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# Philosophy in the Artworld: Some Recent Theories of Contemporary Art

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**Abstract:** “The contemporary” is a phrase in frequent use in artworld discourse as a placeholder term for broader, world-picturing concepts such as “the contemporary condition” or “contemporaneity”. Brief references to key texts by philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, and Peter Osborne often tend to suffice as indicating the outer limits of theoretical discussion. In an attempt to add some depth to the discourse, this paper outlines my approach to these questions, then explores in some detail what these three theorists have had to say in recent years about contemporaneity in general and contemporary art in particular, and about the links between both. It also examines key essays by Jean-Luc Nancy, Néstor García Canclini, as well as the artist-theorist Jean-Phillipe Antoine, each of whom have contributed significantly to these debates. The analysis moves from Agamben’s poetic evocation of “contemporariness” as a Nietzschean experience of “untimeliness” in relation to one’s times, through Nancy’s emphasis on art’s constant recursion to its origins, Rancière’s attribution of dissensus to the current regime of art, Osborne’s insistence on contemporary art’s “post-conceptual” character, to Canclini’s preference for a “post-autonomous” art, which captures the world at the point of its coming into being. I conclude by echoing Antoine’s call for artists and others to think historically, to “knit together a specific variety of times”, a task that is especially pressing when presentist immanence strives to encompass everything.

**Keywords:** contemporaneity; contemporary; art; time; temporalities; untimeliness; modernity; modernism; post-conceptual; postautonomous; presentism

## 1. Introduction

I have argued for some years now that an expansive concept of *contemporaneity* is crucial to grasping what it is to live in the world today, and to make art within this world. Of course, most of today’s conditions were shaped in earlier times: modern times, ancient ones, and those outside Western historical parameters. But some conditions are new in ways different from earlier differentiations. Yes, our present contemporaneity shares much with the self-evident facts of what it has always been like to be contemporary: immediacy (it is happening now), simultaneity (at the same time as something else), and coincidence (to more than one person, thing, situation). Emphasis on “the contemporary” in current art and theoretical discourse is indeed an acknowledgment of presentism—the prioritization of the present—as the contemporary lure. Use of this vague marker as the biggest idea defining contemporary art and life, however, usually means falling into its self-deluding trap. In contrast, an acute understanding of our contemporary contemporaneity begins by recognizing that, unlike every earlier period, today no larger framework, no inevitable world-historical orientation, and no commanding narrative remains strong enough in its actual unfolding in the world to save us from having to find, with increasing urgency, our futures entirely within the resources available to us now. Our time, to which we necessarily belong, and which we share like it or not, is no longer a time *for* us. Naked to the present, we are obliged to understand our situation without illusion:

“Contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them” [1–4].

The notion of contemporaneity, understood in this expansive sense, pinpoints the dynamic at work *between* the many factors usually adduced as predominant explanations of what shapes the contemporary world: Modernity, globalization, neoliberalism, decolonization, fundamentalism, terrorism, network culture, and global warming, among many others less prominent but just as profound, such as indigenization. Each of these terms cluster a particular set of world-changing forces into a configuration that, its discursive chorus claims, encompasses the others—in fact, in principle, or in the future. Yet none has succeeded in doing so, nor seems likely to succeed. Nor can any of these factors, singly or together, account for every aspect of contemporary life as it is experienced today. Nevertheless, their contention creates the divisive differentiations that define our contemporaneity—precisely those qualities of multiteity, adventitiousness, and inequity that I list in the description just quoted—but it also generates counter responses, the most important of which are an insistence on the value of place, the search for constructive world pictures, and the reach for coeval connectivity in all dimensions of our relationships with one another. All these are ongoing processes, feeding a historical condition that is in constant, contentious, unpredictable evolution. The *work* of contemporary art in these circumstances, therefore, is not only to picture these divisive differences but also to counter their destructive effects by helping to build coeval connectivity. In this essay, I will discuss the efforts of some of the relatively few philosophers who have recently attempted to unravel the relationships between contemporary art and our contemporary condition.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Agamben’s Contemporariness

Giorgio Agamben’s essay “What is the Contemporary?” was translated into English in 2009, but has been available online since 2007, when he first presented these ideas as a lecture at the European Graduate School. It quickly became the go-to citation for those in the artworld who wanted to register, in a gesture, their sense of being caught up in the present moment, but also somehow, at the same time, out of it, and thus able to make some (relatively independent) sense of it [9–11].<sup>2</sup> It is worth freezing this frame for a moment, to catch the figure of the gesture, and to ask what it might mean for those held by it.

Agamben’s opening—his “first and foremost”—question is “What does it mean to be contemporary?” His concern is to articulate “contemporariness” as an *actualité*.<sup>3</sup> He poses a sequence of metaphors to demonstrate the paradoxical shadow play that arises whenever “the contemporary” is subject to analysis. His examples, from Nietzsche to contemporary astrophysics, hint at the range and variety of modern thought on the question. He seeks to explicate a state of being that has special relevance today, but not, on analogy to David Harvey’s identification of “The Postmodern Condition”, as a general or widely shared situation [15]. Instead, he shows how “contemporariness” is experienced, ontologically, by philosophers, poets, and others, that is, by those most capable of understanding its true nature. In much of his text, “the contemporary” means the contemporary thinker who is thinking about what it is to be contemporary.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is drawn from a chapter in the reference [5]. The first major effort by a philosopher to identify the core elements of the art being made in a situation that understood itself to be *after* modern art is Arthur Danto’s argument that, in the 1980s, certain postmodern artistic practices, such as that of painter David Reed, instantiated a “posthistorical” artistic consciousness that was essentially different from that which prevailed for modern artists during modern times. It is regrettable that Danto’s imagining of the larger world picture converged with the claims, by Francis Fukuyama among others, that the end of the Cold War, and the apparent total triumph of Western market democracies, meant the “end of history”. See reference [6,7]. Juliane Rebentisch astutely explores some of the key paradoxes from a post-Habermasian perspective in reference [8].

<sup>2</sup> A typical example of an artworld reference to this essay may be found in reference [12].

<sup>3</sup> The allusion here is to Michel Foucault’s notion of *l’actuel*, a point made by Jon Rajchman in references [13,14].

Yet Agamben also takes “contemporariness” to be a quality of being in time, today and at other times. What is this quality? Agamben himself uses the word as he reads out his lecture in English. The Italian text prefers *contemporaneità* at these points: for which the standard translation is “contemporaneity” or “contemporaneousness”, terms that are usually defined as “a contemporaneous condition or state”. Yet, clearly, Agamben is searching for a term that takes us beyond the mere simultaneity or plain coexistence implied in ordinary and simple usage of the term. “Contemporariness” does appear in Noah Porter’s *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary* of 1913, where it means, “Existence at the same time; contemporaneousness”. It is absent from most other dictionaries, and from ordinary language usage in English [16]. But in April 2007, however, alert editors added it to *Wiktionary*, where it is defined as “The state or quality of being contemporary”. This is Agamben’s meaning, in the somewhat circular terms of his discussion. Whereas the dictionary definitions envisage, in rather straightforward fashion, certain temporally proximate relations between things, events and people, he wants to show the complexities of their existential necessity as a succession of acts of insight. In this ambition we see the brilliance but also the limits of his account. Let me unpack his argument.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1873–1876) is rightly cited as identifying the apparently paradoxical proposition that those who are “truly contemporary, truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands”. On the contrary, Agamben insists, “Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it” [11] (pp. 40–41), [17]. Total immersion in the present, absolute up-to-datedness, is blindness. Distance within inescapable implication is a necessary condition of truly contemporary being.

But it is not sufficient. We must also ask: what is *critical*, or at least *skeptical* distance? Agamben offers an elegant analysis of Osip Mandelstam’s poem *Vek* (“The Century”), in which the linkage between the poet and his era is imagined as that between an empathetic observer and a creature that changes from having the flexibility of an embryo into a broken-backed cripple. The contemporary, then, is he “who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness”. A rare observer can see light within this darkness, but only as a “too soon” that is also “too late”, an “already” that is also a “not yet” [11] (pp. 44, 47). Agamben then ruminates on a number of examples, in each case evoking others who have speculated on these questions. The logic of fashion (Baudelaire and Barthes), the archaic within the avant-garde’s thirst for origins (Poggioli and Baudrillard), the as-yet “unlived” of the present asking us for an archaeological reading of it as a future-filled past (Jameson), and St. Paul’s revelation that every present is filled with the potential of the Messiah’s return, making us all potential contemporaries of Christ (Kierkegaard). Walter Benjamin brilliantly elaborated this last insight in his concept of the “dialectical image”, as did Foucault in his “archaeology of knowledge” project, and Jacques Derrida in his concept of *à venir*, the truth to come—in each case these are descriptions of what it is to perceive, as a living component of the present, the multi-temporal nature of past and future actuality. Insights of this kind have, of course, always been available. Those who had them were the true contemporaries of their eras. St. Augustine, thinking about time in his *Confessions* (378–379), shares this quality with Benjamin in 1940.

“Contemporariness” is, in this sense, “natural” to insightful speculation on what it is to be in time. Because he is not taking a historical or geopolitical perspective in this text (as distinct from his major contributions in these fields), Agamben does not go on to claim that insights of this kind are especially pertinent to the understanding of contemporary experience now, nor that they are more widely held, by increasing numbers of intellectuals, these days. In my own work, I have suggested that they are, in fact, eclipsing other kinds of insight into the past, the present, and the future (indeed, that they place the famous triad itself into question). I argue that this is what the times require of us, more so than any other kind of understanding, modern or postmodern, in whatever variant. Almost everything about public culture, economic life, and political processes *invite* us to be contemporary in the obvious sense—that is, to take “our times” in their own terms, in their own words (including “the

contemporary”), appearances, and images. But the deeper currents of today’s contemporaneity *require* us to be their critical, skeptical contemporaries in the sense that Agamben begins to sketch.<sup>4</sup>

Some crucial aspects of the topic are surprisingly underdeveloped. The sense of being “in” *this* time, *these times*, and “out of” them *at the same time* is, indeed, pervasive. Agamben offers a sequence of metaphors of this state of experience—all intensely poetic and theoretically suggestive—but does little to describe it directly. Each of the authors he cites or alludes to struggles to evoke the experience of feeling that one is in a different kind of time than one that is recalled, a time that currently seems to be common to most of one’s contemporaries, a collective time that one also shares. Certain passages indicate that he is sensitive to this state, but less (in this text) to its historicity. “Whoever has seen the skyscrapers of New York for the first time arriving from the ocean at dawn has immediately perceived this archaic *facies* of the present, this contiguousness with the ruins that the atemporal images of September 11th have made evident to us all” [11] (pp. 50–51). This passage evokes a classic experience of modernity displaying itself (as a fascist bundle!) to all comers (as if all such arrivals were immigrants!), and then moves into today’s contemporaneity, one definitively inflected with the imagery of 9/11 attacks, along with much else. The reference is so brief that I am uncertain whether I have just read a brilliant encapsulation of the argument of *The Architecture of Aftermath*, or an insouciant gesture towards the capacity of contemporaneity to oblige everything to start again, *ab initio*, while also shouldering the burden of multiple pasts.

Because he is puzzling over the nature of “contemporariness” as an, in principle, universal experience, it is of no relevance to him that his instinctive frame of reference is modernity. Mandelstam’s poem was written in 1923, and its immediate precedent is the “long” nineteenth century that broke apart during the years of World War I and the Russian Revolution. We can, however, extrapolate its message for our recent millennial transition. It says: the crushing of vertebrae marked the entire twentieth century. For the imagery of spreading darkness, Agamben could have traced a trajectory from Goya’s Black Paintings to Antonioni’s *L’Eclipse*, from Victor Hugo to *Apocalypse Now*, or from Nietzsche’s madness through James Joyce’s epiphanies and Freud’s discontent to the Marxist melancholia of the Frankfurt School—and to Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*. In our contemporaneity, we have become fully aware of the prevalence of dark matter in the universe. We just can’t see it.

But we *can* see the lineaments of other kinds of time within it. To my eye, the most fecund of Agamben’s observations points us toward the possibility, and indeed, the necessity, of grasping that certain present relationships between multiple temporalities constitute a new kind of historical phenomena. A key passage is this:

Those who have tried to think about contemporariness have been able to do so by splitting it up into several times, by introducing into time an essential dishomogeneity. Those who say ‘my time’ actually divide time—they inscribe into it a caesura and a discontinuity. But precisely by means of this caesura, this interpolation of the present into the inert homogeneity of linear time, the contemporary puts to work a special relationship between the different times.

From which it follows that “the contemporary” (thinker) is one who, “dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation to other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to ‘cite it’ according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond”. His final metaphor follows immediately: “It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present cast its shadow on the past, so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now”. If, he concludes,

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<sup>4</sup> Pivotal works by Agamben of core relevance to grasping the broader conditions of our contemporaneity include the references [18,19]. My views may be found in [1,20]. See also footnote 1 above.

we are able to respond to this exigency and this shadow, we may become contemporaries of “not only our century and the ‘now,’ but also of its figures in the texts and documents of the past”.<sup>5</sup>

That’s it, for the contemporary intellectual, in a nutshell.

### 3. Nancy’s Originality

In 2006, Jean-Luc Nancy began a lecture by explaining why he choose “Art Today” as his title instead of the subject on which he had been invited to speak: “Contemporary Art”. He offered the usual reasons, each of them acknowledging one of the standard meanings of the concept, that together amount to a slippery domain that cannot find one name for itself. In the face of such confusion, “how is it possible that in the history of art we have come to adopt a category that does not designate any particular aesthetic modality the way we would, once, describe hyperrealism, cubism, or even ‘body art’ or ‘land art,’ but a category that simply bears the name ‘contemporary’?” [23,24].<sup>6</sup>

He was not tempted to treat this confusion as an indicator of the vacuity of contemporary “thought”. Rather, he went straight to *origins*.<sup>7</sup> At the moment of its making, every work of art is *ipso facto* contemporary with other art being made at the same time. It is also contemporary with its own times in the general sense. Every work of art, therefore, enables us (the artist, the viewer) to feel a “certain formation of the contemporary world, a certain shaping, a certain perception of self in the world”. It does so, not in the form of an ideological statement (“the meaning of the world is this”), but more as a kind of suggestive shaping of possibilities, one that “allows for a circulation of recognitions, identifications, feelings, but without fixing them in a final signification”. [23] (p. 92). Thus the contribution of Giotto, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and others, who give us more than the Christian program that occasioned their masterworks, and the secular artists—Picasso, Cézanne, Brancusi, Proust are among his examples—whose art exceeds the factuality of the everyday from which they begin. The worlds that they (as artists) are, the worlds that they create, are “there every time to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world”. Like Jacques Rancière, as we shall see, Nancy abhors works of art that “offer a surcharge of significations”, that convey messages which seem too obvious, and which thus effect a closure for all concerned [23] (pp. 93, 96).

World-making in and by works of art is, as Heidegger, and, more recently, W.J.T. Mitchell, and Caroline A. Jones have shown us, as fundamental to the practice of art as is the contemporaneity of every work of art [27–29]. What, then, is so special about the kind of art that is designated “contemporary”? Nancy’s first stab at this is as follows: “contemporary art could be defined as the opening of a form that is above all a question, the form of a question”. He is not alone in highlighting the interrogatory gesturing of contemporary artists (in contrast to the projective impulses of modernist artists, and the propositional character of late modern transitional art). He quickly realizes, however, that commitment to the interrogatory is not enough: “Perhaps a question does not entirely make a world, or a world in which the circulation of meaning is solely an interrogative and anxious circulation, sometimes anguished; it’s a difficult world, a fragile world, an unsettling world” [23] (p. 94).

We might expect that these terms would invite him to attach art practice to the broader condition of being-in-the-world today. He does not take this path, trying out first the (opposite) route of proposing that “Art today is an art that, above all else, asks: ‘what is art?’” [23]. This is, of course, the central question of one of the two great strands of twentieth century art, the conceptualist questioning initiated by Duchamp, in contrast to the formal and figural elaborations continued by Picasso and Matisse. Duchamp’s lead was taken up by conceptualist artists during the 1970s and acted out in the public provocations of the Young British Artists during the 1990s. It was also the question that Andy Warhol’s 1963 “Brillo Box” exhibition provoked for Arthur Danto, occasioning the answer: whatever the artworld

<sup>5</sup> Agamben has made suggestions of importance to art historical thinking and has demonstrated an elegant felicity in the interpretation of visual images. Ref [21], exemplifies the former; while reference [22] is an engaging example of the latter.

<sup>6</sup> The following paragraphs are drawn from reference [25].

<sup>7</sup> Notably in reference [26].

says that it is [30]. Nancy does not pursue this development to its current, most obvious instantiation, where every person adept at any form of social media undertakes art-like practices as a matter of everyday course, and many artists everywhere seek to make art virtually indistinguishable from such practices. Today, the question is, in effect, reversed: “What, nowadays, is not art?”<sup>8</sup> Against this merging and melding, the most ambitious artists take on the challenge of finding new way to make this distinction.

Nancy does, however, offer an unusual inflection on Duchamp’s gesture via the readymade, reading it as staging a rendezvous with that which, until that moment of the artist’s designation, was not regarded as art: “The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given”. By “preliminary form” he means “schema” in Kant’s sense, the non-sensible that precedes and makes possible the sensible. He does the same with his suggestion that Picasso’s *Guernica* was the last history painting in the grand manner that had prevailed since the later eighteenth century. From this observation Nancy draws the implication that, subsequently, signification itself went into crisis (one famously identified by Foucault as posthuman and Lyotard as postmodernism): “that whole ensemble of possible schematisms disappeared, even the schematism of man himself, of different figures of man and humanity . . . this disappearance is what characterizes the present world, which causes us to be in a world that is in a way at a loss for world, at a loss for meaning”. This sudden absence of “great schemas, great regulating ideas, whether they be religious, political and hence also aesthetic” removes the “supports” of art, the bases upon which artistic form arises. Contemporary art, therefore (and again echoing Danto), begins from “this shapeless state of self” [23] (pp. 94, 95). It is on this shaky ground that it asks the question “What is art?” necessarily in a new way, one that Duchamp prefigures—perhaps as a lone but increasingly influential precursor, his influence increasing with the accelerating evaporation of the master narratives.

Nancy is here moving toward identifying one of the key elements of what I see as a world historical shift from modernity through postmodernity to contemporaneity. And he picks out some of the implications for art making in such circumstances. But, having seen a set of connections between epochal changes in world-picturing and the interrogatory nature of contemporary art, he retreats towards a set of his core beliefs, above all those concerning art as a fundamental *gesture*, one that “puts us in direct communication with the creation of the world”. In favor neither of art for art’s sake, nor of art dedicated to religious, political, or ethical purpose, Nancy celebrates art as an act that manifests being, which brings worlds into being. The closest he gets towards identifying what might be contemporary about such art today is his remark: “I would say that a contemporary signal is a signal towards this: there is always, again, as before, there is always the possibility of making a world, it opens up a world to us”. He links this with the French preference for the term “*mondialisation*”—the worldwide creation and circulation of sense by all concerned—over the EuroAmerica-centric economic and geopolitical schematism underlying the term “globalization” [23] (pp. 98, 99).

In the limited framework of a single lecture, we cannot expect more than brief allusions to how contemporary art manifests the spirit of contemporaneity, or how it might be shaped by, or in turn itself shape, broader contemporary conditions. Nancy has, at least, brought his core insights about artistic creativity and metaphysical presence to bear on these questions. To me, the most useful provocation is his recognition that in Duchamp’s gesture—and, we might add, that of countless conceptualist artists after him, especially since the 1970s—“The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given” [23] (p. 94). Postmodernist practice, with its reliance on appropriation and pastiche, takes another, more superficial track. What I have called the recursive instinct in remodernist art also relies on preliminary forms, those given by earlier modernist artists’ efforts to work *ab initio*. When we focus on the deeper levels where artistic form originates, can we say that the search for form at these levels is shaped in

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Reference [31], especially [32] (pp. 84–101).

distinctive ways within contemporary conditions? Today, artists search for the supports that will generate form within a worldscape across which great schematisms—globalization, decolonization, fundamentalism—continue to contend for universal dominance, yet are destined to fail because they presume modern, or anti-modern, world pictures. Can we speak, nevertheless, about compositional forms that are distinctively contemporary? I believe that we can, and have outlined them in my book *The Contemporary Composition*.<sup>9</sup> They are, however, discernable only from the close-ups afforded by engaged criticism, and from the application of a theory of contemporaneity, not from within the inclination toward generalization about art's eternal recurrence towards its origins that haunts thinkers such as Nancy.

#### 4. Rancière's Regimes

In recent years, the philosophical thinking of Jacques Rancière has, for many artworlders, come to eclipse that of Giorgio Agamben as the standard repository of "all the theory we need". Among active philosophers, with the exception of Peter Osborne (whose ideas I will consider shortly), Rancière is most familiar with contemporary art, its worlds, and its agents. He believes it to be the current instantiation of an "aesthetic regime of art" that formed during the nineteenth century, originating in Romanticism. Taking up Foucault's description of discursive formations as "regimes of truth", Rancière defines particular "regimes of the arts" as "a specific type of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the latter" [33].<sup>10</sup> In the West, he identifies three as having evolved since ancient Greece. First, the "ethical regime of images", within which the primary concern is the effect of art on the *ethos*, or way of life, of communities. Plato's polemic against the simulacra offered by paintings, poems, and plays was a call for just such a regime. Second, Aristotle's coupling of poesis and mimesis aimed to establish a "representative regime of art", which accepts art's fictional premise but seeks to contain fiction's potential unruliness by defining the forms proper to it: Hierarchies of genre and subject matter; principles such as appropriateness, verisimilitude, and correspondence; distinctions between the arts, etc. [32] (pp. 21, 22, 91). Third, the "aesthetic regime of the arts" distinguishes "a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products", it "asserts the absolute singularity of art", and "establishes the autonomy of art", yet it does so, Rancière insists, as a form of modeling the state of being, the kind of emancipation, best suited to all—Friedrich Schiller's ideal of mankind aspiring to an "aesthetic state" is, he argues, this regime's "first manifesto" [32] (pp. 22–24). While the two ancient regimes remain with us, it is the third that prevails in modern and contemporary societies.

In his lectures and books, Rancière frequently cites works by contemporary artists to illustrate specific points, and occasionally discusses a work, such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in detail [35] (chapter 2). A 2007 interview in *Artforum* is the most felicitous illumination of the relevance of his general concepts to contemporary art and its theorization. Recalling the moment in France, post-1968, during which he saw the necessity to work against the process of "using defined periods and great historical ruptures to impose interdictions", he characterizes his work on "labor's past" and "art's present" as the same effort "to break down the great divisions—science and ideology, high culture and popular culture, representation and the unrepresentable, the modern and the postmodern, etc.—to contrast historical necessity with a topography of the configuration of possibilities, a perception of the multiple alternations and displacements that make up forms of political subjectivization and artistic invention" [36]. He dismisses abstract distinctions between art and politics, along with ideologically branded ones, in favor of paying careful attention to the actual situations in which such distinctions are drawn, and to the inherent indeterminacy of both kinds of distinction. Paralleling his broader conception that the making of divisions within "the regime of the sensible" is the work of thought and

<sup>9</sup> Ref [4] is devoted entirely to this question.

<sup>10</sup> On regimes of truth, see Reference [34].

of action in the world (it's "politics" as he sees it, ranging from the "police" actions of the state, industry, commerce, and institutions to the "dissensus" of opposition to the false consensus that such agencies create), he concentrates on what he names "the aesthetic regime of art", describing it as the "paradox wherein art was defined and institutionalized as a sphere of common experience at the very moment when the boundaries between what is and isn't art were being erased" [35]. This indeterminable status means that artistic agency is not bound to pursue the "historical mission" of art (which, he believes, it would necessarily fail to fulfill), or become part of a utopia (which, he believes, would necessarily take a totalitarian form). Art is not, in his view, required to be overtly, publicly "political" in the sense of denouncing "the society of the spectacle" or "consumer society", nor should it aim to activate a spectator who is (falsely) presumed to be passive. Art should renounce "the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world"; it will become free "when it stops *wanting* to emancipate us". Instead, he insists, "an artistic intervention can be political by modifying the visible, the ways of perceiving it and expressing it, of experiencing it as tolerable or intolerable", while the "aesthetic dimension" of politics is that it is "a common landscape of the given and the possible". Between the two there is a "terrain of the sensible on which artistic gestures shake up our modes of perception and on which political gestures redefine our capacity for action". Accordingly, Rancière prefers "dissensus" to "resistance" and similar critical, oppositional approaches. He defines dissensus, in disappointingly abstract terms, as "a modification of the co-ordinates of the sensible, a spectacle or a tonality that replaces another" [35] (p. 259).

Rancière's more concrete studies of dissensus within teaching and labor, such as his advocacy of the genuine knowledge possessed by "the ignorant schoolmaster", have been of greater use value [37]. Claire Bishop, for one, drew on them for her descriptions of the goals of participatory art practices, especially the concept of "the emancipated spectator" [38].<sup>11</sup> Yet in the 2007 interview Rancière was quite specific about the kind of dissenting versus consensual art he had in mind. Gently rejecting the interviewers' condescending dismissal of certain well-known "socially engaged" works as driven by "nostalgia for the counter-culture", he praises Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave (An Injury to One is an Injury to All)*—a reenactment in 2001 of a 1984 clash between police and striking miners in a Yorkshire village, in which the artist invited those originally involved to act roles from the other side of that political divide—for its breaking up "the dominant imagery of a world where there would otherwise be nothing but high-tech virtuosos or the occasional amused glance at the past, which is complicit with this vision" [35] (p. 259). Similarly, works by Josephine Meckseper on recent protest activity as a kind of youth culture, Sam Durant on sloganeering, Alfredo Jaar on the West's turning a blind eye toward the massacres in Rwanda, the films of Pedro Costa, the installations of Paul Chan, and the blurring of fact/fiction/fantasy by Walid Raad, Jalal Toufic, and other Lebanese artists—each of these is rightly valued for raising awareness of an egregious political division of the sensible, but for doing so in specifically *aesthetic* modes.

Rancière goes on to remark, "A political declaration or manifestation, like an artistic form, is an arrangement of words, a montage of gestures, an occupation of spaces. In both cases what is produced is a modification of the fabric of the sensible, a transformation of the visible given, intensities, names that one can give to things, the landscape of the possible". In contrast, he sees certain works by Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy, and Jason Rhoades, for example, as pretending to reveal "the omnipotence of market flows, the reign of the spectacle, the pornography of power", when in fact they are entirely "integrated into the space of consensus". He suggests that, "If there is a circulation that could be stopped at this point, it's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle". Yet if the complicity with consensus on the part of these artists is blatant enough, there are less obvious invitations everywhere to indirect complicity, even in the most

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<sup>11</sup> Claire Bishop draws on key aspects of Rancière's work in Reference [39].

radical-seeming ideas and practices. Thus, “I try to redraw the map of the thinkable in order to bring out the impossibilities and prohibitions that are often lodged at the very heart of thought that imagines itself to be subversive” [35] (pp. 264, 266, 269).

These formulations have been welcomed by some and opposed by others. T.J. Demos, for example, notes that “one useful feature” of Rancière’s writing is “the reconceptualization of art’s autonomy as a potential zone beyond the determinations of governmental policy or activist tactics, one that supersedes as well autonomy’s traditional association with isolationist escapism and artistic essentialism” [40] (p. 35). In contrast, Hal Foster sees Rancière’s “redistribution of the sensible” as “a panacea, and, when pitted against the capitalist ‘transformation of things into signs,’ it is little more than wishful thinking, the new opiate of the art world Left”.<sup>12</sup>

To my mind, Rancière’s core concept, *le partage du sensible* (the distribution the sensible)—the idea that implicit laws govern our perception of the world, and that our perceptions shape explicit laws as well as dissent from these laws, along with our senses of self and our possibilities for creativity—is of such generality that it risks amounting to little more than a simple sociology, or, at most, an abstract, apolitical version of Marxist theories of ideology. Prior to any politics, its initiating instinct is to aestheticize experience, totally. And it does so with “politics” as its abhorrent Other.

Rancière’s regimes are, of course, not intended as art history per se, although he does introduce them by saying, “With regard to what we call *art*, it is in fact possible to distinguish, within the Western tradition, three major regimes of identification” [32] (p. 20). The qualifier regarding the West is essential here, because these regimes are not readily identifiable elsewhere. With regard to the lineages treated in even the most conventional Western art histories, the three regimes leave untouched vast swathes of temporal and geographic territory, including the arts of Indigenous peoples, for example, among many others. What they do cover is usually described as classical art, realism, romanticism, neo-classicism, and modernism, although Rancière is at pains to avoid these style terms. He explicitly attacks Greenbergian formalism as a reductive modernism (which it was), and regards politically purposed avant-gardism as formalism’s twin, the other half of a mistaken belief that modern art is beholden to modernity’s unidirectionality. Through a series of convoluted assertions, he dismisses both these kinds of modernism as amounting to no more than a self-deluded “modernitarism”.<sup>13</sup> As Aleš Erjavec notes, this attack on modernism seems “problematic and risky because it requires a complete reinterpretation of the art of the past two centuries”, without giving us a persuasive reason for doing so, or providing an alternative historical hypothesis [43].<sup>14</sup> In the essays collected in *Aisthesis*, Rancière models a particularistic, immersive approach to instantiations of the aesthetic regime of the arts, exploring in detail works of art, or ideas about art, from Johann Joachim Winkelmann to James Agee [45]. All are modern. Considered as art history, Rancière’s approach is highly selective. He dismisses as self-delusion the critiques internal to modernist art, theory, and institutional practice, ignores the strong anti-modernist currents that evolved alongside twentieth century Euromodernism, seems ignorant of the multiple modernities that grew during the same period, and fails to recognize the transformations in art all over the world since the 1960s as a historical paradigm shift. For all his awareness of contemporary works of art and his references to important exhibitions, it never occurs to him that the antinomies of the contemporary condition may be birthing a contemporary regime of the visual image that is not entirely complicit with rampant, globalized capitalism, but one that contains within it the seeds of other ways of world being.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, in Reference [41]. See also [42].

<sup>13</sup> My term. See [32] (pp. 26–30).

<sup>14</sup> Erjavec puts Rancière’s rather generalized ideas about the transformative potential of art to interesting use in his anthology [44].

<sup>15</sup> For commentary from a visual cultural studies perspective, see [46,47]. For an update on Rancière’s perspectives on contemporaneity (within which little has changed), see reference [48].

## 5. Canclini's Postautonomy

In his 2014 book, *Art Beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society Without a Story Line*, Mexican sociologist Néstor García Canclini suggests another way of splitting the impasse between interpretations that tend towards taking art's autonomy as basic, and those that see art as of value only when occurs as an effective cultural, social, or political intervention, as effective in measurably similar ways. He proposes instead that we accept that "art is the place of immanence—the place where we catch sight of things that are just at the point of occurring". This is to make contemporaneity itself the main quality, and subject, of contemporary art. It is to elevate a quality that much art throughout time has had into one that is specific to the present situation. García Canclini tends in this direction when he elaborates: "Art gains its attraction in part from the fact that it proclaims something that could happen, promising meaning or modifying meaning through insinuations. It makes no unbreakable commitment to hard facts. It leaves what it says hanging" [49]. Yet these generalizations are designed to highlight art's current situation, which in his view, may be termed "*postautonomous*". This situation is a direct outcome of having to work within the larger world situation, which consists, as his title indicates, of a collation of societies without a shared or even dominant story line:

Art became postautonomous in a world that doesn't know what to do with the insignificance or contradictions of narratives. When we talk about this art, disseminated in a globalization that hasn't managed to articulate itself, we can no longer think of a directional history or a transition state of a society unsure of which model for development to choose. We are long past the time when artists argued about what they should do to change life, or at least to represent its transitions by talking about what "the system" was concealing. They can hardly even act, like victims of a catastrophe who try to organize themselves, in the immanence of what might happen next, or in the barely explicable ruins of what globalization has destroyed. Art now works in the footsteps of the ungovernable [47] (pp. xxi, xxii).

In these circumstances, the most the contemporary artist can do—indeed, should do—is seek "a place for creative transgression, for critical dissent, and for that sense of immanence" [47] (p. xxiv). My sentiments, exactly.

## 6. Osborne's Postconceptualism

Peter Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013) is, to date, the most substantial and sustained engagement by a philosopher with contemporary art as it relates to the idea of contemporaneity [50].<sup>16</sup> For that reason alone, it is worthy of close attention. We do not find this kind of attention in literary theorist Leland del la Durantaye's *Artforum* review of the book, which began from the premise that "the point of a philosophy of contemporary art must be to better illuminate what it is like to experience the art of our time" [52,53]. This is weak: It conjures armchair speculation, exercised by an ideal viewer. In contrast, Osborne sets out to articulate something more than a set of reasonable, plausible responses to the art around us. He aims to discern what drives this art, and above all how it manifests our current contemporaneity. He is concerned not merely with the ideas and practices of those who produce and consume this art, but with what it does as a manifestation of world being. This is an aim that would flesh out his subtitle, and be worthily named "a philosophy of art".

Osborne presents his "main thesis" in these bald terms: "... it is the convergence and mutual conditioning of historical transformations in the ontology of the artwork and the social relations of art space ... that makes contemporary art possible, in the emphatic sense of being an art of contemporaneity". He notes that various "de-bordering" procedures in art and its social settings have occurred. "This has been an extraordinarily complicated and profoundly contradictory historical process, in which artists, art-institutions and markets have negotiated the politics of regionalism,

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<sup>16</sup> The following paragraphs draw on reference [51].

postcolonial nationalism and migration, in order to overwrite the open spatial logic of post-conceptual art with global political-economic dynamics" [48] (p. 28).

Awkwardly put, but a strong hypothesis. It pinpoints two of the three currents that I have outlined in books such as *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. It also sets these two currents into the same dialectical struggle that I have identified and explored in recent writing. As I try to do, Osborne maps much of the contested terrain within and between these currents, but with a strong presumption in favor of the first. Looked at from outside these debates, one might read his book as registering the impact of these contestations on his philosophical approach. To his credit, his text registers openness to the constant disruption of art-theoretical reflection by the critical, antinomic art practices to which it is so closely wedded. In this sense, it is not a philosophy of art, but an art of philosophy that is nascent in Osborne's enterprise. Art, not philosophy, has the agency here. This is an idea with a long lineage in this philosophical tradition, notably for Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, with Alain Badiou prominent among its more recent proponents.<sup>17</sup>

In his careful analysis of *Anywhere or Not at All* Ian McLean comments that Osborne does his philosophical work from perspectives entirely within Western thought and is blind to what McLean calls the "post-Western" character of much contemporary life, thought, and art [55,56].<sup>18</sup> More precisely, Osborne thinks within a specific line of Post-Hegelianism stemming, as he proudly announces in his introduction, from Adorno in the most immediate instance, but, as the book itself constantly demonstrates, is most deeply indebted to the system-subject dynamic in early nineteenth century German Romantic philosophy, while in style it owes most to Heidegger's lectures. While fully aware of the existence of other modes of thought, Osborne presumes that this is the only one that counts as *philosophy*, that is, the only one truly capable of arriving at universally valid truth claims.

The result is that, rather than presenting an overall "philosophy of contemporary art", Osborne offers an account of the theoretical grounding of art produced within a significant sub-current of one of the three main currents in art made in the conditions of contemporaneity—namely, the tendency within first current, EuroAmerican Contemporary Art, that I have dubbed "Remodernism". Remodernism pursues new ways of transforming artistic media—especially painting, sculpture, and photography—that had been brought to a high level of refinement by the early and mid-twentieth century avant-gardes. It finds ways for these mediums to compete with more contemporary modes, such as installations, video, performance, and social activism. Negative capability, especially as formulated by Theodore Adorno, is the philosophical approach most appropriate to the artists, theorists, and institutions of this sub-current. Among those who do theorize "post-conceptual" art, Osborne has set a new, higher standard, unmatched, certainly, in its philosophical depth.

Let me add to McLean's argument the suggestion that Osborne is also, paradoxically (and, as he would say, inevitably), trapped by his own most trenchant critical insight. Osborne rightly condemns much discourse about "the contemporary", showing, more thoroughly than anyone else has to date, that it is a process of constant, self-serving *fictionalization*. In disassembling the ideational fictions that circulate within much contemporary art discourse, Osborne joins a growing chorus of writers, some of whom have been making these points in similar ways for over a decade now. In England alone, this chorus includes Julian Stallabrass, Gillian Perry, Jonathan Harris, T.J. Demos, and many others. None are acknowledged in the book, which from the outset marks itself off from what he regards as the "rushed" and "failed" efforts of contemporary art critics, historians, and "commentators" to theorize their subject.

Osborne is, however, making a core claim that goes beyond the more specific critiques made by the relatively few critical voices in contemporary art discourse. "The concept of the contemporary . . . is a productive act of the imagination to the extent to which it performatively projects a non-existent

<sup>17</sup> See, for example—and for interest rather than illumination—reference [54].

<sup>18</sup> This is a careful comparison of both Osborne's and my positions on these questions.

unity onto the disjunctive relations between coeval times. In this respect, in rendering present the absent time of a unity of present times, all constructions of the contemporary are *fictional*, in the sense of fictional as a narrative mode". He is right to go on to say that this is, in fact, "an operative fiction: It regulates the division between the past and the present within the present". That is, it projects the false sense that our contemporary condition, "albeit internally disjunctive", is "a single historical time". Such a notion, as he says, is "inherently problematic but increasingly inevitable", a kind of necessary evil [48] (pp. 22, 23). Incidentally, this picks up Fredric Jameson's characterization of modernism as a self-defining, historicizing narrative rather than a world-historical reality, an argument outlined in his book, *A Singular Modernity* [57] (p. 94). Osborne applies this idea whole-cloth to contemporary art, which is a repetition that brings contemporaneity, and contemporary art, however disruptively, back within the purview of modernity and modernism.

Osborne is quite clear that "the contemporary" is "primarily a global or planetary fiction", "a fiction of global transnationality" that has "recently displaced the 140-hegemony of an internationalist imaginary, 1848—1989, which came in a variety of political forms", notably modernity, capitalism, and socialism. Today, he goes on to say, "the contemporary (the fictive relational unity of the historical present) is transnational because our modernity is that of a tendentially global capital" [48] (p. 26). He is, of course, fully aware that, today, art is made around the world, and that it circulates everywhere. McLean cites Osborne's only allusion to Indigenous artists, in which he rightly condemns their being constructed as "natives" within this transnational discourse (actually Indigenous artists appear only by inference among those artists living in countries that have been or are still subject to colonization). That passage is followed by this paragraph:

This is one of the main functions of the new biennales: they are cultural representatives of the market idea of a global system of societies. They mediate exchange relations with artists via the latest cultural discourse on "globalization", in order to put the latest version of the contemporary on show. Furthermore, by virtue of their power of assembly, international biennales are manifestations of the cultural-economic power of the "center", wherever they crop up and whatever they show. In short, they are the Research and Development branch of the transnationalization of the culture industry [48] (p. 164).

To me, this is a half-truth taken as the whole story; it downplays the resistances to globalization, and the challenges to parochialism, that biennials everywhere make possible (in ways always specific to the place and time) but by no means guarantee.<sup>19</sup> It subjects them to the always-already triumph of a presumptively hegemonic global capital. Indeed, Osborne concludes this book by describing the implacable limits actually imposed by the "horizons of expectation" endlessly woven by dreams of materialist progress, the horizon of a possible third way between socialism and capitalism that was smashed by the rush to money after 1989, and the "counter-horizon" opened out by China's embrace of markets within state management. What hope for art in such a context? "At its best, contemporary art models experimental practices of negation that puncture horizons of expectation" [48] (p. 211).

With this, Osborne ends up in the same place as "the second-generation *October* art historians" whom he pillories in his Introduction as incapable of exercising critical judgment about contemporary art [48] (p. 4). He joins, in fact, the first generation Octobrists, who continue to exercise such judgment by being unequivocal about their preference for art that, even today, pursues the negation so trenchantly theorized by Adorno over 60 years ago.

We are entitled to ask: This is what it is to be contemporary? This is contemporary theory? This is a philosophy adequate to the kinds of contemporary art being made in the world today? Surely, it, too, is an operative fiction, but one that is becoming less operative every day.

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<sup>19</sup> Osborne elaborates this reading of biennials in reference [58]. For a more expansive view of this exhibitionary form, see reference [59]. The most searching and comprehensive study of the subject to date is in reference [60].

Osborne's concept of "post-conceptual art" is definitive for him, and, for him, is definitive of contemporary art *per se*. He does not mean this "at the level of style, medium, movement, or periodization . . . Rather, it is a claim made at the level of the historical ontology of the artwork—its mode of being, what it most fundamentally is". As the work of Robert Smithson prefigures, contemporary art is a *transcategorical* practice, as distinct from "the self-misunderstanding of the main proponents of 'Conceptual Art' (through which [he means 'whom'] the category was, historically, critically, constituted) of art's ideational, ontological, purity" [48] (pp. 108, 109).

Who among the 1970s conceptual artists believed *that* about art's purity?<sup>20</sup> While Osborne is a respected chronicler of conceptual art, it is disappointing to read such a reductive, second-hand, textbook-style summary. It is as strange as the long passage that takes Sol LeWitt as the paradigmatic Conceptual Artist (this reads oddly from Art & Language points of view, post-1969).

Perhaps, however, this combination of reductiveness (regarding Conceptual Art) and expansiveness (regarding the core post-conceptual character of contemporary art) indicates something larger and more interesting about Osborne's enterprise. To me, *Anywhere or Not At All* reads as a text written within a philosophical tradition that is, today, profoundly troubled by the antinomies driving contemporary life, thought, and art. A narrowing towards essentialism while claiming to constitute the core of whatever really counts as worthy art today is a rational response in the face of such an onslaught. As is a frank, reflexive accounting of its impact. From Osborne, we get both.

A final point about method, that turns out, somewhat surprisingly, to be about art historical method. It is strange that, despite Osborne's explicit rejection of art historical approaches, throughout *Anywhere or Not At All* he constantly recurs to periodization, specifically quite conventional art historical kinds that chart relationships over time between artworks and their "times". There are many echoes of my account of multiple, localized, yet connected modernities followed by three currents within contemporary conditions, but he insists that the currents he identifies succeed each other in time, rather than manifest a more eccentric, historically contingent cotemporality. On pages 18–22 he identifies three turning points: when the neo-avant-gardes emerged after 1945; contemporary art's appearance around 1960; and, in 1989, the post-avant-garde, the dominance of the culture industry, and transnationalization. This is quite orthodox. On pages 78–86, these developments are further refined to be the last of a number of charts of the many factors that cluster to constitute periods within the history of modernism more generally. This is bold, and original. In his chapter 6, he returns to them in his discussion of "art space", his term for artworlds. In each case, these periodizing pictures are offered as heuristics, getting closer each time to an account that might stick, which is his procedure throughout the book. But they remain provisional, and do not account for the work of more than a relatively small number of the many contemporary artists working today in active and conscious response to the complex conditions of our contemporaneity.

Subsequent to *Anywhere or Not At All*, Osborne published a brief essay, "The postconceptual condition, Or, the cultural logic of high capitalism today", that offers the most trenchant account of his overall position. It contains his most explicit statement that what "contemporaneity" signifies most deeply is a new form of historical time—that is, "a new, internally disjunctive global historical-temporal form, a totalizing (but not thereby 'total,' since it is open to no more than distributive unification), radically disjunctive, contemporaneity" [62].<sup>21</sup> To think of it as a *condition* is, he avers, historically new. As will be evident from previous chapters in this book, I am in total accord with this perception, and have been arguing for acknowledgement of it since around 2000. His second major claim—that "Today, 'contemporary art', critically understood, is a postconceptual art"—is glossed as follows:

If we try to construct a critical concept of contemporary art from the dual standpoint of a historico-philosophical conception of contemporaneity and a rereading of the history

<sup>20</sup> For a more specific reading, see reference [61].

<sup>21</sup> This essay is the first chapter in reference [63].

of twentieth century art—in its established sense as that art that is produced, circulated, exchanged, consumed, and preserved within the art institutions of the global network of capitalist societies—the idea of postconceptual art appears as the most intelligible and coherent way of critically unifying this field, historically, within the present. [61] (p. 25).

My caveat here, as noted above, is that contemporary art is scarcely confined to “the global network of capitalist societies”, and, further, even within them, contemporary arts of consequence that take quite other forms have been present for decades and continue to emerge.

As in *Anywhere or Not At All*, Osborne urges the term “postconceptual” as the best descriptor of the *condition* of contemporary art, both its “state of being” and “the totality of conditions that determine it as ‘art’”. He repeats his points about its “transcategorical” character, which I would support, and concludes with this statement:

... the successful postconceptual work traverses (crosses, back and forth) the internal temporal disjunctions that constitute the contemporary, constructing them in such a way as to express them, at the level of the immanent duality—conceptual and aesthetic—of [their] form. Each a condensed fragment of the worlding of the globe. [61] (pp. 25, 26).

I strongly endorse this formulation, provided that one adds the word “condition” after “the contemporary”, and understand it to mean, as we both do, our contemporaneity. Provided also, that the condensation that is the work of works of art is understood to be a worlding that genuinely operates throughout the world, on a scale that includes but is not reducible to or dominated by globalization, and which is shaped by the three currents and the interactions between them that I have been advocating in my writing since 2000.

## 7. The Duty of the Artist

In a recent essay, “The Historicity of the Contemporary is Now!”, visual and sound artist, critic, and philosopher Jean-Philippe Antoine warned art historians that their relative absence from the scenes of contemporary art making means, in the words of Mike Kelley, that, “Historical writing becomes a duty for the artist at this point” [64] (p. 35).<sup>22</sup> Antoine is refreshingly acute about just what history means to our contemporaries these days, not only to artists wishing to get their work, or that of under-valued colleagues, on the record. He argues that it continues to mean a lot, but in ways quite distinct from the enormous purchase that History had during modern times. Then, its determinative load seemed to grow ever heavier, and its tendency toward recursion accelerated, even as it continued to ruthlessly clear away pasts from its forward march. We will come to the broader scale soon. Antoine answers the narrower question about whether art history as a discipline is capable of writing histories of contemporary art with a vigorous, “No!” The form of inquiry he advocates, which I will sketch in a moment, does not

... identify with the existing field of art history, which has a grievous record of stifling the new (as well, just for symmetry, heterogeneous ancientness), while privileging long chains of the same repetitious “influences”. Adding “contemporary art” to a long list of centuries in order to bring to a close a universal history of art would be but a short-lived parody of previous historicist endeavors, and a spectacular misunderstanding of the unique methodological and, yes, ethical value of the contemporary for all historians. [63] (p. 34).

Leaving aside his use of “the contemporary”, Antoine shares with many commentators the recognition that a sense of “uncanny untimeliness”, as distinct from being utterly of and with the times as they present themselves, is the first and most striking feature of our current contemporaneity.

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<sup>22</sup> Antoine is citing Mike Kelley, “Artist/critic?”, *Foul Perfection* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2003), pp. 220–226.

He traces this awareness back to Friedrich Schiller, to the responsiveness of the poet and some of his contemporaries to Greek and Roman models, a particular past to which they wished to belong, while realizing at the same time that this was impossible, just as it was that they might wholly fit their own times. Antoine then sketches a lineage through the inspirations of subsequent artists, from the romantic revivalists through the modernist primitivists, then up to Mark Lewis and Tacita Dean's revocations of modernist architecture, and Gerhard Richter's *abstrakt bilden*, parodies of modernist abstraction. He argues that each of these appropriations, of course in different ways, attempts "to define the contemporary through specific connections to historical periods, picked out of a generic, a-historical past" [63] (p. 29). This is the contemporary difference. To put it in my metaphors: The contemporaneity of all pasts are now available to us, as if they were equidistant in space-time from where we are now, just beyond the horizon of the recent past, arranged as if in a galaxy, as stars that we might choose to visit, on our improvised, constantly self-repairing, imagining projectile, in order understand the temporalities in play in a particular past, and to find out how its experience of its temporalities might help us understand ours.

Antoine notes that this sea change in understanding the nature of history's purchase on our present took some time to fully theorize. He usefully reminds us of the variety of types of temporal valuing plotted in Alois Riegl's landmark essay of 1903, "The Modern Cult of Monuments", and of Marcel Duchamp's expansion of the concept of art through his deployment of readymades [65]. The result:

... this widely expanded definition means that art no longer operates as it used to, through the underwriting of the contemporary by supposedly eternal, time-free ideals. It now inhabits a vast, a-historical and boundless warehouse of ancientness, continually revisited and augmented by the present. There all past objects and events have become indifferently available for historical and artistic pick-up [62] (p. 31).

To my mind, these perceptions of the relationship between the present and past times are themselves subject to evolutionary historical interpretation, or, at least, they were so subject, until recently. They count, I have been arguing, in a distinctive and more widespread way, in contemporary conditions than they did before, during modern times. We are required, now, to hold in our minds simultaneously these two distinct senses of what it is to be in historical time. This leads to the paradox that their availability for historical pickup, to use his terms, has become more pervasively so since around 1980, as frameworks such as progress and the inevitability of modernity proved themselves to be fragile constructs, and the antinomies of our contemporaneity have come to shape our situation. Antoine is back-projecting from an under-theorized present, but this is a salutary exercise. It alerts us to the relatively recent arrival of the sense that modernity is now included in the "generic, a-historical past", and that it might have no more a determinative hold upon us than certain earlier moments. More broadly, there is a growing sense that the choice of which past, or pasts—along with which utopian elements, and which pragmatic fixes—we might use to compose our futures may not already be decided for us, but could be, in significant part, a matter of our choosing. Provided, of course, that we can mobilize enough people willing to act in its name. Before then, and as a vital part of this mobilization, visual artists can, as I have been arguing for decades, prefigure such possible futures, and many are actively doing so in their collages, installations, and films.

Antoine does not call for such an explicitly political project, but he is alert to the ethical dimension of historical inquiry at a time of such seeming ahistoricity. He rightly says that because the historical determinations have fallen away, "precisely because the contemporary work of art and the ancient thing don't already belong to established historical categories, they require—indeed, they *demand*—to become the focus of historical inquiry", otherwise art, thought, and action will be condemned to "reiterate previous constructs and petrified events". But what kind of historical inquiry?

Such a history will be discontinuous. It will be fragmentary and anachronistic, as indeed are the relationships between present and past. As suggested earlier, as one of the signal ways in which a present grows to differentiate itself from what it was, is by appointing,

within the boundless storehouse of a generic past, newly targeted moments. This means that the contemporary, far from identifying with a “present” reduced to a narrow and fugitive slice of chronological time, actually consists in the knitting together of a specific variety of times [62] (p. 32).

These sentiments entirely accord with my emphasis on the contemporaneousness of different kinds of time within our contemporaneity; they echo my emphasis on multiteity; and they suggest a mode of contemporary composition, one available not only to artists, but also to curators, critics, historians, and thinkers of all kinds—indeed, to all of us. Yet, the “knitting together of a specific variety of times” is not a calming, regular procedure aimed at securing a habitus. It is instead the outcome of a past object or event or place insisting on its relevance to a present that would be ours, as we recover from the shock of its arrival, and see why it has come to us now. The art to come can arrive as much from one of our pasts, or from the past of another, as it might be arriving from the future. In fact, art to come is already here; it has been with us for some time.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For suggestive speculations along these lines see reference [66]. I offer a critique of recent conceptions of “the postcontemporary”, especially those of reference [67], and in their edited volume [68].

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