

Temporalization as Transcendental Aesthetics

Avant-Garde, Modern, Contemporary

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ABSTRACT Reflections on the relationship of aesthetics to politics tend to circle, almost compulsively, around a relatively stable set of conceptual oppositions, inherited from German philosophies of the late 18th century. This essay proposes an expansion of the theoretical terms of the debate by extending the field of transcendental aesthetics into the domain of historical temporalization. Fundamental art-historical categories may thereby be incorporated, philosophically transformed, into 'aesthetics' as forms of historical temporalization: avant-garde, modern, contemporary. The essay expounds two theses, in particular: 1. The historical subsumption of the temporality of the avant-garde by the temporality of the modern: the modern stands to the avant-garde as the *negation of its politics by the repetition of the new – 'the new as the ever-same'*; 2. the historical subsumption of the temporality of the modern by 'the contemporary': the contemporary stands to the modern as *the negation of the dialectical logic – and hence specifically developmentalist futurity – of the new by a spatially determined, but imaginary co-presencing*. One effect of this latter subsumption, it is argued, is a particular, regressive 'repetition of the national', at the level of cultural representation, on the terrain of the global.

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'Aesthetics and politics' has been a set – too often, a settled – topic for international conferences and symposia for over thirty years now, since the rubric was popularized as the framework for a set of debates with their origins in Germany in the 1930s.¹ It returns each year, like a kind of intellectual second nature, refreshed by the failure of the world to move beyond the oppositions it is dedicated to theorizing: expression and knowledge, form and commitment, art and non-art, art and life. These debates are at once invigorating and blocked. Keeping the independent discourses of aesthetics and politics alive, at their limits, by the contradictions of their conjunction, the seemingly endless reproduction of these oppositions figures something of the restless stasis at the heart of the social relations of capitalist societies themselves: the temporality of 'expanded reproduction'.² At once a reflection of and a reaction to these conditions, the opposition between aesthetics and politics functions in a quasi-transcendental manner, as a historical *a priori*, producing something akin to an aesthetico-political condition in its own right – a kind of intellectual scratching of the itch of commodity culture.

How are we to make of it something more than a symptom of divisions that are all-too-readily at once bemoaned and prospectively (but always only prospectively) surpassed and thereby, on occasion, wished away: divisions between models of un-alienated activity, given the lie by being alienated from each other?³

The problem, I think, lies more deeply within the concept and condition of politics than it does within our understandings of either aesthetic or art (which are themselves to be strictly distinguished); although the *internality* of aesthetic to politics – what we might call, *the aesthetic dimension of political subjectivation* – is an essential aspect of politics, in its classical sense as a collective practice of the reproduction or transformation of social relations as a whole.⁴ Art contributes to the aesthetic dimension of political subjectivation by reflecting upon it and re-presenting it for further reflection, although art itself is rarely of direct political significance, of course. (One should not inflate the political significance of art – as a widespread tendency to conflate art and aesthetic inclines some to do.) One way in which art does this is through the *forms of historical temporalization* (the temporalizations of history) that it enacts, which are conditions of its intelligibility: pre-eminently, over the last two centuries, the temporalities of *avant-garde*, *modern* and *contemporary*.

‘Temporalization’ functions here as a metacritical term of transcendental aesthetics, applicable to ‘politics’ and ‘art’ alike, as to other forms of social practice and experience. Following Heidegger, I think of temporalization as the process of production of the structure of temporal differences, in their dynamically differentiated unity.⁵ Departing from Heidegger, I think of it not as an individually existentially generated process (based in a primordial ‘mineness’ of death), but as the temporal aspect of practices that are constitutively relational and which produce (and reproduce) subjects, in social processes of subjectivation. Such processes constitute ‘subjects’ not merely as the epistemological correlate, or point of consciousness, of ‘objects’ (the epistemological problematic with which both Marx and Heidegger definitively broke), but as the retrospectively projected occupants of the ‘empty place’ of the actions of structures.⁶ ‘Subject’, in its modern (post-Kantian) philosophical sense, is primarily, *that which acts*; but it is also, still, socially, that which is ‘subjected’ (in the sense of being placed in a subordinate position) to the power and authority of others.⁷

From the standpoint of the aesthetic dimension of processes of subjectivation, we may say that *temporalization is a practice of transcendental aesthetics*, both in Kant’s basic sense, in which transcendental aesthetic

concerns the spatial-temporal conditions of experience, conceived as elements of the subject (the first *Critique*), and in the second, extended Kantian sense of referring to a specific domain of feeling and judgment arising from the internal relationship between the faculties, and hence concerning the subject's felt relationship to its (to 'our') unity and disunities (the third *Critique*). As a practice of transcendental aesthetics, temporalization is a process at the heart of subjectivation: the process of production of subjects. Different processes and practices of temporalization inscribe subjects within different forms of historical time. As such, they determine the forms of possibility of actions of different kinds. The extension of the scope of transcendental aesthetics to historical time incorporates both a certain critical art history and certain political temporalities, within the discourse of 'aesthetics', thereby providing a basis for rethinking the 'aesthetics and politics' relation.⁸

To echo Baudelaire, one may say that art functions here as a kind of cultural 'distillation' or 'purification' of historical-temporal forms. These forms of temporality function as models for the historical dimension of politics. Indeed, these forms of temporality are themselves political forms, of a sort, insofar as politics continues to be thought within an imaginative space delineated by the terms of the Enlightenment philosophy of history, however aporetic such a historical conception of politics may ultimately be.⁹

That politics should continue to be thought within an imaginative space mapped out by the terms of a philosophical concept of history is currently fiercely contested. Indeed, the whole post-Althusserian and post-Foucauldian revival of a philosophical thinking of emancipatory politics (in the writings of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, in particular – but also in Gilles Deleuze) is premised, precisely, on the rejection of any such notion of history – as, indeed, is the self-consciousness of most contemporary art. (There is, in certain respects, a surprising affinity between the two fields here.) Nonetheless, within art as in politics, as I have argued elsewhere, the *problem* of historical temporalization continues to be posed, if only implicitly, as a condition of the intelligibility of social experience. In this respect, history is a problem in the Kantian sense: the sense in which 'ideas' (regulatively necessary concepts of objects beyond possible experience) are inherently 'problematic'. It cannot be escaped.¹⁰ In the case of art today, the problem imposes itself, first and foremost, in the question of the critical meaning of the temporality carried by the term 'contemporary' in the phrase 'contemporary art'.

In the wake of the swift disposal – one might almost speak of a

blessed obliteration – of the belatedly discredited concept of the post-modern, and the revival of an interest in avant-gardes (and thereby in the critical legacy of Peter Bürger's 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*), art-critical discourse has begun to have recourse to a three-fold historical schema to encompass the art of the last two hundred years: *avant-garde*, *modern* and *contemporary*. One interesting thing about this schema is that, while it is in certain respects periodizing, nonetheless, at base, in their fundamental conceptual meaning, its categories denote not forms, movements or styles, but the prevalence of particular forms of historical temporality, each of which has implications for our understanding of periodization itself. However, when these temporalities are narrated as occurring successively, in a straightforwardly periodizing manner (as successive 'regimes of historicity', for example, in François Hartog's Foucauldian terminology)¹¹ such a narrative tends itself to take place within a homogenous meta-temporality, or historicist 'empty time', which suspends – as historicism always suspends – the critical question of the temporality of the present of the analysis itself, and its constitutive relations to the (always effectively genealogical) temporality of periodization.¹²

In what follows, I offer some brief reflections upon these three historico-temporal forms – *avant-garde*, *modern* and *contemporary* – the relations between them and, in particular, their *conflictual co-existence*, as transcendental-aesthetic aspects of processes and practices of *subject constitution*. My narrative is not that of a simple epochal replacement of one form of historicity by another, but rather of an overlaying of one by another, in a deepening *contradictory complication* of temporal forms. I do not believe, as John Rajchman has recently asserted, that "avant-garde" is itself history',¹³ in the pejorative sense intended there, whereby 'history' is used to refer to that which is definitively of the past, in the sense of no longer being present. Rather, I propose that "avant-garde" is itself history' in the fullest philosophical sense of the term 'history', in which history is not just *also* about the present and the future (as well as the past), but is primarily so. If, in Heidegger's phrase, 'temporality has the unity of a future that makes present in the process of having been', the articulation of the relations between the three temporal ecstases, at the level of history, is nonetheless considerably more complicated and varied than the structure of repetition through which Heidegger himself theorized it.¹⁴

In particular, I propose two theses, each of which poses problems for the aesthetic dimension of political subjectivation, both at the level of

social relations, and more particularly, for art as a critically reflective social practice.

Thesis 1. The modern stands to the avant-garde as the *negation of its politics by the repetition of the new* (the infamous experience of the new as *the ever-same*).

Thesis 2. The contemporary stands to the modern as *the negation of the dialectical logic* (and hence specifically developmentalist futurity) *of the new by a spatially determined, imaginary co-presencing*.

This latter thesis is not that of the negation of time by space, as some advocates of the 'spatial turn' have imagined (this is an incoherent notion: there is only space-time), but the negation of a specific temporality – a specific futurity – by a specific spatiality. The question it raises (too large to address here, although I have begun to address it elsewhere)¹⁵ is: what is the form of futurity of the contemporary? Here, I shall restrict my focus to some particular aspects of the two theses themselves. However, one should bear in mind that the relationship between the temporalities of avant-garde and modern is itself now complicated by their mutual relations to the emergent temporality of a global contemporaneity, within which the temporalities of 'avant-garde' and 'modern' are increasingly mediated by the spatial relations between national and transnational forms.

Avant-Garde and Modern: Formal Subsumption

'The trick by which this world of things is mastered', Walter Benjamin famously wrote in his 1929 essay on Surrealism, 'consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past.'¹⁶ Contained within this sentence, when taken together with the materials in Convolute N of the *Arcades Project*, is the seeds of an account of avant-garde as a philosophical concept: specifically, a certain *political temporalization of history*.¹⁷ (The opposition of 'political' to 'historical' here is actually the counterposition of a non-historicist, interruptive conception of history to the chronologically based continuity of historicism that forms the temporal ground of historiography.) The distinctiveness of this political temporalization, which requires the explicit affirmation of a *particular* historical future (be it 'left' or 'right' – there are fascist avant-gardes, of course), can be seen in its difference from the modernism to which it was 'reduced' by Greenberg and others – indeed, by the institutional culture of the art-world as a whole – after 1939. This is the difference between destruction or negation as (1) the condition of specific, politically defined construc-

tions ('Construction presupposes destruction' was Benjamin's formulation),¹⁸ the positivities of which derive from the free appropriation of the givenness of certain social and technological conditions; and negation as (2) a logical moment in the abstract temporal formalism of the new *qua* new: the fate of the modern under the conditions of the commodification of culture, or the new as 'the aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction', as Adorno put it, 'with its promise of undiminished plenitude'.¹⁹

The social instantiation of this latter abstract temporal formalism in fashion – which Benjamin associated with the dialectic of the new and the ever-selfsame ('the new in the ever-selfsame, and the ever-selfsame in the new'), and about which Adorno wrote that 'the longing for the new represses duration'²⁰ – makes it as *actual* (despite its abstraction) as the development of the value form from which it ultimately derives: the expansion of consumption as a condition of the expanded reproduction of capital and the consequent commodification of novelty as the means for the capitalistic appropriation of desire. The political problem here concerns the character of the 'subjects' produced by such abstract temporal processes of subjectivation. These are neither 'citizen subjects' (Étienne Balibar's political model for the modern subject)²¹ nor, primarily, labouring subjects (contradictory amalgams of the individual, collective and formal, objectified subject-structures of human labour and capital), but consumer subjects and subjects of debt – in both the active and the passive senses of 'subject'; that is, as both imaginary sources of free action and beings 'subjected' to the processes and conditions of the accumulation of capital. As individuals, we are the *felt sites* of these contradictory processes of subjectivation (and many other ones too) – this is our primary 'aesthetic dimension'. Such at least is the outcome of the structuralist recasting of the existential analytic of Dasein, through which the concept of subjectivation achieves its most consistent development.

Outside of *politically defined* and *sustained* cultures of production and consumption (for which the historical model remains the brief early years of the Soviet Union), the two temporalities of avant-garde and modern co-exist; or rather, the latter (the modern as the *abstractly new*) becomes the social form through which the former (the avant-garde as the politically produced *qualitatively historically new*) achieves a generalized social appearance, in the wake of its failure to be actualized politically. We could think of this co-existence as a temporal-cultural version of what Marx called formal subsumption: the subsumption of an existing labour process to the social relations of the production of value.²² Here, the concrete historical novelty of the avant-garde is subsumed to the

abstract and formal temporality of the new characteristic of ‘the modern’ as a temporal schema. There is a contradiction within avant-garde practices that are culturally ‘formally subsumed’ to the temporality of the modern between the temporal logic of their production process (that is, *construction* as a politicized historical temporalization, a making of the future) and the temporal forms under which they are consumed (the temporal determinations of the commodity form: the new as the ever-same). Furthermore, the effect of the sustained repetition of the abstract temporal formalism of the new (the primary temporal determination of the *distribution* of the art commodity) has been to reduce further whatever qualitative historical novelty it retains, in any particular instance, to its relations of difference to other works with which it shares the common time of its space of exhibition. This represents a further reduction: an over-coding of the logic of the modern by that of the contemporary – a togetherness in time produced by the appearance of works with different temporalities with the same, *de*-temporalized, abstract art-space (the famous ‘white cube’).²³

There has thus been a dual retreat within the temporalizing function of the artwork from a historical conception of the future: first, a subsumption of the temporality of the avant-garde to the temporality of the modern as the abstractly new (Benjamin’s later thought is located at the crisis-point of that transition); second, and subsequently, the attempt to save the qualitative aspect of the temporality of the modern from its immanent degeneration through repetition, via the more punctual concept of the contemporary. However, this spatializes novelty by making co-presence the condition of the conjunction of the different times it holds together. Furthermore, under the conditions of global capital (in which ‘globalization’ is shorthand for ‘global capitalization’), this is a primarily imaginary, speculative or *fictional* co-presence.²⁴

Just as political debates about social emancipation and the resistance to capital have tended to focus on what is beyond the scope of subsumption to the value form – either in historically received non-capitalist social forms or inherently (for some, ‘ontologically’) non-capitalistic forms – so, debates about artistic avant-gardes have shifted from a constitutive identification with a post-capitalist future immanent in the potentiality of the productive forces developed by capitalism, to the potentiality of practices developed outside, or on the regional margins of, the now globally transnational art market. However, rather than being prospectively projected as actualised in a *historical* future, the anticipation of which will historically transform the present, such regional avant-gardes are in-

stead projected as realising their artistic value within the chronological near-future of the international artworld itself. That is to say, they function as a kind of pre- and non-capitalist anthropological reserve, which achieves its avant-garde status not via its anticipation of a prospective post-capitalist future, but rather from its prospective subsumption to the art institution itself (ultimately, the art market). Indeed, it is precisely formal subsumption that preserves the possibility of the constitutively contradictory structure of the artwork as at once 'autonomous' and 'social fact', from which its critical status derives.²⁵

The formal subsumption of the temporality of the avant-garde to that of the modern performed by art institutions in capitalist societies was accompanied, from the outset, by an insistent spatial coding in terms of metropolitan, national or regionally delimited territorial forms.²⁶ This is a different kind of repetition: not the economically driven, abstract repetition of the new (the new as 'the aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction'), but the cultural-political repetition of the national and (at a greater distance) the regional, which increasingly functions as the compensatory correlate of its destruction as an economic form, under the conditions of a tendentially global transnational capital – 'after 1989', and after the opening up of capitalist manufacturing in China subsequent to its joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, in particular. In the context of the history of avant-gardes (and the history of the theory of the avant-garde, especially), one exemplary form of this repetition has been the recent *repetition of the Russian*.

Avant-Garde, National, Historical: The Repetition of the Russian

The theoretical understanding of avant-garde art practices in Russia in the immediately post-revolutionary period has now turned full, through a succession of stages, returning us to its starting point in the idea of a Russian avant-garde. Initially conceived as an extension of the pre-revolutionary national-bourgeois artistic avant-garde, with Malevich as the central, defining figure of its 'revolutionary' artistic continuity, by the early 1920s the explicitly *communist*, *internationalist* and *anti-'art'* ideas of its Constructivist-Productivist trajectory had redefined the logic of future-orientated artistic production according to the dual – formal and functional – parameters of the concept of construction. Subsequently, however, in the 1940s and 1950s, in the West, with reference to its main emigré figures (such as Gabo), this heritage was stripped of its functionalism to produce a politically dissident formalist Constructivism, reintegrated into a history of specifically artistic avant-gardes, as part of a

broader modernism²⁷ – the ideological content of Soviet Constructivism having been conflated with the Stalinist cultural policy that usurped it. This was followed, in the 1960s and early 1970s, by attempts to recover the critical social logic of Soviet Constructivism, culminating in its re-positioning as part of a broader, anti-art institutional ‘historical’ avant-garde, in Peter Bürger’s 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde* – a work that condensed two decades of renewed reception, from the standpoint not of social revolution as such, but its refraction in the ‘anti-art’ of Dada and Surrealism.²⁸ Finally, after 1989 and the apparently definitive closure of a 70-year episode in Russian and world history, the avant-garde of the 1920s once again began to appear as distinctively *Russian*, harking back to the terms of the *pre-internationalist* 19th-century, dissident bourgeois, national avant-gardes from which the description originated. (And this despite the fact that, from the standpoint of the emerging post-Soviet nationalisms, Malevich appears as a Ukrainian – and not a ‘Russian’ – artist.)

The sequence of dominant Western understandings of the avant-garde in Russia from the beginning to the end of the 20th century thus runs:

Early 20th century	Russian
1920s	Communist/Soviet
1940s/50s	Dissident formalist
1960s/70s	‘Historical’
1990s–	Russian

If not a spiral of forgetting, this is at least a spiral of recoding: a recoding of the communist (via the Soviet) as the Russian. If there is repetition here, in this sequence of designations, it is not the repetition of what has become known as the ‘repetition paradigm’, from ‘historical’ to ‘neo’ avant-gardes and beyond, as set out by Benjamin Buchloh and later Hal Foster in the 1980s and 1990s, as the enabling condition of the historical legitimization of a retroactively declared institutional critique as the continuation of the historical avant-garde under the conditions of the ‘neo’.²⁹ Nor is it the ‘repetition of revolution’ – the repetition of revolution as *counter-revolution*, in Boris Groys’s formulation, whereby political revolution appears as artistic counter-revolution.³⁰ It is the repetition of the Russian as a national coding, within a globally expanded art market, in which it is the financial strength of Russian buyers, rather than the significance of contemporary Russian art, which has imposed a sense of ‘the Russian’ on the market.

In the development of this series, the concept of the ‘historical’ avant-

garde performs a complex and subtly double-coded role. On the one hand, it acts as an agent of political neutralization, by consigning the political conception of avant-garde definitively to the *past*, via the restricted connotation of ‘historical’ meaning ‘of the past’. The historical avant-garde is ‘historical’ in this sense because it is *over*; more particularly, it is supposedly over because it ‘failed’ (just as conceptual art was later said to have failed). And the political avant-garde failed because Soviet Communism failed – quite early on, by the end of the 1920s, let us say (albeit not, *pace* Groys, by 1925). It thus became, retrospectively, ‘utopian’. Its utopianism is the effect of its failure. Indeed, it is deemed to have failed so fundamentally that on Bürger’s schema the term ‘historical’ displaces the term ‘communist’. (This is not, I think, merely an effect of Bürger’s guiding reference to Dada and Surrealism, but a fundamental part of the book’s political unconscious.) The term ‘historical’ covers over the politics of the avant-gardes of the 1920s by its very mode of acknowledging them, preparing the way for the subsequent preservation of the ‘treasure’ of their revolutionary heritage. (This is the paradigm of cultural history to which Benjamin, for example, was explicitly opposed.)³¹

However, the so-called historical avant-garde was also ‘historical’ in a second, deeper sense: it was historical by virtue of its investment in history, as a whole, in the collective singular – not as ‘the past’ alone, but, in order to complete that whole, by representing *the future*. The ‘historical’ avant-garde was socially and politically (and not merely artistically) avant-garde; hence, precisely *not* ‘artistically’ if the sense of this latter term is restricted to the predominant modern conception of art as autonomous. When The First Working Group of Constructivists (Aleksei Gan, Rodchenko, Stepanova) announced ‘IRRECONCILABLE WAR AGAINST ART’, in 1922, it was because ‘A CONSTRUCTIVE LIFE IS THE ART OF THE *FUTURE*’ (1921).³² This sense of the ‘historical’ in the historical avant-garde kicks against the neutralization of its politics involved in Bürger’s narrower usage, by retaining a sense of its politics as a *collective construction of life*, at the level of history (‘THE COMMUNIST EXPRESSION OF MATERIAL CONSTRUCTIONS’, as the First Working Group put it),³³ as a permanent possibility – immanent with the historical ontology of the social. This is the philosophical core of the Constructivist avant-garde. However, ironically, it is the very permanence of this possibility – and thereby the abstraction of its basic terms, ‘construction’ and ‘life’ – that allows for its imagistic freezing, not merely as an ‘instantaneous picture of a process’ (Lissitzky), but as an eternalized form, waiting, as in a fairytale, to be reawakened. Benjamin’s ‘dialectical fairytale’,

the subtitle of his initial version of the Arcades Project, is in this respect a better description of the current fate of historical communism than of 19th century capitalism. Recent ontologizations of communism as 'idea' attest to this fate.³⁴

In fact, with regard to Bürger's historical avant-garde, the very expression 'art into life' harbours an *aestheticist misrepresentation* of the communist avant-garde's replacement of one art (the art of composition) by another (the art of construction = 'the organization of elements') that is *always already engaged* with 'life'; and hence does not need to go 'into' life. It is already there. This marks the critical primacy of the avant-garde of the 1920s over those of 1914–1919. Aestheticism had already projected the generalization of the aesthetic aspect of the artwork into the sphere of life as a whole. (Think here of Benjamin's formulation: the avant-garde was the 'cargo' of 'art for art's sake', 'a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name'.)³⁵ Constructivism is no generalized aestheticism. It is the generalization of the principle of construction. This is a generalization that is necessarily, in part, *mimetic* as well as constructive, and hence (as Gan, Rodchenko and Stepanova said) *expressive*. This is a side of constructivism that is rarely discussed: that speculative identity of construction and expression to which both Adorno and the later Deleuze point as the telos of the non-organic work of art or machinic art assemblage.³⁶

Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* leads us astray here, in figuring its early 20th-century 'historical' avant-garde from the institutional standpoint of the neo, as its future negation. This may apply to Dada, but Constructivism was effectively (rather than rhetorically) indifferent to art-institutional negation, since, in the period immediately after the Revolution, there were very few actual institutions left to negate. In fact, institutions needed *building*, alongside the application of the principle of construction to the re-organization of everyday life. Hence the proliferating collective art organizations of the early soviet years, from the Art Department of the Moscow Council of Soldiers' Deputies (of which Malevich was the President as early as September 1917) to the UNOVIS collective ('Affirmers of the New') at the art academy in Vitebsk. Constructivism contained Productivism within itself as one of three elements: 'laboratory' formalism, reorganization of everyday life, and organization of production. There was no necessary contradiction there. At the level of theory, that conflict was a phoney war. The invocation of institutional critique as the 'good' political repetition of the avant-garde of the inter-war period, as opposed to the 'bad' formalist one of the neo-avant-garde

is thus largely spurious; doubly so, in fact, since institutional critique is *more* concerned with art institutionality than the autonomous works of laboratory constructivism, the formalism of which was produced in anticipation of life-functional applications, rather than for their own sake; unlike the predominantly, albeit negatively, *art-functional* applications of institutional critique. The issue rather concerns construction as the expression of a particular historical form of the social; hence, alternative constructions as expressions of alternative forms, levels and aspects of the social: '*communist* expressions of *material constructions*', and *capitalist* expressions of material constructions. In theoretical terms, 'the Russian' is relegated here to no more than a mediating cultural-historical form, and a form, moreover, which carries with it the permanent danger of the illusion of an autonomous 'cultural history'.³⁷ Historically, though, this illusion has been the mediating condition of the global extension of the art market, organizing meaning according to interacting national narratives. The temporality of the contemporary finds itself critically suspended here between understandings of it as a kind of recently spatially expanded chronological co-presence, making possible exchanges between *all* nations, on the one hand, and a radically disjunctive field of relations, on the other, in which a multiplicity of *different* times are at play, which have to be actively conjoined. Only the latter is adequate to the concept of temporalization, and thereby to a properly historical form of transcendental aesthetics.

Contemporaneity: Co-Presence or Active Conjunction?

Although the word has a long history (derived from the medieval Latin *contemporarius*, and the late Latin *contemporalis*, the English 'contemporary' dates from around the mid 17th century) the philosophical thinking of contemporaneity is a distinctively post-Hegelian phenomenon, associated in the first instance with Kierkegaard's existential theology. It emerges there as a philosophical concept of simultaneity in *opposition* to its everyday historicist meaning of living, existing, or occurring together in the same chronological time. As Gadamer puts it, in his ontological deployment of the Kierkegaardian notion against the idea of the 'simultaneity of aesthetic consciousness': 'Contemporaneity [*Gleichzeitigkeit* – literally, same-time-ness PO] for Kierkegaard, does not mean existing at the same time'. It is 'not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a *task* for consciousness and an *achievement* that is required of it'. More specifically, for Kierkegaard, contemporaneity is 'a formulation of the believer's task of so totally *combining* one's own presence and the redeeming act of

Christ, that the latter is experienced as something present (not as something in the past)'. It thus consists in 'holding on to the object in such a way that ... all mediation is dissolved in total presentness'. This appears, superficially, to be similar to the simultaneity of aesthetic consciousness. Gadamer argues, 'aesthetic consciousness depends on the *concealment* of the task that contemporaneity sets', while Kierkegaardian contemporaneity, despite its dissolution of mediation, nonetheless understands this immediacy, paradoxically, as an achievement, and not as a given.³⁸

This philosophical notion as the contemporary as *a task and achievement of temporal combination* (of past and present within the present) remained confined to religious existentialism until, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, it began to acquire a historical meaning, through the use of the term to denote a new epochal periodization in contrast to 'the modern'.³⁹ The immediate postwar years saw new uses of 'contemporary' in English to denote both an emergent style of design ('contemporary design') and the artistic present more generally ('contemporary arts'), in their differences from the preceding period. This is the source of that sense of up-to-dateness with which the term remains predominantly identified in popular usage.

When the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) was founded in London in 1946, for example, it was very up-to-date indeed. Doubly and paradoxically so, in fact, in so far as it both fed off the residual energies of the pre-war avant-garde, acting out a weakened version of its temporal logic of futurity, and took a step back from that avant-garde's ruptural historical futurity into the more expansive present of a new beginning. In the years immediately following the Second World War, the future was imaged as much by the desire to throw off the restrictions of wartime life and achieve some kind of 'normality' as by the fundamental social changes that the end of the war was to bring about.⁴⁰ In the UK, unlike France and Italy, no break with capitalism was envisaged, but rather a different capitalism, of peace and social democratic reconstruction (although 'Cold War' would soon become the new name for peace in Europe). The transformation of 'advanced' art's identification with a radically different future – associated in Britain largely with surrealism – into an identification with a more extended present exchanged the anticipation of an 'end of art' (the avant-garde dissolution of art into life) for a focus on interactions between the arts, and popular and technologically advanced arts, like cinema, architecture and advertising in particular. This was characteristic of the work of The Independent Group at the ICA (1952–55), for example, culminating in the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at

the Whitechapel in 1956. The future, apparently, had already arrived – a standpoint later ironized in Victor Burgin's 1976 photowork, *This is the Tomorrow You Were Promised Yesterday*.

However, the separating out of 'modern' and 'contemporary' that this notion of contemporary arts involves in no way dominated the historical consciousness of the institutional field of art at that time.⁴¹ Rather, the contemporary acted there mainly as a qualification of (rather than a counter to) 'the modern': the contemporary was the most recent modern, but a modern with a moderated, less ruptural futurity. 'Contemporary' was still not enough of a critical concept in its own right by the 1970s to be included in Raymond Williams's influential *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976). And when, a decade later, Matei Calinescu updated his book *Faces of Modernity* (1977) into *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987) it was 'postmodernism' that provided the topic for the new chapter – alongside terms already established by the end of the 1930s – 'modernism', 'avant-garde', 'decadence' and 'kitsch' – despite the fact that the chapter on 'The Idea of Modernity' (written in the mid 1970s) still ended with the emphatic declaration that 'the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* has been replaced by a Quarrel between the moderns and the contemporaries'.⁴² By the mid-1980s, postmodernism had become the periodizing term of choice to mark the distance from a now-historical modernism, a distance that had previously been registered by the presentness of the contemporary. For some historicists, like Fredric Jameson, this seemed to imply that the postmodern was 'post-contemporary'.⁴³ Fortunately, the term did not stick. In fact, it has been only with the decisive discrediting of postmodernism as a coherent critical concept, in the last ten years, that 'contemporary' has begun to emerge into the critical daylight from beneath its commonplace function as a label denoting what is current or up-to-date. Hence the recent rush of writing trying to make some minimal theoretical sense of the concept.⁴⁴

This writing reflects the fact that having emerged as a self-designating periodizing term after 1945, of a quasi-epochal kind (much like 'renaissance' self-designated its present as a new beginning), thereby gradually condemning the established referents of 'modern' to the past, the structure of contemporaneity is itself changing. Indeed, the very idea of contemporaneity as a *condition* is new. At the same time, the widespread diffusion of the term has placed it in danger of being emptied out of its increasingly complex temporal-existential, social and political meanings, by being treated as a simple label or periodizing category. This is of particular concern because what seems distinctive and important about

The early-morning mist
dissolves. And the sun shines
on the Pacific. You stand like
Balboa the Conquistadore.
On the cliff top. Among the last of
the Monterey Cypress trees.

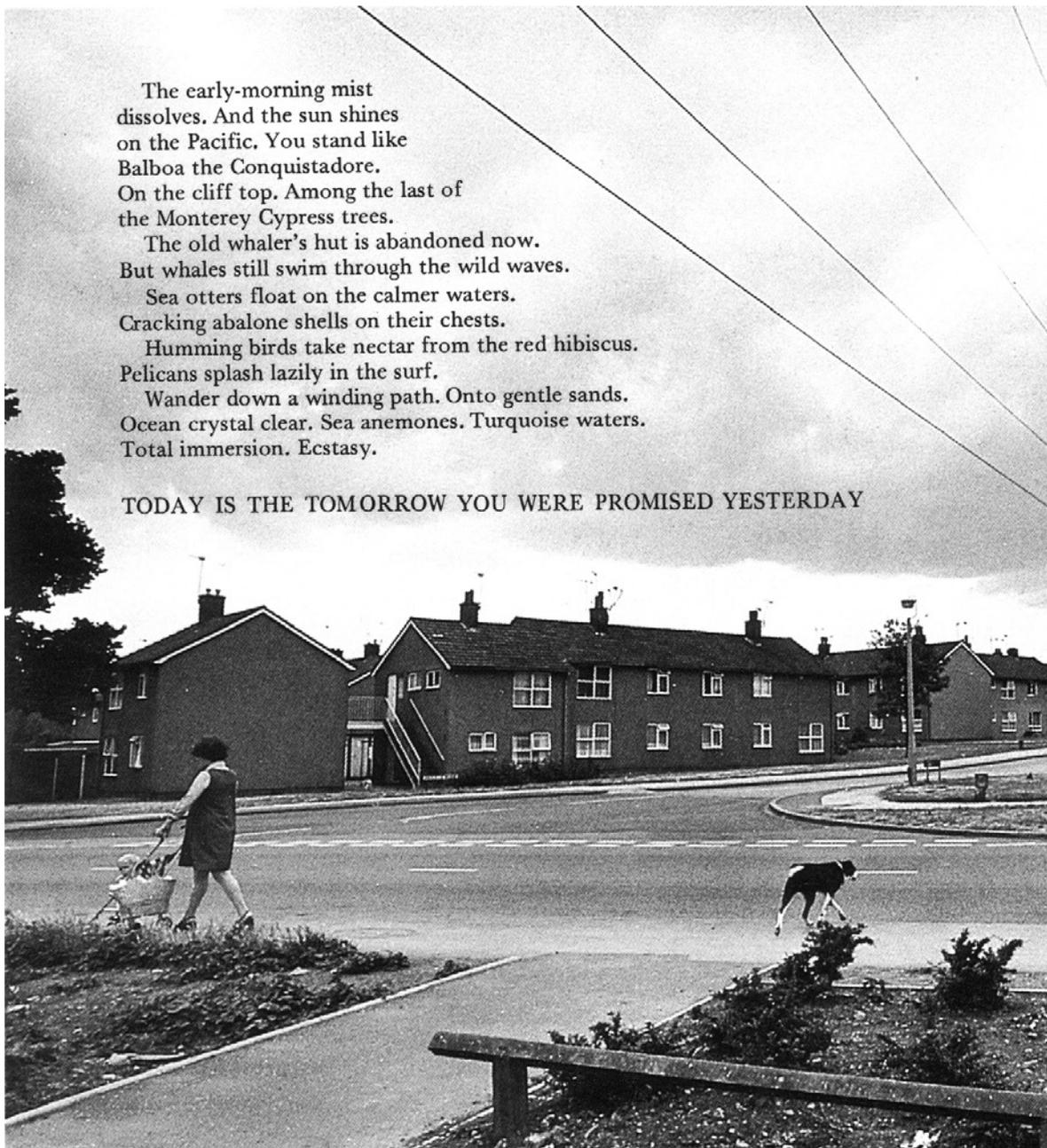
The old whaler's hut is abandoned now.
But whales still swim through the wild waves.

Sea otters float on the calmer waters.
Cracking abalone shells on their chests.

Humming birds take nectar from the red hibiscus.
Pelicans splash lazily in the surf.

Wander down a winding path. Onto gentle sands.
Ocean crystal clear. Sea anemones. Turquoise waters.
Total immersion. Ecstasy.

TODAY IS THE TOMORROW YOU WERE PROMISED YESTERDAY





Victor Burgin, Today is the Tomorrow You Were Promised Yesterday (033) from the series UK 76, 1976. Eleven panels with text (40 x 60 inches each). Courtesy of the artist.

the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through the distinctive conceptual grammar of con-temporaneity, a coming together not simply 'in' time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together 'in time' with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different, but equally 'present'* temporalities or 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*.⁴⁵

This is not the simple combination of a particular existential present with a particular (religious) past, of Kierkegaard's founding philosophical concept of contemporaneity as a task and an achievement; rather it is a geo-politically diffuse multiplicity of social times, combined within the present of a constitutively problematic, speculative or fictional 'subject' of historical experience. This problematically disjunctive conjunction is covered over by the straightforward, historicist use of 'contemporary' as a periodizing term, in the manner in which it is encountered in mainstream art history, for example, in its stabilization of the distinction between modern and contemporary art. Although, within this discourse, as a register of the continual historical movement of the present, we nonetheless find several competing periodizations of contemporary art, overlapping genealogies or historical strata, differently extended senses of the present, within the wider time-span of a Western modern art of which is constructed from the standpoint of the rupture of a particular historical event and privileges a particular geo-political terrain.⁴⁶ The competition between these conceptions registers their epistemologically constructive and politically overdetermined characters. Each is itself cut across by complex imbrications within the present of the abiding, interlaced temporal forms of the avant-garde and the modern outlined above.

The extension of transcendental aesthetics into the field of historical temporalization thereby transforms the question of the relationship of aesthetics to politics in a theoretically fundamental manner. It is not longer a question of actualizing positions within a field defined by a relatively stable set of conceptual oppositions and relations, inherited from philosophies of the late 18th century. It has become the conjointly philosophical, empirical and political task of grasping and constructing the possible political meanings of new and internally complex sets of temporal relations, in uneven and rapidly changing spatial distributions. For now, 'art' remains an emblematically privileged site of such relations; for how much longer, it is unclear.

Notes

1. Ernst Bloch et al, *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno* (London: New Left Books, 1977). This essay is a revised version of a paper presented to a plenary session of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics's annual conference, on the theme of 'Aesthetics and Politics', University of Copenhagen, 28 May 2011.

2. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 2, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1978; 1992), Ch. 17, Pt 2, 'Accumulation and Expanded Reproduction [*erweiterte Reproduktion*]', pp. 418–24.

3. See Peter Osborne, 'Theorem 4: Autonomy – Can it be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?', *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*, no. 23, Special Issue, 'Autonomy: New Forms of Freedom and Independence in Art and Culture' (Amsterdam: Skor, 2012), pp. 116–26.

4. Jürgen Habermas, 'The Classical Doctrine of Politics in Relation to Social Philosophy' (1963), in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 41–81. This aesthetic dimension is what Rancière calls 'the distribution of the sensible'. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), Division Two, Parts III and IV, pp. 349–423.

6. See Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Action of the Structure' (1968), in *Concept and Form*, vol. 1, *Key Texts from the 'Cahiers pour l'Analyse'*, eds. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, trans. Christian Kerslake (London and New York: Verso, 2012), chapter 2, pp. 69–83. For an account of the dual (retrospectively prospective) temporality of the subject, associated with this conception, see Alain Badiou, 'Subjectivizing Anticipation, Retroaction of the Subjective Process', in *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 248–53.

7. See Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 326–48; *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005). For the broader historical framework of philosophies of the subject, see Étienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin, Alain de Libera, 'Sujet', in *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Paris: Seuil, 2004), pp. 1233–54; translated by David Macey as 'Subject', *Radical Philosophy* no. 138 (July/August 2006), pp. 15–41.

8. The idea of a *practice* of transcendental aesthetics is, I am aware, a controversial one. After all, is not 'transcendental' form precisely that which conditions the possibility of practices of all sorts, and thereby has logical priority over

practices themselves? Only if we maintain a strictly logical or 'purely rational' construal of transcendental form. If we understand such forms as historically produced, then they must themselves be possible objects of practices, to the extent that a notion of *historical practices*, in the full sense of that term inherited from the Enlightenment philosophy of history, can be sustained. Given the increasing global interconnectedness of practices, it is possible that such practices are becoming historically possible, for the first time, at the very moment their idea is being discarded. The uneasy relationship here between languages of *practices* and *processes* is a symptom of the historical, as well as the philosophical, problematicity of the issue.

9. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (1959; Oxford/New York/Hamburg: Berg, 1988).

10. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London and New York: Verso, 1995; 2011), Ch. 2.

11. François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

12. For a critique of the temporality of conventional historical periodization, see Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

13. John Rajchman, 'The Contemporary: A New Idea?', in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, eds. Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin and New York: Sternberg, 2011), pp. 125–44; 126.

14. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 374; 'Temporality and Historicity', Division Two, Part V, pp. 424–55.

15. Peter Osborne, 'The Fiction of the Contemporary: Speculative Collectivity and Transnationality in The Atlas Group', in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, pp. 101–123; 'Global Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of the Philosophy of Historical Time', in *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders Between the Present, the Past and the Future*, eds. Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming 2013). An extended version of the former appears as Chapter 1 of Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

16. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intellect', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.1, 1927–1930 (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 210.

17. See Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59–109.

18. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), [N7, 6], p. 470.

19. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p. 21.

20. Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940 (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 175; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 27.

21. Étienne Balibar, 'Citizen Subject', in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds. Eduardo Cadava et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 33–57. See also the Introduction to Étienne Balibar, *Citoyen Sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), pp. 1–31.

22. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1976; 1990), Appendix, 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', pp. 1019–38.

23. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, Ch. 6, 'Art Space'.

24. Osborne, 'The Fiction of the Contemporary', pp. 108–14, 120–22.

25. See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 225–8.

26. The Ur-scene of this particular scenario of spatial belonging was, of course, Paris, from which New York famously 'stole' the idea of modern art during the 1940s; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). French artists – Duchamp, in particular – had been trying to sell it the idea since the outbreak of World War I.

27. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Cold War Constructivism' in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 85–112; Hal Foster, 'Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism', in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932*, ed. Richard Andrews (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), pp. 241–53.

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

29. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'The Primary Colours for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde', *October*, 37 (Summer 1986), pp. 41–52; Hal Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?', in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 1–34; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art, 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, 55 (Winter 1990), pp. 105–43.

30. Boris Groys, 'Repetition of Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Revisited', paper to the conference, *Russian Avant-Garde Revisited*, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, 13 March 2010, part of the Former West project, www.formerwest.org.

31. 'Barbarism lurks in the very concept of culture – as the concept of a fund of values which is considered independent not, indeed, of the production process in which these values originated, but of the one in which they survive. In this way, they serve the apotheosis of the latter... barbaric as it may be.' Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N5a, 7], pp. 467–68.

32. 'Who We Are: Manifesto of the Constructivist Group', in Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 145; 'Slogans', Rodchenko, 22 Feb. 1921, *ibid.*, p. 142.

33. 'Who We Are', in Rodchenko, *Experiments*, p. 145.

34. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds, *The Idea of Communism* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

35. Benjamin, 'Surrealism', p. 212.

36. See Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne, 'Philosophy and Contemporary Art, After Adorno and Deleuze: An Exchange', in *Gest: Laboratory of Synthesis*, eds. Robert Garnet and Andrew Hunt (London: Bookworks, 2008), pp. 35–64.

37. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1937 (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 267–68.

38. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), pp. 112–13, emphases added; *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke*, 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), p. 132. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Ch. 4, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 7, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

39. The next draw upon, Peter Osborne, 'Look Beneath the Label: Notes on the Contemporary', in Eileen Daly and Rebecca Heald, eds., *Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2011* (London: Bloomberg/ICA, 2011), pp. 4–8. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, Ch. 1, section 1, 'Together in time?'

40. See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (2005; London: Vintage, 2010), Part 1.

41. The first art institution to follow the terminological innovation of the ICA in London seems to have been The Boston Museum of Modern Art, in the USA, which became the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, in 1948. But it wasn't until the 1960s that the term became more widely used, and even then it was exceptional. Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (1963), Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (1964) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1967) are early instances, by which time the contemporary had been around long enough to become an object of museological attention.

42. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 92. Cf.

Raymond Williams's 1987 lecture, 'When was Modernism?', in his *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London and New York: Verso, 1989, pp. 31–35, p. 32: 'Very quickly... "modern" shifts its reference from "now" to "just now" or even "then", and has for some time been a designation always going into the past with which "contemporary" may be contrasted for its presentness.' Whilst Calinescu was content to treat postmodernism descriptively, for Williams it was a 'new conformism', a 'non-historical fixity' with which we needed to 'break' (p. 35). It is perhaps symptomatic of the only very recent emergence of 'contemporary' as a theoretical term that my own 1995 book, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* which was dedicated to a deepening of the temporal comprehension of the latter two categories, in the context of an attempt to extend theorization of existential temporalization to historical time – and was critical of the philosophical naivety of discourses of the postmodern – nonetheless contains no sustained discussion of, or even index entry for, 'contemporary'.

43. Since 1990, Jameson has co-edited a series for Duke University Press entitled 'Post-Contemporary Interventions'.

44. See Terry Smith, 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006), pp. 681–707 and 'Introduction: The Contemporary Question' in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19 – along with the essays in Part 1 of that collection; Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', in his *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39–54; John Rajchman, 'The Contemporary: A New Idea?', in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, eds. Armen Avanessian and Luke Skrebowski, pp. 125–44; along with my own contribution to that volume, 'The Fiction of the Contemporary', in extended form as *Anywhere or Not at All*, Ch. 1.

45. In this respect, there seems to be something like a social actualization of the insights of Heidegger's critique of the 'ordinary' time consciousness of 'within-timeness' and Fabian's critique of anthropology's denial of the coeval, respectively. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 456–72; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 156–65. Cf. Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, pp. 62–8, 17 and 28.

46. See 'Three Periodizations of Contemporary Art' in *Anywhere or Not at All*, Ch. 1.