should obtain, another, which represses it, holds sway. The name "culture" comes to obliterate that of "art." The word "technology" obliterates the word "science." The word "management" obliterates the word "politics." The word "sexuality" obliterates love. The "culture-technology-management-sexuality" system, which has the immense merit of being homogenous to the market, and all of whose terms designate a category of commercial presentation, constitutes the modern nominal occlusion of the "art-science-politics-love" system, which identifies truth procedures typologically.[2]

It is no coincidence that this poignant lament should start with the fate of *art* (and not, more predictably, with an assessment of the debased status of the political in the contemporary society our fiery Frenchman so tersely describes): Badiou's thought is inscribed in the long history of a philosophical valuation of art above *all* other realms of human activity (even as the singularly humanizing force *in* all of this activity)—a complex history, riddled with contradictions of all sorts, which long ago acquired its canonical form in the heroic figuration of German Idealism.



II.

There are three moments, events, conjectures in the history of philosophy—which is always also/already a history of *art* (in that it is always also/already a history of the *philosophy* of art)—that would undoubtedly make for great, unforgettable movie scenes, maybe even for great, unforgettable movies. In fact, the inevitability of their greatness is probably the one reason why I would want to entertain the fantasy of venturing into the world of movie-making proper, with or without the help of an artist friend. The first of these scenes would be set in Athens around the time of Socrates' trial; the second one in Jena during the early years of the nineteenth century; the third in Pacific Palisades and neighboring Brentwood during the Second World War. The first scene would feature Socrates himself, of course, along with his heir apparent, Plato, and a motley crew of Atomists, Eleatics, Pythagoreans, Sophists, and the like; in the second scene, such notables as Fichte, Hegel, Novalis, Schelling, Schiller, and (only passing through!) Schleiermacher would appear; in the last scene, Charlie Chaplin would be playing tennis with Sergei Eisenstein while Theodor Adorno and Arnold Schoenberg would be caught bickering over the former's preparatory notes for *Doktor Faustus* at a barbecue hosted by the author of this dodecaphonic novel, Thomas Mann. If a fourth scene were to be called for, it would probably show Plato, Hegel, and Adorno crossing paths on Manhattan's Lower East Side—or in a studio in the Soho of the seventies, perhaps Lawrence Weiner's. (Indeed, it is very tempting to imagine the Soho of the seventies as the last great art-historical equivalent of 1800s Jena).

So we have called these three high-water marks in the history of philosophy "moments" in the history of art. And surely the scene set in Jena AD 1806 captures the history of philosophy *as* a history of the philosophy of art (and hence also of art proper) at its undisputed acme—a triumphant scaling of the heights after which nothing but the long descent to the banal plains of the "now" could follow. If German Idealism is indeed often referred to as the World Spirit's finest hour, this is in no small measure *because* of the centrality accorded to the question of art at the very zenith of philosophy's historical development: German Idealism *needed* art to become what it became—or rather, it needed its conceptualization (again, much like Concept Art itself in our beloved, bedeviled twentieth century).

This relationship of inner ("philosophical") necessity and profound dependence is not necessarily one of great love or even sympathy—its roots reach far deeper. Indeed, if one thing is especially noteworthy in this respect, it is the fact that neither the father of German Idealism, Immanuel Kant, nor his talented, rebellious philosophical offspring (Hegel first and foremost, but the now more easily forgotten Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling certainly occupied a position of similar prominence), were terribly interested in the practical reality of art, let alone very artistically minded themselves. Present-day readers of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* or Hegel's *Aesthetics* will fruitlessly look for passing references to actual artworks produced in their lifetime (certainly of the visual kind), and it is truly frustrating to realize that they were the contemporaries of such iconic image-makers as J. M. W. Turner, Caspar David Friedrich, and Jacques-Louis David, about whose work they remained forbiddingly silent. On the contrary, they were primarily interested in *aesthetics*—but still needed the extremely powerful *idea* of "real" art to lend this primary interest a salient quality, thus shaping a blueprint of sorts for all future engagements of established philosophical practice with artistic practice. [It is far too facile to say that philosophers do not "understand" art, or habitually only "discover" certain artists, art forms, art practices, and/or artworks long after their prime or the moment of their historical emergence/emergency; philosophy's relationship with art is much more complicated than this—while art's relationship with philosophy is probably much *less* complicated.[3]]

Here follows an extensive quote from Andrzej Warminski's illuminating introduction to Paul de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology*—and we really could not have put it any better:

> For both Kant and Hegel, the investment in the aesthetic as a category capable of withstanding "critique" (in the full Kantian sense) is considerable, for the possibility of their respective systems' being

able to close themselves off (i.e., *as* systems) depends on it: in Kant, as a principle of articulation between theoretical and practical reason; in Hegel, as the moment of transition between objective spirit and absolute spirit. . . For without an account of reflexive aesthetic judgment in Kant's third *Critique*, not only does the very possibility of the critical philosophy itself get put into question but also the possibility of a bridge between the concepts of freedom and the concepts of nature and necessity, or, as Kant puts it, the possibility of "the transition from our way of thinking in terms of principles of nature to our way of thinking in terms of principles of freedom." . . . The project of Kant's third *Critique* and its transcendental grounding of aesthetic judgment has to succeed if there is to be—as "there *must* after all be," says Kant, "it *must* be possible"—"a basis *uniting* [*Grund der Einheit*] the supersensible that underlies nature and that the concept of freedom contains practically"; in other words, if morality is not to turn into a ghost. And Hegel's absolute spirit (*Geist*) and its drive beyond representation (*Vorstellung*) on its long journey back home from the moment of "objective spirit"—that is, the realm of politics and law—to dwell in the prose of philosophical thought's thinking itself absolutely would also turn into a mere ghost if it were not for its *having passed through* the moment of the aesthetic, its phenomenal appearance in art, "the sensory appearance of the Idea." In other words, it is not a great love of art and beauty that prompts Kant and Hegel to include a consideration of the aesthetic in their systems but rather philosophically self-interested reasons. As de Man put it in one of his last seminars, with disarming directness and brutal good humor: "therefore the investment in the aesthetic is considerable—the whole ability of the philosophical discourse to develop as such depends entirely on its ability to develop an adequate aesthetics. This is why both Kant and Hegel, who had little interest in the arts, had to put it in, to make possible the link between real events and philosophical discourse."[4]

I have long liked the fatalist sound of this "had-to-put-it-in" in particular: it speaks to a basic reluctance on the part of philosophy to accept that only one thing is more important ("higher") than philosophy, namely, art—the grudging acknowledgement (and this grudge may well be the source of all critique) that art, as a very precisely delineated philosophical concept *that is absolutely distinct from the general notion of culture*, is simply the most important thing, namely, that on which all other thinking (including that of "culture") hinges.

III.

Although we have, of course, long since given up any attempts at truly *defining* this thing called "art" (and already in German Idealism it is clear that not so much art as its *concept* is the object of reverence and scrutiny, and that it will henceforth be approached purely negatively[5]), today we continue to live and work, to labor and love, under the aegis of this one tenacious assumption—that art simply *is* the most important thing, and that if a thing is named art, it is thereby made the most important thing, possibly even the only thing. And perhaps this is all the definition we need.

"Art" is not just (*it is in fact far from*) a madding crowd of images, objects, and pictures of objects, nor does its name simply refer to the mass of people who produce the aforementioned; art is not just that which is shown or talked or written about in the various spaces of art, however fleeting or fixed, "solid" or "melting"; and it certainly is not just the subject of art history, art criticism, and/or art curating. Finally, "art" is not just an archipelago of institutions, physical or otherwise, scattered around the world in time as well as space, accruing to a parallel universe that appears more or less disconnected from a supposedly "realer" world down below (or up above, if you still believe in the underground).

It is all of these things put together, for sure, and then some: art is the word, or, better still, the *name* of a great theme, of mankind's greatest idea, its single lasting sentence—the name of a hope and of something that has yet to come: the unfulfilled and/or that which eternally lies ahead. *Not* a thing of the past, then. This, precisely, is where the view from Jena sharpens its focus: like history, science, and society, art is one of the great concepts of "modern" culture—and because we already know what our indifference and careless disregard (posing as "critique") has done to those other concepts, we must forever, and now more than ever, especially in the face of its dissolution in the monochromatic miasma of a "culture" that is no longer so modern, rally to its defense.[6] We must, in a certain sense, stand up against the gradual encroachment of this generalized culture upon the domain of art—that process of willful confusion that is so characteristic of that which is specifically "contemporary"

in contemporary art, namely its very state of confusion (as to its own future, borders, and sense of "belonging").

Imagine that someone would one day say: "there is no such thing as art" (someone else, and someone very powerful too, once said that "there is no such thing as society," and we know now what that has lead to)—now *that* would be very disturbing indeed. *Then* what? What would *we* do, what would *we* talk about, and where would *we* go? Whom would we know and how (on earth) would we ever get to meet them? Let us briefly conjure the image of a truly art-less world, and imagine the panic this would spark, probably very much like the panic a similar prospect or thought would have sparked among the well-read inhabitants of Jena in AD 1806: wouldn't this be much like *the end of the world*?

IV.

Let us return to the alarmist, apocalyptic tenor of Alain Badiou's indictment of the "culture-technology-management-sexuality" system as that which has come to occlude the "art-science-politics-love" system. We have already noted how this process of occlusion really goes hand-in-hand with a process of *confusion*—of art's *own* confusion, that is, concerning its relationship to a cultural system (one that used to be called "mass culture" or "popular culture," but those terms have certainly lost their legitimacy) that it clearly desires to be immersed in, or just belong to; a confused desire for its own disappearance into something other, bigger, badder. Now, in thus constructing a one-dimensionally affirmative relationship (namely one of mimetic desire) with an essentially affirmative cultural complex, contemporary art has become a hugely influential affirmative force in itself—and once again, its insistence on being "contemporary" is precisely what helps to define and determine its affirmative character: not only is it merely "of" the times (the minimal definition of contemporaneity), it basically bestows value upon these times simply by so desperately wanting to infiltrate, inhabit, and if possible even shape it. This great yea-saying ritual is best expressed in contemporary art's reluctance, if not outright refusal—and that is as close as it comes to assuming a programmatic stance—to preclude certain (that is to say, *any*) forms, practices, or tropes from being named art. We have long known that anything and everything can be art, but in our contemporary cultural climate this equation has taken on a different quality, one in which, conversely, contemporary art can be anything and everything. [Or that everything is permitted, to paraphrase Ivan Karamazov.] The critical question then becomes not so much "what is contemporary art?" but, much more typical for contemporary art as such: "what is *not* contemporary art?"

V.

If art does not (or should not) "belong" to culture, or rather belongs to a different, probably *older* order of being (or becoming), and if "culture" is the name of the web of desirous artifice that has come to engulf and wholly cover today's global village (how quaint that phrase already sounds!), then it is probably not too far-fetched to call art, that absent ("occluded") thing such as Badiou and I conceive of it, "a thing of the past"—and here, of course, the Hegelian circle magically closes itself, for that is precisely why Hegel-the-art-theorist is probably best remembered today: for calling art ("on the side of its highest destiny"[7]) a thing of the past long before art, as we came to know it, came into its own. The view from Jena was already a melancholy backward glance, "theory" or philosophy its only remaining source of solace (and in this sense I certainly continue to reside in Jena *anno* 1806).

But didn't we just call art "the name of a hope and of something that has yet to come: the unfulfilled and/or that which eternally lies ahead"? Indeed we did. Now if art is both (and simultaneously) a thing of the past and a thing of the future, this merely means that there is no art "now"—and that, indeed, is precisely what contemporary art foolishly claims: it wants to be *culture* instead.[8]

This may all sound very grim perhaps—but it really isn't. We just patiently wait for the clouds to clear and the confusion to cease; it won't be long.

X

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1
But I am afraid it *is* the same.

2
Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* , (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12. Badiou's identification of art, science, politics, and love as the four fields of human activity that yield truth is a central claim of his philosophical project.

3
There are many reasons for the German Idealists' depreciation of the artistic achievements of their own time, but one reason "why Schelling and Hegel, among others, underrated German art" is particularly noteworthy in the current context: it concerned "their belief that in times of intense artistic creativity . . . there is little reflection on art. Thought about art, and philosophy of art, arise only when art is in decline. . . And Hegel's age was above all an age of criticism and of reflective thought about art." Michael Inwood, introduction to Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* , trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, 1993), xi. Perhaps this remark could help to solve the riddle asked by *Frieze Magazine* on the cover of their September 2009 issue, "Whatever happened to theory?"

4
Andrzej Warminski, "Introduction: Allegories of Reference," in Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–4. The Kant quotation is taken from his *Critique of Judgment* , trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987). The concluding quotation by de Man is taken from notes compiled under the title "Aesthetic Theory from Kant to Hegel," delivered in the fall of 1982 at de Man's *alma mater* , Yale.

5
A classic example of the persistence of this *via negativa* in our time is presented by Giorgio Agamben in his essay "Les jugements sur la poésie...": "Caught up in laboriously constructing this nothingness"—i.e., the "negative theology" (this is the term Agamben actually uses) of criticism—"we do not notice that in the meantime art has become a planet of which we only see the dark side, and that aesthetic judgment is then nothing other than the *logos*, the reunion of art and its shadow. If we wanted to express this characteristic with a formula, we could write that critical judgment, everywhere and consistently, envelops art in its shadow and thinks art as non-art. It is this "art," that is, a pure shadow, that reigns as a supreme value over the horizon of *terra aes thetica* , and it is likely that we will not be able to get beyond this horizon until we have inquired about the foundation of aesthetic judgment." See *The Man Without Content* , trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 43–44. A more elegant proposal, no less negatively worded, however, is formulated by Thierry De Duve in the justly celebrated opening pages of his landmark tome *Kant After Duchamp* , where he invites the reader to imagine herself an anthropologist hailing from outer space trying to figure out what humans mean when they name something, anything "art": "You conclude that the name 'art,' whose immanent meaning still escapes you—indeterminate because overdetermined—perhaps has no other generality than to signify that meaning is possible." See *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 5–6.

6
I am of course perfectly aware of the apparent arbitrariness with which different notions of culture are bandied around and played out against each other here; as is the case with "art," the impossibility of really defining "culture" is partly determined by the culture to which such questions of definition necessarily belong. The question of contemporary culture as that which presently engulfs art and from which, I believe, "art" should be saved, is a central concern of Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (both Eagleton and his mentor Raymond Williams are, of course, key authors in the art-and-culture debate): "pleasure, desire, art, language, the media, body, gender, ethnicity: a single word to sum all these up would be *culture* ." *After Theory* (London: Basic Books, 2004), 39.

7
The reference here is to the following celebrated, oft-quoted (and just as often misread) passage: "In all these respects art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past." Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* , 13. This statement has often been misread as a proclamation of the *end* of art; Hegel himself provides the qualifying commentary, stating that "this claim excludes the possibility of great and/or intellectually authoritative art in the present and the foreseeable future, but not in the distant future. But such an art of the future would not be 'for us.'" Ibid., 105. (It would be "for us," though). The amount of commentary this seemingly casual remark has spawned continues to baffle and astound; Arthur C. Danto and Donald Kuspit are some of this exegetic tradition's most prominent representatives.

8
There is no more powerful symbol of this state of diffusion, which Agamben (see note 5) would describe as "art now," than the series of books published under the best-selling title "Art Now" by Taschen Verlag.