

The Contemporaneity of Contemporary Art

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It might sound somewhat tautological, but contemporary art is experiencing a boom. There is hardly any city that does not boast of having a contemporary art museum. More and more, biennials worldwide are devoted to assessing the current situation and thus are able to attract large international audiences. Professorships and research programs are being established to explain it all. But what does the term *contemporary art* mean, and above all, to what “contemporaneity”—to what present—does it refer?

The first thing to note is that the term *contemporary art* has largely superseded the term *modern art* for describing the art of our time. To be “absolutely modern” today, it seems, is no longer quite up-to-date. But how can we understand this displacement of modern art by contemporary art, the art of the present? One first intuition might be to understand it as a distancing from modern art’s own programmatic movements of displacement. Modern art was decisively antitraditional and committed to progress. In contrast, the term *contemporary art* seems to claim to be neutral and thus merely describes the art that exists right now.

Such a definition, however, according to which the term would be neutrally applied to art that has just emerged, obviously falls far short. For then all art would once have been contemporary art, and everything produced yesterday would no longer be contemporary art. Aside from the fact that art history is not written as a sequence of unrelated points in time, such a view also leads to confusion over how we understand the present at all. Jacques Derrida

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1 pointed out that one would do well not to try to come to any understanding of
 2 the present by analytically compressing it into a single point in time. As Paul
 3 Valéry explained in a passage cited by Derrida, you quickly land in the realm
 4 of *idées fixes* if you attempt to stick “the point of the *present* into the actual
 5 moment.”¹ Trying to do so will only draw you farther away from its immediate
 6 presence.

7 Following Valéry, Derrida saw that the present cannot be made present
 8 in this way as an indication that the present is always more and other than
 9 itself, as it were, that it contains a certain potentiality.² Valéry suggestively
 10 gives this potentiality, which is always implicit in the present, the name *implex*.
 11 If one uses the term politically, as Dietmar Dath and Barbara Kirchner have
 12 recently sought to do over approximately nine hundred pages, the implex des-
 13 ignates a dimension within the present complex that is not subsumed by the
 14 apparent evidence of what is immediately given; it designates what inextrica-
 15 bly conjoins reality with possibility.³ To be more precise: the implex reminds
 16 us of what opens up the present to the question of the future as well as to that
 17 of the past. For under the sign of the implex, the past likewise appears not as
 18 something merely given but as something that can be read anew with regard to
 19 the question of its meaning for today and tomorrow.

20 Now, one might arrive at the idea that it is no accident that the thought of
 21 the implex—the reminder of a certain potentiality in what *is*—can be traced
 22 to a modernist, even perhaps emblematically modernist, writer: Paul Valéry.
 23 For there is yet another quite different interpretation of the neutral appearance
 24 that the term *contemporary art* initially suggests, an interpretation that criti-
 25 cizes this appearance as ideology. According to the corresponding diagnoses,
 26 the term *contemporary art*, at least in the West, established itself over *modern*
 27 *art* insofar as every perspective on historical change has been displaced, and
 28 thus the implex, the implicit dynamic, or the potential of the currently given,
 29 has also been supplanted. Indeed, it has been supplanted in favor of a pseudo-
 30 dynamic, which is nothing other than the continuation and affirmation of the
 31 same. According to this diagnosis, the continual production of the new that we
 32 see in contemporary art, unlike the *avant-gardes* of modernism, makes no
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34 1. Paul Valéry, *Idée Fixe: The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 5 (New York: Bollingen Foun-
 35 dation, 1965), 57–58. Quotation taken from Jacques Derrida, “Qual Quelle: Valéry’s Sources,” in *The*
 36 *Derrida Reader: Writing Performances*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,
 1998), 220.

37 2. Derrida, “Qual Quelle,” 220.

38 3. Dietmar Dath and Barbara Kirchner, *Der Implex: Sozialer Fortschritt; Geschichte und Idee*
 39 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).

claim to distinguish itself against tradition. The new would then only be original, but no longer originary. It would distinguish itself only individualistically, but no longer produce a new beginning—that is, a beginning that reaches out beyond the originality of the individual.⁴ The contemporaneity of contemporary art, according to this rather gloomy diagnosis, is nothing but the nightmare of an eternal now, a shallow present without historical depth, which of course fits in perfectly well with the widespread economization of the life-world, with the consequence that there are only new things to be consumed, but not to be lived. The empiricist fixation on the now in art is then the exact correlate of a time imprisoned by immanence.⁵

This description of the current state of things corresponds to the diffuse feeling that the present is no longer defined by the directional vector of historical development; instead, it gently spreads out in a peculiar way so that it becomes “broader,” as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht formulates it.⁶ For Gumbrecht, the broad present marks nothing less than the end of the chronotope of “historical time” itself.⁷ He sees one indication of his diagnosis in the absence of the great generational conflicts. We no longer see young people with “intellectual-Oedipal murder fantasies,” Gumbrecht asserts in astonishment;⁸ they simply no longer quite fit into Harold Bloom’s notion of an intellectual history spurred on by the *anxiety of influence*.⁹ Instead of aggressively rejecting previous generations, young artists today seem to embrace their influence; radical breaks and new beginnings have been replaced by referential acknowledgment. Contemporary art casts nets of references into the past, thus also only expanding, if one believes the critique, its peculiar timeless present ever farther back. According to this diagnosis, contemporary art absorbs all previous isms, all historical movements, to the degree that it itself can no longer be identified in terms of any historical development, that it itself is thus no longer any ism, not even modernism. According to this culturally pessimistic reading, what was discussed in the 1990s with the keyword *posthistoire* has in fact therefore been realized with regard to contemporary art. Everything appears

4. See Boris Groys, *Über das Neue: Versuch einer Kulturökonomie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 38–41.

5. See the introduction by Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle to their e-flux reader *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2010), 6–9, esp. 7.

6. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Die Gegenwart wird (immer) breiter,” in *Präsenz* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 66–87.

7. Gumbrecht, “Die Gegenwart wird (immer) breiter,” esp. 70.

8. *Ibid.*, 69.

9. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

1 in this reading as if art had entered into a period after the end of history: In
 2 place of making us realize our historical time through style, art, then, would
 3 eclectically level out historical differences; in place of visible breaks it would
 4 offer only false totalities; and in place of decisive engagement it would show
 5 only indifference and boredom.

6 Now there is no denying that all this exists in the contemporary art
 7 world: empty eclecticism, historical amnesia, indifference, boredom. The
 8 question, however, is whether these phenomena should be taken for the whole.
 9 I find such a conclusion hasty, even wrong. A first indication that we should
 10 not be so quick to leave the last word about our present to the diagnosis of
 11 *posthistoire*, even if only from the perspective of Western societies, can be
 12 seen already if we consider some recent social research that puts the critical
 13 complaint—that the youth of today no longer rebel as they ought to—in a very
 14 different perspective. In view of the current state within these societies, the
 15 French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg, for example, states that the paradigmatic
 16 mythological figure of the present is no longer Oedipus, who has fallen into
 17 conflict with the Law of the Father, but rather Narcissus, who has fallen ill
 18 because of an overly idealized image of himself. As is well known, narcissism
 19 is not a kind of self-love but the state of being trapped in an ideal image of
 20 one's own self to the point that it is paralyzing, if not even fatal.¹⁰ This shift
 21 reflects the context of broader social developments, addressed also, for exam-
 22 ple, by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their study on a “new spirit of
 23 capitalism.”¹¹ As these authors demonstrate, in significant parts of Western
 24 societies self-responsibility, initiative, flexibility, and creativity have become
 25 decisive requirements that subjects have to meet to take part in social life.
 26 These requirements have replaced older disciplinary models of subjectivation,
 27 without, of course, doing away with discipline. In place of standardizing the
 28 subject according to socially established role models, there is now the compul-
 29 sion to creative self-realization under the sign of competition. Subjects, then,
 30 no longer obey by complying with a regime or by following rules but by cre-
 31 atively performing a task on their own initiative. As Chiapello points out, the
 32 artist's form of life that once promised a specific freedom has linked up with
 33 the current form of capitalism in a way that has produced new forms of alien-
 34 ation.¹² The rebellious artist who cares nothing for narrow-minded rules and
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36 10. See Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the*
 37 *Contemporary Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

38 11. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

39 12. Ève Chiapello, “Evolution and Cooptation: The ‘Artist Critique’ of Management and Capital-
 ism,” *Third Text* 18, no. 6 (2004): 585–94.

instead does his or her “thing” becomes the model for the masses—exceptional creativity thereby, of course, is toned down to a moderate inventiveness, and heroic melancholy diffuses into the depression of the masses. Indeed, as one can learn from Ehrenberg, the steadily increasing symptoms of depression in Western capitalist societies have to be read as narcissistic personality disorders that point at least partly to the difficulties whereby individuals end up in concrete realities with real limitations as they attempt to comply with an idea of freedom that is as abstract as it is subjectivist.

Given such a situation, however, the call for young rebels in art might seem nostalgic at best. Young people today have thus not left history; rather they have entered into another historical constellation—less about emancipating oneself from the father figure and his rules than about positioning oneself in a critical relationship to an ideology that no longer acknowledges social inequalities, but only individual failure. A response to this state of affairs obviously cannot be found in a renewed claim to individual freedom but in politicizing this freedom by drawing attention to its social conditions. For social conflicts are occluded to the degree to which individual freedom is posited as being without presuppositions. Of course, whoever realizes that the subjectivist idea of freedom is itself something that must be addressed in its political dimensions will also recognize that even the complex of a present dominated by neoliberalism actually contains an implex, a potentiality that could open it up to change. This is attested to, not least, by recent political movements.

Nevertheless, pointing out the current social constellation is not enough to invalidate an objection to contemporary art that can be formulated precisely in view of *this* constellation, namely, that the productions of contemporary art here are more a part of the problem than a part of the solution. Art, one might think, cannot counter the “new spirit of capitalism,” which no longer suppresses the creativity, spontaneity, and originality of its subjects but rather demands and exploits it. Today, in fact, hardly anything makes a more dismal impression than an art that narcissistically relies on the idea of individual creativity, as if the world were still constructed such that the side of art was bright and colorful, while that of the manager remains dull and flannel gray. The world of management itself has in the meantime become occupied by creative subjects so that the difference between art and everything else can no longer be convincingly defined by creativity alone.¹³ And this situation is made even more acute, one might go on to think, by the fact that art, with its *own*,

13. See Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst: Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).

1 art-specific critique of the myth of the genius artist, has itself contributed to
2 the homogenization of creative industries and artistic practices.¹⁴

3 But this last conclusion is misleading, I think. For the new spirit of capi-
4 talism sustains exactly the subjectivistic myth of the genius who creates from
5 the inexplicable interior of his individuality. Only now it no longer reduces the
6 transgressive power of innovation to the exceptional case of the artist, but
7 encourages it in the most ordinary project employee. The critique of the myth
8 of the genius that has been formulated by artists themselves, on the other hand,
9 is directed precisely against the subjectivism of that myth, which has been
10 mobilized by neoliberal ideology. Against mythologizing ideas of artistic crea-
11 tion and inspiration, artistic critique since the 1960s has increasingly focused
12 on the circumstance that even the most individualistic artistic activity is always
13 already subjected to the influence of society. We are familiar today with vari-
14 ous artistic approaches that negate or undermine such a subjectivist idea of art
15 production: one might think of appropriation art that made explicit that the
16 claim to artistic originality is more often than not bound to a certain repression
17 of influences, but one could also think of the many artistic practices that rule
18 out the trace of the artist's subjectivity as such, be it through chance operations
19 or through the inclusion of those industrial forms of production that under-
20 score that art is not the authentic other of the general conditions of production
21 that structure the rest of our lifeworld but, in fact, partakes in them. Artists
22 today largely see themselves as people who cannot evade social influences any
23 more than anyone else can. Of course, this has not abolished the artist's social
24 significance, just shifted its meaning. The artist is no longer significant for
25 society owing to the exceptional status of being singled out from it. The artist
26 is rather seen as a witness to his or her cultural and social present, as a contem-
27 porary. This obviously contradicts the suspicion that artists have contributed to
28 normalizing and economizing creativity through their critique of the myth of
29 the genius. The artistic critique of this myth aimed at its subjectivism, which
30 the neoliberal normalization of this myth has not at all abolished but in fact
31 affirmed.

32 But this shift in the artist's self-understanding also provides us with
33 another indication that the diagnosis of *posthistoire* might not speak the whole
34 truth about contemporary art. For it demonstrates that significant develop-
35 ments in more recent art can be traced back to critical motives. The turn
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37 14. On this thesis, see Andreas Reckwitz, "Vom Künstlermythos zur Normalisierung kreativer
38 Prozesse," in *Kreation und Depression*, ed. Christoph Menke and Juliane Rebentisch (Berlin: Kul-
39 turverlag Kadmos, 2010), 98–117, esp. 100.

against the metaphysical notion of the artist genius, still very much alive in modernism if one thinks of emblematic figures like Picasso or Pollock, is motivated—it is a critical turn. This suggests a very different reading of contemporary art than the one offered by the cultural pessimists. What if the displacement of modernism by contemporary art were to be understood not as some departure from history as such but as a critical, motivated turn against certain aspects of modernism? If one follows this intuition, the term *contemporary art*, of course, immediately loses its problematic neutrality; it instead becomes legible normatively, namely, as a figure of progress in critical consciousness.

However, such a notion of contemporary art could not be satisfied with empirically registering the presumably given. It would, in fact, have to be decidedly anti-empiricist. For something to qualify as contemporary art would then mean designating it normatively, not least with respect to the question of whether it contributes to the understanding of its own time. The full normative sense of the term *contemporary art* consists in the fact that it is meant to make our historical present present to us. Such a task, however, requires taking an attitude toward one's own time that neither blindly merges into it nor assiduously conforms to its demands. So what exactly does it mean to be a contemporary, a comrade of one's time (a *Zeitgenosse*)? Boris Groys has proposed the nice idea that the contemporary, like any good comrade or companion, should help out his or her own time, should rush in to help it when things get difficult—for example, when it is perceived as unproductive, as mired in sticky immaturity, as indifferent and meaningless.¹⁵ Contemporaneity would consequently be much more than merely participating in chronological time. To the contrary, to be true to one's own time, to be a good contemporary, would mean adding certain discontinuities into the continuum of chronological time.

This begins, as Giorgio Agamben has asserted in a small text on the notion of the contemporary, already in the moment in which someone speaks of "his time," thus identifying himself as a contemporary. Being with the time, being con-temporary, means to split time, to add caesuras that make it legible in the first place.¹⁶ This pertains not only to the division between chronological time and the eccentric time of experience, already operative when a contemporary declares the present to be his or her time, but also, as Agamben emphasizes further, to the task of trying to define the historical meaning of the

15. Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," in *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 32.

16. Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," in *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54.

1 present. For this also means placing the present in a relationship to the past so
 2 that the present receives some direction for historical development that leads
 3 into a future.

4 But what are the caesuras that can be put forward to understand the con-
 5 temporaneity of contemporary art as a critical answer to that modernism from
 6 which it seems to so programmatically distance itself? In his contribution to a
 7 collection of essays titled *What Is Contemporary Art?*, the Mexican art critic
 8 and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina points out the lack of unity in this question.
 9 For instance, a reference work with the title *Theories and Documents of Con-*
 10 *temporary Art* takes 1945 as the starting point; the Tate Modern, on the other
 11 hand, organizes its holdings of contemporary art with artistic productions after
 12 1965; and one increasingly hears 1989 named as the date by which the contem-
 13 poraneity of contemporary art gets its profile.¹⁷

14 At first glance this may seem like a heterogeneous list—1945, 1965,
 15 1989—yet something does connect them. The dates correspond to various
 16 crises in the modern narrative of progress, each of which is in turn linked to
 17 the history of art in its own way. If it is correct that the term *contemporary art*
 18 programmatically breaks away from the modern, and indeed that it does so in
 19 a way that concerns modernist ideas of progress, then in fact what we have
 20 here is a significant list of dates. Instead of hastily deducing—as the represen-
 21 tatives of the *posthistoire* thesis do—that contemporary art stands for a crisis
 22 of progress *in general*, and thus the term *progress* does not make sense at all if
 23 applied to contemporary art, one should, I am convinced, evaluate the artistic
 24 critique of modernist models of progress and history itself as progress. And
 25 this is the case for all three of the stages named.

26 The first date, 1945, marks a threshold after which it is no longer possible
 27 to conceive history according to the Hegelian model directly as progress in the
 28 consciousness of freedom. It stands for the experience of a political-moral
 29 catastrophe of such proportions that this notion was shaken to its very core.
 30 After Auschwitz, in light of, as Theodor W. Adorno succinctly put it, “a regres-
 31 sion that has already *taken place*. . . . Not only every positive doctrine of prog-
 32 ress but also even every assertion that history has a *meaning* has become prob-
 33 lematic and affirmative.”¹⁸ This break also had certain effects on aesthetic
 34 discourse. Any discussion of the progressive quality of art could now refer to
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36 17. Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses,” in *What Is Contemporary Art?*,
 37 11–12.

38 18. Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity,
 39 2006), 4.

only such works that undermined the false optimism of the idealistic model of progress. This was partly reflected in an artistic critique of conventions of the beautiful, glorified by idealistic aesthetics as an expression of freedom. This is of course also reflected in modernist aesthetic theory. One could argue that for the perhaps most influential (postwar) modernist aesthetic, that of Adorno, it is no longer the category of the beautiful that is decisive but a postmetaphysical concept of the sublime.¹⁹ “After the fall of beauty,” Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, “the sublime was the only aesthetic idea left to modernism.” For “the ascendancy of the sublime is one with art’s compulsion that fundamental contradictions not be covered up but fought through in themselves. . . . Thus, however, the sublime becomes latent.”²⁰ In other words, the sublime takes on the structural meaning of formal principles that negate the beautiful form with its proportion, its balance, its unbroken unity, its harmony. Turning against beauty’s self-righteous triumph over its other, the sublime unfolds its latent work as the principle of formlessness at the core of the (then no longer affirmatively beautiful) form. My point here, however, is that even the story of modernism can already be told as a story of a correction in the notion of progress—namely, of its idealistic understanding.

The second threshold, dated somewhat at random by the Tate at 1965, stands for a developmental point in art that can no longer so easily be seen as compatible with the categories of postwar modernist aesthetics. During the 1960s, art insistently turned against the system of the individual arts as well as against the unity of the work—that is, against the presuppositions that still defined the aesthetics of the 1950s, even when they stood under the sign of the sublime. While the development toward open and intermedial works had begun somewhat earlier, the tendency increased to such an extent during the 1960s that it became irrefutable and thus a problem for modernist art theory. For one now began to encounter works more and more frequently that could neither be allocated solely to the tradition of one art alone, nor did they restrict themselves in any way to traditional artistic media, instead engaging with new technologies and industrial production methods. Furthermore, it was often no longer possible to tell where the lines separating the works from their

19. On the respective reading of Adorno, see Albrecht Wellmer, “Adorno, die Moderne und das Erhabene,” in *Endspiele: Die unversöhnliche Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 178–203, esp. 186. See also Wolfgang Welsch, “Adornos Ästhetik: Eine implizite Ästhetik des Erhabenen,” in *Das Erhabene: Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn*, ed. Christine Pries (Weinheim: VCH Acta Humaniora, 1989), 185–213.

20. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 197.

1 nonartistic outsides were to be drawn; rather, the works deliberately destabi-
 2 lized them. These developments threw postwar modernist art theory, which,
 3 for all its critique of idealistic aesthetics, still hung on to the idea of the work's
 4 unity and the necessity of dividing art into the various arts, into crisis—and
 5 with it went the modernist notion of artistic progress. With regard to hybrid
 6 and open works, it seemed impossible at first glance to identify any develop-
 7 mental logic at all. Open and hybrid works not only seemed to evade any com-
 8 parison with the art of the past because they, as intermedial, could no longer be
 9 read and judged against the backdrop of a tradition (*of music, of painting, of*
 10 *sculpture, of literature, etc.*), they were—because of their unclear borders with
 11 the nonaesthetic lifeworld—no longer even given as something definite. This
 12 shift is certainly decisive in the confrontation between contemporary art and
 13 modern art, because it is here that the art theory of postwar modernity associ-
 14 ated with the term *high modernism* expressly reaches its limits, particularly
 15 where its understanding of progress and history are concerned.

16 With regard to the visual arts, the great divide between high modernism
 17 and what came after is represented by minimalism, for example. The modern-
 18 ist art critic Michael Fried not only criticized minimalist objects for ambiva-
 19 lently lying between sculpture and painting but also for opening up to the exhibi-
 20 tion situation without ever making that relation explicit. Minimalist objects,
 21 Fried observed, seemed to be what they are only by virtue of the beholder, who
 22 perceives them in different ways depending on perspective.²¹ Indeed, if you
 23 think of Fred Sandback's minimalist yarn installations, it is equally possible to
 24 look at them as a picturesque constellation of tender lines against a neutral
 25 backdrop as it is to experience them in a more tactile manner, as it were, as
 26 interventions into the architecture of the exhibition space. Both tendencies—
 27 the dissolution of the boundaries between the arts and between art and nonart—
 28 have been radicalized in the wake of minimalism, and today they often take on
 29 much more drastic forms. Santiago Sierra's political twists on the aesthetics of
 30 minimalism are a good case in point. Think, for example, of the work he did in
 31 Brisbane in 2010 where he employed workers to hold heavy-looking minimal-
 32 ist structures to the wall by resting them on their shoulders. But to focus solely
 33 on the working conditions of those who literally keep the art up for us, for
 34 example, is partly to ignore the artistic work, yet it is obviously no more
 35 instructive merely to insist that what one is looking at is just an arrangement of
 36 forms. The very point of this work was precisely the situative discomfort that
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38 21. See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory
 39 Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 116–47.

calls the accepted safety of the audience's position into question, and does so to the very degree to which the boundaries between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic, between art and nonart, between reality and fiction become the stakes in what is doubtlessly serious aesthetic play: not, however, to provoke the viewer to overcome his or her status as a spectator and act but to aesthetically isolate the tension between the formalist and practical stances and to set free the reflexive potential of that tension. For this experience confronts the viewer with the problem of his or her own spectatorship, with the different meanings it takes on in different contexts and with the conventions that support it. This means that the aesthetic here can no longer be short-circuited with formalism. Such practices do not negate the aesthetic in favor of the realm of political action; rather, they insist on an antiformalist understanding of the aesthetic. To experience aesthetically means to "experience experience," as Martin Seel once put it, to encounter the worlds of our daily experiences in a new, reflexively distanced manner.²²

This is also to say that even such works do not simply suspend the difference between art and nonart, between artistic representation and empirical reality. Rather, they call for a fundamentally different understanding thereof. The difference between art and nonart can no longer be made objective as a border between a self-contained work of art and its outside; it manifests itself in the specific reflective structure of the experience that distinguishes our relation to art from all other theoretical and practical manners of living in the world. The object's aesthetic quality is not tied to certain properties of the object that are defined in advance, but must instead be understood as the product of experience initiated in the engagement with the object. If, under the conditions of the dissolution of boundaries, the aesthetic can no longer be understood as the objective other of the nonaesthetic, that does not imply a renunciation of aesthetic thinking but a shift within that thinking.²³ Far from facing the nonaesthetic as its external other, the aesthetic consists now in its reflective transformation.

But what follows from all this for our understanding of progress and history? Counter to the *posthistoire* diagnosis, one can now argue that the current situation neither signifies the end of art nor the end of its history but merely the end of a particular art theory or aesthetics including its one-dimensional model

22. See Martin Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung: Zum Begriff ästhetischer Rationalität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 319–20.

23. For a more extensive discussion of this point, cf. Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), published in English as *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, trans. Daniel Hendrickson with Gerrit Jackson (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012).

1 of progress and historical development.²⁴ That art since the 1960s can no longer
2 be allocated exclusively to the history of only one art, indeed, that the open
3 works expressly refer to their being constituted through contradictory inter-
4 pretations and readings, has to be understood less as a symptom of a general
5 historical forgetfulness than as the manifestation of a proper understanding
6 of the historicity of art. Even a superficial look at the reception histories of
7 arbitrary works—with their booms, drops in potential, periods of latency, and
8 rediscoveries—shows that their historical life is not absorbed by the role that
9 might be attributed to them by *one* history of progress. Historically changeable
10 experiences disclose the work anew over and over again in its innovative
11 potential, and in reverse, the absence of such disclosures causes the work to
12 sink into meaninglessness. This, by the way, also indicates that contemporaneity
13 is not some kind of additional quality that artworks might or might not
14 have, but that it is essential to its very conception. All meaningful art, all art in
15 the emphatic sense, is contemporary. It has meaning for the present.

16 This also has consequences for discussions of canonicity. Instead of
17 assuming a transhistorical validity of great works, we now see that such great-
18 ness itself is historically formed in and through the history of its new and dif-
19 ferent disclosures in each contemporary context. This also means that the
20 canon is up for discussion at every moment, or at any rate that it can be, in
21 principle, and must therefore be conceived as dynamic. The many rediscoveries
22 of forgotten artists or artworks by the figures of contemporary art would
23 then also not be an expression, at least not entirely, of a merely subjective retro
24 taste, which incorporates its material for individual distinction; rather, they
25 express a more complex understanding of (art) history. And it is certainly also
26 not a mistake to see in this a corrective in the understanding of modernity
27 itself. Although in the context of modernist theory, if one thinks of its emblem-
28 atic critic Clement Greenberg, for example, modernity sometimes seems as if
29 it had only one temporal direction—namely, forward. Modernity is, as Jacques
30 Rancière points out, still factually marked by groundbreaking reappropriations
31 of tradition. Any understanding of the modern “tradition of the new” is
32 insufficient if it ignores the “newness of the tradition” that goes along with it.²⁵
33 From this perspective, contemporary art not only renews the historiographical
34 potential of modernity but also brings to the fore another dimension of the
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36 24. See the discussion in Christoph Menke and Juliane Rebentisch, eds., *Kunst—Fortschritt—*
37 *Geschichte* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2006).

38 25. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London:
39 Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 20.

notion of the contemporary, for its sometimes untimely engagement with the past might bring us back to a present that we have not yet been in.²⁶ Admittedly, such an idea of contemporaneity once again explicitly contradicts the gloomy image of a *posthistoire*, which generates its present by, as Gumbrecht formulates, “always only placing the latest thing from today alongside the latest thing from yesterday without differentiation.”²⁷

This examination of the understanding of modernity, history, and progress also provides the framework for the most recent threshold associated with the term *contemporary art*: 1989. In terms of world politics, the date stands for the end of the Cold War and for so-called globalization, which has provided the rubric for understanding the thorough implementation of a neoliberal, deregulated capitalism that operates globally, on the one hand, but which, on the other, is characterized by a new attention to questions of postcolonialism. In view of the development in art, the latter certainly involves a further critique of the modernist narrative of progress. What now becomes problematic is its increasing restriction to what criticism polemically but tellingly refers to as NATO art.²⁸ In fact, recent art is full of critical rereadings and grapplings with Western modernity in the light of the discovery of new genealogies and cultural relations of exchange. This had caused a whole series of not exactly small-scale problems to emerge, which in no way have all been circumvented by contemporary art and the discourse surrounding it. For this is a project that should neither be confused with a fetishization of differences that celebrates the authentic other while keeping its own identity intact, nor with the complaint that condemns Western modernity as the source of all our present troubles—thereby falling back behind all attempts to give up the overly simple distinction between “West and rest” in favor of more complex historiographies sensible to contradictions.

And even the metaphor of “being-in-between,” with which theory seems to have created a certain comfort zone for itself, as Andreas Huyssen emphasizes,²⁹ turns out to be somewhat misleading, as it suggests that there are stable national cultures between which such an “in-between” zone could be established. Complementarily, though, the overhasty talk of “global flow,” which presumably penetrates all cultures equally, turns out to be inadequate too, as Huyssen rightly adds. This kind of talk is already askew in view of financial

26. For this formulation, see Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?,” 52.

27. Gumbrecht, “Die Gegenwart wird (immer) breiter,” 69–70.

28. Medina, “Contemp(t)orary Art: Eleven Theses,” 17.

29. Andreas Huyssen, “Shadow Play as Medium of Memory,” in *Nalini Malani: In Search of Vanished Blood*, ed. dOCUMENTA (13) (Ostfildern: Cantz, 2012), 49.

1 capital, the flows of which in no way run evenly, but asymmetrically; further-
 2 more, as we know all too well from the experience of crisis in recent years,
 3 they can also falter. But as a cultural metaphor, according to Huyssen, the term
 4 *global flow* assumes that all difference is already obliterated by the new com-
 5 munications technologies, which make anything and everything indiscrimi-
 6 nately available. One should, however, not immediately draw conclusions from
 7 this technological condition about its social and cultural use. Terms such as
 8 *translation* and *appropriation* would be much more promising in this context,
 9 by taking account of the specificity of each context involved, without losing
 10 sight of the fact that neither the starting materials nor the contexts in each case
 11 in which it will be translated or to which it will be appropriated are left
 12 unchanged in such processes.³⁰

13 Insofar as it is dedicated to examining such circumstances of translation
 14 or appropriation, contemporary art is as opposed to the conservative idea of
 15 closed cultures as it is to the neoliberal idea of a world culture that is being
 16 realized today. Its project is then less that of a translation “between the cul-
 17 tures” than that of a culture of translation, in which modernity’s universalism
 18 alone has a future pointing beyond Western domination. Understood in this
 19 way, however, even this last development in art is in the service of an under-
 20 standing of the present that is precisely not placeless and timeless but made
 21 present in its geographic, cultural, and historical specificity.

22 To conclude: none of the three dates mentioned documents the departure
 23 of contemporary art from history—as if artists today wanted to get around the
 24 plainly existential question of whether there is progress. Rather, each date
 25 stands for a different way to rethink this question, without necessarily relying
 26 on the metaphor of linear advance.³¹ Insofar, however, as this rethinking not
 27 only occurs in critical engagement with modern models of history and progress
 28 but also links up to modernity’s potential to enlightenment, it should also be
 29 understood as a critical self-transgression and self-overcoming of *modernity*.
 30 Significantly, this becomes particularly evident precisely in the most recent of
 31 the developments mentioned in contemporary art, for it is with regard to the
 32 global nonsimultaneity and local specificity of unfolding modernities that the
 33 question of what connects them has to be posed. In other words, the opening of
 34
 35

36 30. Huyssen, “Shadow Play as Medium of Memory,” 49–50.

37 31. The necessity of such a rethinking is surely also fortified today in view of the crises in the
 38 areas of the economy and of ecology. See also Claus Offe, “Was (falls überhaupt etwas) können wir
 39 uns heute unter politischem ‘Fortschritt’ vorstellen?,” in *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*
 2 (2010): 3–14.



the notion of modernity itself forces us to confront the task of conceptualizing 1
modernity. Contemporary art thus does not refer to modernity as if the modern 2
project were completed; contemporary art is not “finished” with modernity in 3
a way that everything associated with it could be left behind. The present of 4
contemporary art is much more that of a modernity critically self-transforming 5
itself and thus of a modernity that is to be conceived as unfinished. 6

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