

Defining Contemporaneity: Imagining Planetaryity

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ABSTRACT If the contemporaneity of difference seems the most striking characteristic of contemporary life today, its conceptual structure continues to elude definition. The same lack of clarity attends a frequently evoked parameter for the most desired resolution of such volatile differences: a cohesive, consensual world picturing, sometimes named “planetaryity.” My overall project is a close examination of these two concepts, aimed at finding productive connections between them. Previous attempts to think them, from the confessions of St Augustine to the New York Times columns of Thomas Friedman, reveal a plethora of illuminating insights, but the overall record reveals that both concepts remain inadequately imagined for current circumstances. Temporality and world-being seems to constellate around these concepts: contemporaneity, history, decoloniality, connectivity, artworlds, and planetaryity. How might the contemporaneity of difference and the embattled yet emergent planetary commons be imagined in terms appropriate to present need –that is, as contemporaneous, differential and convergent? While this question is obviously of the broadest relevance, my specific goal within the history and theory of art and architecture is to articulate the conceptual structure underlying my recent accounts of the relationships between contemporary art and architecture and contemporary life.

KEYWORDS Contemporaneity, History, Decoloniality, Connectivity, Artworlds, Planetaryity

What does it mean to think contemporaneity today, and to think contemporary art’s relation to it? I begin from the concept of contemporaneity itself, which I will define, for the moment, as follows: the multiplicity of ways of being in time, at the same time as others, right now, but also at earlier and future times, in ways that open us to other, non-modern temporalities (including Indigenous knowing), and to other kinds of time. This possibility has been present since the first sentient making of distinctions of any kind. Sustained reflection upon it appears in St Augustine’s *Confessions*, written in 398 CE and still resonant in current thinking about the structure of time, as a kind of default position: that is, humans best conceive past, present and future times as if they were present to them, in contrast to the eternality available to God, and the saintly. But let us begin to profile *modern* conceptions through a text dated June 25, 1820, written in Berlin by Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, the preface to his *The Philosophy of Right*, in which the famous owl metaphor occurs.

WORLDS-WITHIN-THE-WORLD: PLANOMENA

Earth, planet, natural histories, evolution, information

Sentient interiority (human, animal, thingly, machinic?)

Societies, social relations, local economies, nation states, cultures

Geopolitics and economics, international arrangements, ngos, civilizations

These are the irreducible *arenas* or *fields* of world being, perhaps the essential ones. They are arrayed, temporally, from the origins to the present. Each of them is distinctive, materially and conceptually, but they are also tied together, historically and pragmatically. Indeed, it may be the case that all worldly experience occurs and becomes visible on one or more of these planes, and all thinking is thinking about the nature of these planes, the relationships between the elements upon them, and their relationships to each other. What connects these planes, how were they formed, how do they change over time, and do they interact with each other?

I was inspired to this proposal partly in reaction against the brutally simplistic modeling advanced during the 1990s by theorists of globalization and government such as Samuel P. Huntington and Joseph Nye Jr.²⁶ Nye suggests that we envisage the distribution of power throughout the world as a chess game played on multiple boards at once, in which actors moving pieces on one board (say, the geopolitical) impact on another (say, the cultural). He urges that, if the United States is to retain its preeminence it must act in awareness of the effects of power across all relevant domains, and do in a planned way, within frameworks of conscious policy (thus his concept of “soft power,” avidly adopted as a tool of foreign policy by governments around the world today, not least the Chinese government). Being actually more concerned with coercive power, having forgotten their Foucault, and being unconcerned about climate change, both Nye and Huntington pay little attention to interiority and the planetary. They persist with the top-down “visuality” that Nicholas Mirzoeff traces as having competed with, and mostly dominated, a more democratic “right to look” since the seventeenth century.²⁷

Let me complicate this strata-title approach with some suggestions as to the kinds of relationship that are commonly held to *connect* these planes. They will be a little more subtle, I hope, or at least less fictive, than the TRiD Chess regularly played by Captain Kirk and Commander Spock on *Star Trek* during the 1970s. I indicate only some of the most prominent *forms* that these relationships take, through the names that these relationships have attracted. I will do so in two steps, first by adding to the planes what I call *states of becoming*.

To apprehend what is is the task of philosophy, because what is is reason. As for the individual, every one is a son of his time; so philosophy is also its time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world as that an individual could leap out of his time or jump over Rhodes.

He denies that this restricts us to “the particular and the contingent,” that is, to presentism. Instead, he claims that “subjective freedom” – the goal of living – may be found only while remaining “present in substantive reality.” He concludes with the famous metaphor: “Only one more word concerning the desire to teach the world what it ought to be: for such a purpose, philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready ... When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes flight only when the shades of night are gathering.”¹

From a technical, or territorial, point of view, this is a warning about what happens when ontology takes itself to be deontology. More broadly, it is a reminder that the world itself has primacy in the production of thought, and that every philosopher is a messenger who fades to black upon delivery. Hegel may have wished to strike a metaphor opposite to that of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. So, if we were to seek visualizations of his metaphor, they would not be the implied narrative of being guided to the light shown in Jan Sanraedam’s etching of 1604 (British Museum). Rather, they would be closer to the contrast between the use of *grisaille* compared to full color that was typical for academic painters in Hegel’s time, as we would see if we were to compare the *Odalisque* painted by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres 1814 (Louvre) and the *grisaille* version made by him and students a decade or so later (Metropolitan Museum). An exact demonstration of Hegel’s point about what happens when you paint grey on grey: to put it bluntly, you get knowledge but not life.

Most philosophers of consequence have used visual metaphors to make vivid the experience of what it is (like) to come to know the world’s significance, and we can trace an uneven but gradually increasing compression of metaphor into actuality as we approach the present. Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* is, among other things, one account of this development in Western thought.² It is a topic in Peter Osborne’s *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde*.³ But our goal today is to try to highlight what is most compelling, and most critical, in contemporary

thinking about contemporaneity, so let me leap to the present in four or five quick steps.

Søren Kierkegaard opens his 1846 polemic *The Present Age* with these words:

Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, occasionally bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose.⁴

He goes on to detail everything he hates about the institutionalized mediocrity and the “leveling” orthodoxies of his time. For him, the contrast is always with the compelling call to a quite different relationship to time, that is, to fully occupy The Instant, as he named the broadsheet to which he devoted the last months of his life, and in which he reiterates his belief in the kind of “sametimeness” that is to be most desired: contemporaneity with Christ.⁵

Walter Benjamin reflected on this topic constantly – most famously his last text, the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), in its opening passage about Paul Klee’s watercolor *Angelus Novus* (1920) which he owned for a few years. Another painting, *Crashing Bird* (1919), also shown at the exhibit from which Benjamin bought the painting, suggests that Klee’s focus was the impact of World War I, rather than Benjamin’s interpretation of the angel being the dismayed at “storm blowing in from paradise” that we know as progress. I will cite a statement about the dialectical image from the “N” folder of *The Arcades Project*, on which Benjamin worked during the later 1930s.

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronous with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time... It is not that which is past that casts its light on what is present, or what is present that casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.⁶

The dialectic in operation here is not a process that synthesizes opposites as an absolute historical process, but a revelatory event, one that brings Hegel’s knowing and rejuvenation together in a conjunction that

is experienced as a radical rupturing. Jacques Derrida was among those who have noticed this. In the midst of his most intense discussion of the concept of *différance* in *Margins of Philosophy* he argues that:

The structure of delay (*Nachträglichkeit*) in effect forbids that one make of temporalization (temporization) a simple dialectical complication of the living present as an originary and unceasing synthesis – a synthesis constantly directed back on itself, gathered in on itself and gathering – of relational traces and protentional openings. The alterity of the “unconscious” makes us concerned not with horizons of modified – past or future – presents, but with a “past” that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a *production* or reproduction in the form of presence.⁷

Which leads him to not only reconstrue – actually deconstruct – Hegel as a speculative philosopher, but also to reformulate Benjamin’s metaphor in a way that retains its eruptive character but loses the presumption that the dialectic is foundational. Thus, in the “Exergue” to *Of Grammatology*, he writes:

The future can only be anticipated in the form of absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and this can announce itself, present itself, only under the species of monstrosity. For this world to come and what in it will have shaken the values of the sign, of speech, and of writing, for what is guiding here our future anterior, there is no exergue as yet.⁸

The so-called later Derrida devoted himself to writing this very “exergue,” but he had little to say directly in his published writings about contemporaneity as such. He was, however, directly influential on my posing “the contemporaneity question” to a group of scholars, theorists, artists, critics, and curators, meeting exactly ten years ago, in early November 2004, in Pittsburgh on the occasion of the 54th Carnegie International Exhibition. The question was posed in this form:

*In the aftermath of modernity, and the passing of the postmodern, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity?*⁹

Like all such deliberately loaded interrogations, it carried a plethora of presumptions as to why it was being posed, about its acuity in having identified a problematic, and about the kinds of implied answer it would admit. Our preface was explicit about the purport of the question, and where it was heading:

This is a question about individual being and social belonging now, about how the relationships between them might be understood these days, and how they might be represented to others – in speech, in texts, in works of art, and in exhibitions. The editors of this book begin from the intuition that, when it comes to offering acute accounts of these relationships – in brief, of large-scale world-picturing and small scale world making – the time of postmodern doubt about modernity may appear to have run out. Does this mean that the kinds of large-scale world making and the various projects of totalization associated with modernity have returned to dominance, albeit in multiple, contingent and contradictory forms? Or does it mean that the world has entered a condition in which overarching frameworks, however internally differentiated and skeptical, have lost their power to shape the far reaches of thought and thus their purchase on the particularities of everyday life? This would leave us naked to the present. If so, it is a contemporaneity that is riddled with as much wary doubt as it is infused with watchful hope, that seems immured in utopian appeals to the futurity of various pasts, including that of modernity, yet everywhere and always poses itself to itself as a pressing question.¹⁰

The speakers at the conference, from Fredric Jameson and Antonio Negri through Rosalind Krauss and Geeta Kapur to McKenzie Wark and Nikos Papastergiadis, explored this question from a variety of perspectives. In my introduction, I drew on the layered complexity of meanings inherent in the word “contemporary” and their changes of priority over time, notably their displacement of the set of meanings associated with the word “modern,” which now lingers as a subset within our contemporaneity. The core claim has been often cited:

If we were to generalize this quality (of course, against its grain) as a key to world picturing, we would see its constituent features manifest there, to the virtual exclusion of other explanations. We would see, then, that *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.* This certainly looks like the world as it is now. No longer does it feel like “our time,” because “our” cannot stretch to encompass its contrariness. Nor, indeed, is it “a time,” because if the modern was inclined above all to define itself as a period, and sort the past into periods, in contemporary conditions periodization is impossible. The only potentially permanent thing about this state of affairs is that it may last for an unspecified amount of time: the present may

become, perversely, “eternal.” Not, however, in a state of wrought transfiguration, as Baudelaire had hoped, but as a kind of incessant incipience, of the kind theorized by Jacques Derrida as *à venir* – perpetual advent, that which is, while impossible to foresee or predict, always to come.¹¹

A similar set of interrogations and insights inform Jacques Rancière’s collection of essays, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, written between 1997 and 2005, but they are not developed into a broader theory, or even speculation, about “the times” – rather, they counter its efforts to secure hegemonic closure through a fake consensuality.¹²

Likewise, Giorgio Agamben, in his 2007 seminar at the European Graduate School, asked “What does it mean to be contemporary?” He sought to articulate “contemporariness” as it is experienced by those who are most capable of understanding its true nature – a truth found precisely in that experience, in the grasping of its inner registers. He posed, mostly via metaphor, one paradox after another to demonstrate the shadow play that comes into being whenever “the contemporary” is subject to analysis. Although seeking to explicate a state of being that has special relevance to our present times, he did not do so (as I attempt to do) by showing how this state, however universal or preexistent aspects of it may be, has qualities that are characteristic of current conditions, understood as a general or widely shared situation. Rather, he sketched how “contemporariness” is experienced – at its most profound, ontological register – by philosophers, poets and others. He took his examples from across the span of modern thinking about such matters, from Nietzsche to contemporary astrophysics. Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1873–76) – above all his passionate insistence that overweening respect for the determinative power of History had reduced his contemporaries to servile subjects, incapable of making their own lives, let alone future history – is cited as a prime example of 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.”¹³ This is a replay of Baudelaire’s conception of *modernité*, and is inadequate to the contemporary situation.

Yet it is precisely this buried familiarity, to say nothing of its simple, circular ambiguity that has made Agamben’s “definition” (actually, it has the form of a postmodern de-definition) so attractive to contemporary

artworld discourse, which is congenitally devoted to immersion in its own hall of mirrors. Tim Griffin, ex-editor of *Artforum*, noted this with some acuity:

Among the more puzzling preoccupations of dialogues around art during the past five years has been “the contemporary,” a seemingly self-evident description that, to date, has operated largely in reverse – that has been put forward, in other words, as a meaningful denomination and subject of inquiry in advance of any actual, deductive relationship to the surrounding world. The hope, it would seem, is that the term employed by itself and evocatively will help tease out some general understanding of the conditions for art making and its reception today. Yet, unlikely as this might seem, the impulse is easy enough to fathom: artists, art historians, curators, and critics alike wish to find historical trajectories in art today where none immediately announce themselves; a disorienting air of atemporality prevails instead. Indeed, the imperative for historical precedence or distinction becomes only more urgent in light of the speculative obsessions with the “new” in a radically expanded art system whose borders have become so porous as to erode the very ideation of art. If there is a substantive sense of “the contemporary” to be employed here, it is likely to be the “out-of-jointness” that philosopher Giorgio Agamben ascribed to the term: Something is contemporary when it occupies time disjunctively, seeming always at once “too soon” or “too late,” or, more accurately in terms of art now, seeming to contain the seeds of its own anachronism.¹⁴

In the face of such pervasive mindlessness, I am delighted that Peter Osborne has joined in a quest to think the nature of our present contemporaneity, and to identify certain kinds of contemporary art practice and thought as central to our understanding of it. There is no doubt that his *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* is a landmark book in thinking the relations between contemporaneity and contemporary art. From my perspective, however, rather than amounting to an overall “philosophy of contemporary art,” his account offers a theoretical grounding for art produced within a significant sub-current of one of the three main currents that I identify in my approach to art made in the conditions of contemporaneity – namely, the tendency within the first current, within EuroAmerican Contemporary Art, that I have dubbed “Remodernism.” That is, the on-going (and market-dominating) recursive renovations of artistic media – especially painting, sculpture, film and photography—that were revolutionized by the avant-gardes of the early century and transformed again during the 1970s, so that these (post)mediums can continue to carry content as pertinent as that

explored in more contemporary modes, such as installations, video, performance, and digital platforms, along with the even more contemporary mashing of these mediums. As I can attest from my involvement in Art & Language, Adornian criticality is the philosophical approach most appropriate to the artists, theorists and institutions that form this sub-current, which he calls “post-conceptual.”¹⁵ A more complete philosophy of contemporary art would also address the conceptual enterprises that drive the larger currents that constitute contemporary art, which I will describe below.

En route to this larger picture, I need to propose a geopolitical framing of the contemporaneity question, as this is the route necessary to break open the self-contained conflation between art and ideas that prevails in much current art discourse.

Geopolitical Contemporaneity as the Construction of the Present While It Is Happening by Those Who Arrogate to Themselves the Power to Do So

In the years around 2000, questions about the current world condition were being asked, in all spheres, from the most public of media to the most esoteric the academic disciplines. Why? Where did such questions come from? What problems did they seek to pinpoint, which apparently definitive events were they describing? Above all, what kind of world was demanding this kind of answer?

A *New York Times Magazine* journalist reported the following remarks from a conversation with “a Senior White House aide” in the summer of 2002:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”¹⁶

The senior aide is believed to be Karl Rove, long-term advisor on political strategy to President George W. Bush, who himself made the same general point often enough in the years following 9/11. In, for example, his State of the Union address, delivered on January 31, 2006, to the US Congress in Washington D.C.:

Fellow citizens, we have been called to leadership in a period of consequence. We have entered a great ideological conflict we did nothing to invite. We see great changes in science and commerce that will influence all of our lives. And sometimes it can seem that history is turning in a wide arc, towards an unknown shore... In a complex and challenging time, the road of isolationism and protectionism may seem broad and inviting, yet it ends in danger and decline. The only way to protect our people, the only way to secure the peace, the only way to control our destiny is by our leadership. So the United States will continue to lead.¹⁷

At this time, Bush was struggling against a democratic Congress hostile to the accelerating disaster of the war in Iraq, itself a disastrous dissembling of a nation state that resulted from the export to the Middle East of the brand of crony capitalism championed by Bush, Cheney, and their gang of neoliberal radicals as the universally valid model of progressive economic and social organization. Keeping the public placid – or, better, frozen in fear, locked into the instant, waiting for the next disaster to occur, that is, totally contemporary – was essential to the success of what Naomi Klein aptly dubbed “disaster capitalism” in her book *The Shock Doctrine* (2008).¹⁸

Bush was also appealing to a larger sense of the United States as a nation post-1989, as the world’s only remaining “hyperpower,” the sole survivor of the Cold War, the inheritor of the Hegelian mantle of the maker and shaper of World History, so bluntly expressed by Rove. In his 2012 essay “Making Modernity Work: The Reconciliation of Capitalism and Democracy,” Gideon Rose, editor of the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*, defined a more benign version of this model, the “Washington Consensus” that, supposedly, would continue to absorb the destructive energies of the crony capitalism championed by Bush, Cheney, and the neoliberal crew, the depredations of the financial markets, and anything else the world could throw at it:

The major battles about how to structure modern politics and economics were fought in the first half of the last century, and they ended with the emergence of the most successful system the world has ever seen ... the postwar order of mutually supporting liberal democracies with mixed economies.¹⁹

I suggest to you, however, that far from the consolidation of this post-War or Post-Cold War order, we are experiencing its implosion. None of the terms of Rose’s simple formula are functioning, all are either self-destructing (finance capital) or self-immobilizing (governments), their mixture failing, and their support for each other has become anything

but mutual. Meanwhile, other kinds of huge-scale experiments are being undertaken by fragile national states around the world, and with increasingly unpredictable results. And, most importantly, we have reached the limits of the earth's capacity to sustain the material bases of these modern experiments.

The implosion will take decades, will take many strange, unpredictable forms, and will occasion many recurrences. But implode it will. The contemporaneity of irreconcilable difference, it seems, is all that remains. Is this so, and, if so, how might it be pictured?

Contemporaneity: A Meta-World Picture

In my view, three currents course through contemporary life and thought, isolating modernity's master narratives like beached whales, and proliferating divisive differences while at the same time channeling them into these powerful currents. This is a historical argument, about the shape of historical forces operating through the present. Underlying it is an intuition about a historical shift in the nature of human thinking about thinking, and perhaps in the nature of human thought (if such an object can still be imagined).

BECOMING CONTEMPORARY: WORLD CURRENTS

(A META-WORLD PICTURE)

CONTINUING MODERNITIES

Globalization, Post-Cold War Hyperpower; Clash of Civilizations, Spectacularity, Neo-conservatism, neoliberal economics, Posthistory, Invented Heritage,
Remodernisms

(between these, dialectical oppositionality but no prospective resolution)

TRANSITIONAL TRANSNATIONALITY

Decolonization; Indigenization; Anti-Orientalist and postcolonial critique, the movement of movements, anti-globalization; Postmodern pastiche, new realisms; inverse modernizations (China, Asian "tigers"); revived fundamentalisms; insurrectionary anarchisms

(between these, difference, adjacency, antinomic frictions)

CONTEMPORANEOUS DIFFERENCES

Contemporaneousness of incommensurable master narratives; Self-fashioning within Immediation; cosmopolitanism/planetarity, ranging from world citizenship to as-needed affiliative connectivity (Occupy); eco activism; open-form revolutions.

It will take decades to work through to what will doubtless be a different configuration of differences. But this, I submit, is what our contemporaneity looks like to us now, when we see it straight, when we frame it as historical occurrence in the present, with each of these concepts signaling a cluster of orientations towards world-being.

Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art

I have also argued for a number of years that these currents are manifest in contemporary art, most recently in a book – *Contemporary Art: World Currents* – that surveys how they developed based on the multiple modernities that actually prevailed during the twentieth century, and did so in distinct ways in the various art producing centers around the world. Deep difference is evident everywhere: for example, in the contrasting cover images chosen by the publishers of the English and US editions of my book.²⁰

Developments in art since the 1950s can be schematized as three currents that take shape over the decades since then in distinct ways in different parts of the world, then spread through time, like the fingers of an opening hand, coming into conflict and convergence in particular ways, but always diverging, towards an open-ended future, never combining into a fist that could be named “global art,” a “world art,” or even “Contemporary Art.” Rather, they maintain their contemporaneous differences, their internal contemporaneities and their cotemporality in relation to each other. This is an art historical argument, about the shape of historical forces operating through the present, and about how the ideational orientations mentioned earlier play out within art.

I. BECOMING CONTEMPORARY IN EUROAMERICA

(art movements, markets)

1. Late Modern Art becomes Contemporary
2. Postmodernism, Retro-Sensationalism and Remodernism

II. TRANSNATIONAL TRANSITIONS

(ideologies, issues)

1. Decolonization, Nationalism
2. Globalization, Internationalism
3. Cosmopolitanism, Translation

III. CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

(strategies, imaginings)

1. World Picturing, Making Art Politically
2. Environmentalism, Catastrophe, Planetaryity
3. Affects of Time, Mediation, Worlding

While this is a complex picture relative to the totalized or pluralistic models that are offered by others, it is not higher mathematics or rocket science. I was pleased to see that it was visualizable in spatial terms, or, more precisely, architecturally, as is evident in the design for the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University by Steven Holl Associates (2011-15). Holl's concept visualized contemporary art as moving through "the plane of the present" into "forking time," three parallel temporalities that open out to what Holl calls "scalelessness." At VCU, this will be a fourth gallery upstairs and a garden, a "thinking field," that links to the university campus.²¹

If it were possible to imagine the currents of contemporary art architecturally, what would it be to conceive them philosophically? We must begin from the recognition that "contemporaneity" is not a synonym for "the contemporary." On the contrary, "the contemporary" is an adjectival phrase missing its noun. Ask always, "The contemporary ... *what?*" In most cases, you will find that the speaker is using an abbreviation for "the contemporary world," "our contemporary situation," "the contemporary condition," "the contemporary experience," or some such. Uncertainty as to which noun is, in the case in point, most fitting has led art discourse in particular to leave the last word as a blank. More generally, those who feel that our times cannot name themselves without fearful consequence have left it empty. But it has been, all along, a space waiting to be filled. Actually, the contemporaneity of divisive differences has been filling in the blank since the 1960s. The real "blank," now, is the void in the place that should be being filled by a full consciousness of our connected planetarity. World picturing is becoming the preoccupation of artists everywhere. The contemporary question is: How can we shape our differences into the connections that the world requires?

The Planetarity to Come

My suggestion is that we need to set out on a broader search, from this premise. Picturing worlds in their real relation, making and sustaining a viable sense of place for each of us, establishing and maintaining a coeval connectivity between worlds and places – doing these things in circumstances where divisive difference prevails, and seems to be increasing exponentially – this is the challenge of contemporary world-being.

In her *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak called for something similar. Urging students of writing to "cross borders under the auspices of a Comparative Literature supplemented by Area Studies"

by imagining themselves as “planetary rather than continental, global, or worldly,” she announced:

I propose the planet to override the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered with latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems. To talk planet-talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided ‘natural’ space rather than a differentiated political space, can work in the interests of this globalization in the mode of the abstract as such. (I have been insisting that to transmute the literatures of the global South into an undifferentiated space of English rather than a differentiated political space is a related move.) The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say “the planet, on the other hand.” When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition.²²

In response to a question from me during a visit to the University of Pittsburgh in 2012 she disavowed this call for planetarity rather than globalism, as too generalized in form. It was too generalized as she formulated it in 2003, but, to me, it remains a valid – indeed, in our current crisis, the most valid – call. Let us try to make it at once more abstract and more concrete, more of a meta-picture in order to make it more real.

In attempting to do so, I am inspired by the claim of Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* that “What defines thought in its three great forms – art, science, and philosophy – is always confronting chaos, laying out a plane, throwing a plane over chaos.”²³ They insist that these three “great forms” do so in parallel but fundamentally distinct ways. Thus, they distinguish the “plane of immanence” within which philosophical concepts are formed, the “plane of coordinates” that enables scientific observers to define states of affairs, functions and references, and the “plane of composition” on which artists “wrest percept from perceptions” and “affect from affectations.”²⁴

My quest, it turns out, is somewhat broader. It attempts to throw a few more secant planes, or conceptual cuts, across even more chaos, to bring into the meta-picture of world pictures that I outlined earlier something of what they describe as “nonphilosophy,” “nonscience,” and “nonart.”²⁵

As a first step, we might imagine four such planes, a set of *planomena*.

WORLD/WORLDS/WORLDDING: <STATES> & PLANES

Earth, planet, natural histories, evolution, information

<Indigeneity, ecology, virtuality>

Sentient interiority (human, animal, machinic? things?)

<art, language, sexualities, belief, humanities, sciences, media, technologies>

Societies, social relations, local economies, nation states, cultures

<cooperation, diplomacy, war, criminality, networks>

Civilizations, geopolitics and economics, international arrangements, ngos

<temporality: modernity, globalization, globality, planetarity>

The terms I have inserted between the planes, or fields of being, are of course tremendously varied in kind, and in their historical valiance. I see them as the names of states of becoming, or modes of acting, that operate together as the groundwork of the planes of being. They are the conditions of possibility for each of them; they enable the planes to become immanent, to become fields on which being can appear, show itself becoming to other beings. For example, indigeneity is the most fundamental way of being for all that lives (humans, animals, and plants); art is the most profound social expression of interiority and sentience; cooperation is at the core of all social formation, from the smallest groups to world scale civilizations; while temporality is the state that registers contemporaneous difference and historical continuity and change – the modern and contemporary names for which are listed along the bottom line.

A similar pattern appears if you move through the terms on the right side, which presume that the world has also always existed as pure information, which then takes differentiated forms through time, appearing mainly in technological forms and organizational structures.²⁸ To move through the central sections is to start to see even more nuanced exchanges and patterns, most of which are not clear to me as yet.

When we sense these patterns moving down and up, we immediately ask: how do connections weave between the states of world becoming, and the planes on which being appears and acts? We grasp the need for a third set of terms, terms that I have yet to work out a way of visualizing, as they overwhelm any static image. But I know that they are there, and want to call them *connectivities*. I conceive of them as actions in space and time, as repeated and expanded patterns of acting, which change and develop over time. They have names that are instantly familiar: thinking, of course, first of all, but then, immediately, imagining, and figuring, and on to all of the other associated processes: such as feeling,

projecting, identifying, communicating. More blandly put: producing, consuming, prosuming. Or put in the language of power: warning, deterring, and negotiating, skirmishing, warring, surging, peace making, reconciling, watching. Or net actions: searching, networking, streaming, flocking. Or economies of various kinds, from bartering to high capitalism (this is where capitalism fits, as one kind of connectivity: very powerful, but contingent, and dependent, nothing like the default driver that remodernists and post-Marxists take it to be). Or ideologies, and hegemonic operations. There are many more, all specific to particular practices, and able to spread to others.

Usually, we conceive of these processes as things-in-themselves, or as having limited or local connection with similar processes. But if understanding how place making connects to worlding is our aim, then it is more useful to imagine them as threads weaving through these layers and forms of connection, or as folds that bring space and time into unexpected adjacency (which Michel Serres metaphorizes as connections across the surface of a crumpled handkerchief), as nodes that bring networks into being. This gives us a mobile, three-dimensional matrix.²⁹ If we have to name this activity – this weaving of connectivities between states and planes, this making of individual and collective place as a locating within constellations of worlds-with-other-worlds – let us call it “world-making” or “worlding.”³⁰ We are, all of us, and constantly, *worlding*... including – indeed, especially – when we make, exhibit, and participate in works of art that make manifest, give form, to the connectivities. In this, Peter Osborne and I concur. He concludes a recent article by saying that “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 its form. Each a condensed fragment of the worlding of the globe.”³¹

Worlding

Throughout this lecture, I have been asking: how does the multiplicity of time itself configure now, in our contemporary circumstances, as modernity splinters and recedes, and new modes of being come into existence? We know that the risk-taking to the point of self-destruction that is essential to all forms of capitalism has reached, yet again, significant limits. Among these: the pervasiveness, yet also cascading implosion, of globalization as a world system; the incapacity of most political systems to accommodate market extremism; the accelerating inequities between

nations and within them that is precipitating revolutions of many kinds everywhere; and, above all, the dialectic of mutually-assured destruction that seems wired into the Anthropocene.³² These are the fundamental forces shaping our current contemporaneity of difference. Within these forces, but primarily against them, I am arguing, finally, that we need to build a viable planetary consciousness from the meta-picture of world picturing, placemaking and connectivity that I, and the artists and thinkers mentioned, have attempted to chart. If we can do this, we might be able to weave within the extinction that is slowly but inevitably enveloping us, and, perhaps, slow it down – or, at least, *face it* by working, from now on, to recover, not an undifferentiated, global consensus, nor an exacerbated incommensurability, but, rather, a differentiated, worldly compact between coevals that is our (impossible but also “natural”) state of planetary being.

Notes

1. Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (New York: Cosimo, 2008), “Preface,” xx and xxi.
2. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985 and 1988).
3. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).
4. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* [1846], trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962), 33.
5. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* [1844], in *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 7, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), ch. 4 “The Case of the Contemporary Disciple”, and the detailed exposition by “Anti-Climacus” in *Practice in Christianity* [1850] in *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 20, trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).
6. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), N, 3, 1, p. 463.
7. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 21.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 5.
9. See my “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

10. Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," xiii.
11. Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," 9. There are internal references here to Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity: An Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002) and Jacques Derrida's later work, specifically *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and the interview following 9/11 in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
12. Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times* (London: Continuum, 2010).
13. Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40.
14. Tim Griffin, "Out of Time," *Artforum* 50, no. 1 (September 2011): 288–89.
15. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).
16. Ron Suskind, "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, at http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?_r=0.
17. Cited *New York Times*, February 1, 2006, A20 and A21.
18. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).
19. Gideon Rose, "Making Modernity Work: The Reconciliation of Capitalism and Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 1 (January/February 2012), 2.
20. Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011).
21. Steven Holl Associates, Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2012–15. See <http://www.stevenholl.com/project-detail.php?type=museums&id=123>. In his 2012 Windmueller Artist Lecture Holl describes the design as meeting the change in art from the dominance of the "master narratives" to open-ended possibility, with artists being able to work in different mediums for different purposes, simultaneously, with each direction being "fine." Examples he uses are Doug Aitken, Brice Marden ("Now, no-one says painting is dead"), Eduardo Chillida, and Richard Serra. At <http://ica.vcu.edu/events/past/video-windmueller-artist-lecture-series-presents-steven-holl/>.
22. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72.
23. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 117.

24. Ibid., 166.

25. Ibid., 218.

26. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1997), Joseph S. Nye Jr, *The Future of Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: PublicAffairs, 2011), and Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: PublicAffairs, 2004).

27. Nicolas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

28. James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

29. See Jane Bennett and William Connolly, "The Crumpled Handkerchief," in *Time and History in Deleuze and Serres*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London: Continuum, 2012), 153–71. I thank Judith Farquhar for this reference.

30. Of course, I draw on the brilliant tradition of thinking about worlds, that of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Nelson Goodman, etc., etc., Ed Casey, etc., etc., Marc Augé, etc, etc. But we are coming to their thoughts on these matters from a perspective that is emerging after theirs.

31. Peter Osborne, "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 184 (March/April 2014): 26.

32. See, for example, Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).