Some weeks ago I was asked by the German quarterly journal *Texte zur Kunst* to contribute to their upcoming summer issue, loosely organized under the grandiose rubric of “theses on contemporary art,” whose aim would be not so much to *define* art, but to allow for the staking out of certain positions, which seemed especially important given the confusion resulting from the current “crisis” in the global economy. (The question as to what may happen “after the crisis” had been addressed in the journal’s most recent issue.) After all, the editors of *Texte zur Kunst* rightfully suggest, “the financial crisis brought the hitherto conjured boom of ‘contemporary art’ to a preliminary halt; one can often hear these days that content (finally?) will once again become more important than market success. *But what are those contents?*”

My response to their invitation was hurriedly written down – not carelessly, mind you, but simply out of a sense of urgency: this was an important question! The piece for *Texte zur Kunst* followed up on some thoughts first articulated in a previous essay written for *e-flux journal*, “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art,” which ended with a lament concerning contemporary art’s inability “to grasp or even look at the present, much less to *excavate the future*.” This prompted the invitation, on the part of the editors of *e-flux journal*, to further speculate on the possible outcome of such an “excavation of the future,” something I had already started doing in the text for *TZK*, which in turn became the point of departure for the current reflection, an expanded version of an essay titled, tellingly, “On the Impossibility of Theses, And Why That Is A Bad Thing.” Dig, Lazarus, Dig.

**Back to the Futurists**

Just over a hundred years ago, on February 20, 1909, the Futurist Manifesto was published in *Le Figaro*. In addition to making many rather more dubious claims, it declares that “we are on the extreme promontory of the centuries! What is the use of looking behind at the moment when we must open the mysterious shutters of the impossible?” The author of these glowing, muscular lines, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, also infamously likened museums to cemeteries:

> Museums, cemeteries! Truly identical in their sinister juxtaposition of bodies that do not know each other. Public dormitories where you sleep side by side for ever with beings you hate or do not know. Reciprocal ferocity of the painters and sculptors who murder each other in the same museum...
Helen Levitt, New York, 1980 (girl / green car), 20 x 24" c-print.

Jason Dodge, (the title of the work is the absence of acknowledging the hole, as opposed to a title). Also visible in the image are: You always Move in Reverse, 2005; North, 2007; and Wind Made from Things that are Not the Wind.
with blows of line and color. To make a visit once a year, as one goes to see the graves of our dead once a year, that we could allow! We can even imagine placing flowers once a year at the feet of the Gioconda! But to take our sadness, our fragile courage and our anxiety to the museum every day, that we cannot admit! . . . Indeed daily visits to museums, libraries and academies (those cemeteries of wasted effort, calvareyes of crucified dreams, registers of false starts!) is for artists what prolonged supervision by the parents is for intelligent young men, drunk with their own talent and ambition.5

How genuinely out of sync these pronouncements now sound, at a time when there seems to be such great longing, precisely among young artists – no longer just men, obviously – drunk with talent and ambition, for the lethargic, anesthetizing comfort of the museum; at a time when artists frequent these very same cemeteries in such droves and with such unmitigated passion that the use of the word “necrophilia” seems in order! Indeed, even Institutional Critique as a “genre” or “ism” in its own right, which may at first appear sympathetic to the Futurist rhetoric of iconoclastic subversion, ultimately only speaks of love for the museum – of the desire to belong to the museum. (Why has there been so bitterly little “institutional critique” of the institution of the art market? I guess institutional critics have to live too.)

In “The Way of the Shovel” I couched this diagnosis in the critical terms of a “historiographic turn in art” apparent in the obsession with archiving, forgetfulness, memoirs and memorials, nostalgia, oblivion, re-enactment, remembrance, reminiscence, retrospection – in short, with the past – that seems to drive much of the work done by some of the best (and most highly regarded) artists active today, from Gerard Byrne and Tacita Dean, via Felix Gmelin and Joachim Koester, to Goshka Macuga and Deimantas Narkevicius. This has mostly been a good thing, and has also produced much exquisite art; I too am a history nut who often prefers dwelling on the past – not just that of art, obviously – than truly living in the now.

For, in truth, and this is perhaps more to the point, there haven’t been too many good reasons to fully and optimistically engage with either the present or the future in the last half decade or so: the historiographic turn in art, which of course has been under way much longer than that, really took on the shape of a fully-fledged trend or movement in art (what should we call it?) in the early years of the twenty-first century; in other words, it was in a sense inaugurated by the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent “war on terror” which has done so much to make the first decade of this century such a gloomy, depressing affair. This “new historicism” (is that what we should call it?) is really nothing other – like it or not – than the art of the Bush era.

Let us go back to 2003, for instance, a crucial year in more than one respect. Most of the previous year had been consumed by the global geopolitical obsession with a new “ideological” specter, this time haunting not just Europe, but the world in its entirety: terror. In March 2003, these globalized politics of fear culminated in the unlawful invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration’s so-called “coalition of the willing.” The obvious criminality of Operation Iraqi Freedom provoked the largest anti-war protest of all time to flood the streets of some 800 cities around the world on February 15, 2003, with the estimated number of protesters ranging from ten to thirty million. According to the BBC, “the demonstration in London was the biggest in the UK capital’s political history, with nearly two million taking part,” and according to the Guinness Book of World Records, the three million people who gathered in Rome made it the largest anti-war rally in history.6 I was in Mexico at the time, and participated in a demonstration in Mexico City with some 10,000 kindred souls – not much, for the world’s second largest city, I even thought to myself then.

Now we all remember, of course, that in the end this didn’t make the slightest difference: a little over four weeks later the first American bombs were dropped on Baghdad and the rest, as they say – very appropriately, in the present context – is history. The largest anti-war protest of all time proved miserably, pitifully powerless: no wonder that the remaining five years of the Bush presidency were characterized in the main by a deep-seated sense of resignation permeating all layers of (Western) society and (Western) cultural life, by “inner exile” (a historically fraught phrase), by escape and withdrawal into both intro- and retrospection, by depoliticization and hedonist apathy – this is the background against which the defining features of the contemporary art scene of the last eight years or so should be read: 1) the unprecedented boom of the art market as demonstrated by the seemingly ceaseless proliferation of galleries and art fairs around the world, as well as by the exponential growth in numbers of pages devoted to advertising in the world’s leading art magazines (e-flux itself is both part of and witness to this phenomenon); 2) the rewriting of recent art history to allow for the “invention” of such new paradigms as Romantic Conceptualism and the concomitant cultivation of a certain
willed marginalism; and 3) the historiographic
turn in art proper.7

If the current state of the art market is any
indication, however, this era in art may
effectively be drawing to a close along with
the Bush era. Perhaps this may cause a massive U-
turn, in art as elsewhere, back to the future. But
what will such a reorientation look like? What is
the present condition of art, after the onset of
the crisis, and after the Bush era?

Current Findings (On the Present
Condition)
Great artists, thinkers, and writers alike are well-
known – in quite a few cases it has become the
defining source of their greatness, and this is
especially true of twentieth-century high culture
and its constitutive cult of the maverick
(remember McCain?), the renegade (remember
Palin?), the refusenik (remember Clinton?) – for
the scorn they invariably heap on the isms that
were either named after their pioneering work, or
which they helped to establish as isms as such:
none of Dada’s original “leaders” wanted to have
anything to do with “Dadaism”; Guy Debord
notoriously rejected the possible existence of
anything akin to “situationism”; the two most
prominent minimalist composers of the
twentieth century, Steve Reich and Philip Glass,
vigorously contest any association with
“minimalism”; Michel Foucault, finally, spent
considerable amounts of his energy as a public
intellectual publicly distancing himself from the
very structuralisms and post-structuralisms of
which he was later named a martyred patron
saint.

Coming at the tail end of a century founded
entirely on the secular myth of a charismatic,
Nietzschean individualism (stretching all the way
from John D. Rockefeller and Pablo Picasso to
Matthew Barney and, indeed, Barack Obama),
and whose most exemplary evils we are
systematically taught to associate with the vagaries of the collective, with the perverted
group psychology of mass movements (Nazi
Germany, Stalin’s Soviet Union), the very notion
of an “ism” now seems capable of inspiring the
enthusiasm of only those second- and third-rate
artists, thinkers, and writers deemed unfit to
found an ism, movement, or school all their own:
maning the oars of such isms is the exclusive
task, not of leaders (first-rate artists, thinkers,
and writers), but of the followers these leaders
didn’t want in the first place.

Now, it goes without saying that modern
art’s contribution to this ideologized dialectic of the
“good” individual versus the “bad” crowd has
proven singularly invaluable for the reigning
liberal doctrine of heroic, entrepreneurial
ingenuity (which wants “leaders not followers!”).

And it certainly continues to do so well into this
age of so-called “contemporary” art
(considering with what, precisely?), a time
when, paradoxically enough, there are probably
more artists than ever before in the history of
mankind (all jockeying for a claim to irreducible
individuality, of course), and yet it has also never
been harder to think of even the simplest ism
beneath which one could potentially group
together even the slightest fraction of this
promiscuous overabundance of artistic activity.

But why would we attempt to dream up
such an ism in the first place? Why would we

\textit{want} an ism to channel and discipline the
diffuse energies of artistic practice that
effectively define the perceived or presumed
wealth of contemporary art? Is it not exactly this
promiscuity that is the sole dependable
guarantor of \textit{fun}? Indeed, it seems
counterintuitive to desire the clarity and
intellectual comfort afforded by a neat, orderly
overview of schools, movements, and isms,
especially within the field of contemporary art,
which prides itself with such programmatic arbor
on its structural resistance to hierarchical
thinking, to reduction and systematization.

Again, it is precisely the lack of such an
overview in art – let’s call it an instance of Jürgen
Habermas’ \textit{neue Unübersichtlichkeit} – or the
impossibility of an Olympian viewpoint from
which to self-confidently write the history of the
present, that is supposedly constitutive of the
tremendous riches of Art in the Present Tense; in
this (now probably overly familiar) sense,
contemporary art also reflects, more or less
directly, the irreversible decentralization,
fragmentation and intractability (in short,
\textit{Unübersichtlichkeit}) typical of the globalized
world.8 I very consciously say and write
“supposedly constitutive” – for who would
actually assert that we truly live in a Golden Age
of art making? Who really believes that mere,

\textit{sheer} numbers can rightfully be taken for
wealth? Perhaps the self-indulgent rhetoric of
die neue Unübersichtlichkeit has simply become
an excuse for lazy thinking, for intellectual
paralysis and timidity in the face of a
phenomenon of overproduction that begs to be
theorized in greater, totalizing historical terms –
to be named, precisely, with an ism.

Perhaps the challenge of this process of
theorizing and naming – to theorize and name
the present state of art, rather than merely
applaud its excess and heterogeneity – is
precisely what is needed right now, both in (and
for) art and art theory. It seems perfectly
legitimate – in fact, I would say it is simply
\textit{urgent} – to ask oneself the following question:
what, ten or fifteen years from now, will art
 critics, historians, and theorists think or say

\textbullet \textbullet \textbullet

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Helen Levitt, New York, 1972 (kids with laundry), 16 x 20” c-print.

Zoe Leonard, Clothing Palace.
Inward, Outward, Backward: Fast Forward

When was the last time something akin to a “school,” organized around a body of purposefully articulated theses, emerged in the critical field of art practice as theory? Let us say that “Relational Aesthetics” perhaps defined such a moment (surely the aforementioned “Romantic Conceptualism” can’t possibly be qualified for the job): true to form, most of its leading practitioners either immediately or eventually refused the label and implied simplicity of belonging to a definite ism – luckily for us, with limited public success, though they do still name their exhibitions “anyplacewhatever.” Certainly, there have been minor attempts at art-historical crystallization since, but it is rather telling that most of these have been only literally historical – or should we simply say historicist?

We have already documented the historiographic turn in art, and this is not the place to expand on it in further, but there does certainly seem to exist a connection between, on the one hand, the reluctance to theorize the present moment in art (let alone its future), and, on the other, the massive amounts of art made today concerned with “yesterday”; our inability to either “think” or simply imagine the future seems structurally linked with the enthusiasm shared by so many artists for digging up various obscure odds and ends dating from a more or less remote, unknowable past – and the more unknowable the past in question, the deeper the pathological dimension of this melancholy, retrospective gaze. (One particularly potent genre in contemporary art – not an ism just yet – deals exclusively with the overlooked nooks and crannies of recent art history in particular: re-enactment, or historicism to the nth degree.]

As Danish artist Joachim Koester has remarked, “in the nineteenth century exploration was geographic. Journeys were made into impassable jungles or the ice deserts of the Arctic in an attempt to map the last “white” spots on the globe. But in the twentieth century this notion of the ‘unknown’ changed. Exploration turned inward. The new realms to be explored were the molecule (Niels Bohr), the unconscious (Sigmund Freud), language (Gertrud Stein) or the outskirts of the mind (Henri Michaux).” Now, Koester is of course well known for the acuity with which he himself has explored this double history of exploration, both outward and inward – his is an exploration, in other words, of the very idea of exploration as a historical achievement, and his best-known works are silent, 16mm films that reconsider the “discovery” of either the outer reaches of the inner self (Morning of the Magicians) or the very edge of the visible world (Message from André).

Koester’s high profile in contemporary art is founded on the substance and obvious intelligence of his retrospective gaze, which is anything but retrograde; but the high regard in which his work – that of a pioneer of the historiographic turn in art – is held has become living proof of a new, not entirely beneficial development that logically concludes his own aforementioned observation as follows: in the twenty-first century, exploration has turned backward – not outward, not inward, but plainly towards the past. Which is perhaps not as interesting an orientation for thinking about both the present and the future – arguably the more pressing concerns right now, I repeat – than we have been led to believe.

As I mentioned above, there have been many good reasons to indulge in the escapist fantasy of historiography, the most convincing probably being that the world has been a rather dismal, depressing place for the last decade or so. Accordingly, these last five years have given us both an awful lot of nostalgia-bound “historicist” art (so much of it simply awful “historicist” art), as well as a complete loss of perspective from which to view the art world as a historical whole that actively invites and needs our thinking the bigger picture. This thinking the bigger picture, with an eye on the possible production of the theory of the present and recovery (“excavation”) of the future, may well be one of contemporary art’s most inspiring challenges: to finally be able again to capture art in a handful of isms.

The Desire and Opportunity Named “Crisis”

Recovering the future with a view to producing a theory of the present (and turning our backs on the past): now is probably a great time to give it a try. “Now” of course meaning “after the crisis,” that already fully mythologized, pivotal moment
Zoe Leonard, Artist.
Dorothea Lange’s and Diego Rivera’s realism (which reminds me: this pamphlet should probably have been dedicated to Helen Levitt, who passed away last month), capitalist realism, critical realism, and photorealism, they all belong to defining moments of economic, political, social, and cultural crisis – with every crisis producing that “fine hour for criticism” which may lead us to “productively discuss what ‘Art’ is to be understood as,” as Graw, Kleefeld, and Rottmann put it.

The above provisional list of past realisms, however, shows that (apart from Roberto Bolaño’s “visceral realism,” but that’s another story) there has hardly been any realism in art and culture for over three decades now – probably because there have not been real crises, at least not really real ones, until now. Whether conceived of as 1) “a practical understanding and acceptance of the actual nature of the world, rather than an idealized or romantic view of it,” 2) “lifelike representation, in artistic and artistic works, of people and the world, without any idealization,” 3) “the theory that things such as universals, moral facts, and theoretical scientific entities exist independently of people’s thoughts and perceptions,” 4) “the theory that although there is an objectively existing world, not dependent on our minds, people are able to understand aspects of that world through perception,” or 5) “the theory that every declarative statement is either true or false, regardless of whether this can be verified,” these (online) dictionary definitions help explain why there has been no real realism of late: there simply has not been terribly much engagement with something akin to a “real” (i.e., actually, really shared) world in recent times.¹¹

We have already argued why this has not been the case – that the real world just wasn’t very hospitable, and inhabiting it wasn’t very rewarding either. But it is clear that this may now finally change, or may perhaps have changed already – how clearly we have heard the clarion call of “change!” resound through the global political landscape – and a reinvention of (rather than mere return to) realism in art may possibly result from it. But this will require the heroic effort of a new (and this time really real) seriousness.

A Realism

Crises, it is well known, breed realisms: realism proper (that of the original nineteenth-century variety), socialist realism, Walker Evans’, Dorothea Lange’s and Diego Rivera’s realism

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1 Texte zur Kunst 73 (2009).

2 André Rottmann, e-mail message to author, October 31, 2009.


5 Ibid., 28.


7 I have written elsewhere about the historical convergence of a revived interest in sentiment and sincerity in contemporary art on the one hand, and the post-ironic revival of an ethic of “family values” in the Bush era on the other. See my “Emotion Picture Theory,” AS 173 (2005), and “Great Transformations: On the Spiritual in Art, Again,” Afterall 20 (2008). Many artists active in the field of historiography have also been associated with Romantic Conceptualism; the rehabilitation of many unsung heroes or overlooked and otherwise marginalized Einzelgänger from the recent past has been wholly central to both enterprises, and has resulted in the hero worship of a new cultural figure: the loser as an essentially decent, honest man in the vein of Bush’s own “average Joe” or “regular guy” persona. See also Oliver Stone’s recent re-reading of contemporary American politics in W (2008).

8 The reference here is to a slim volume of political writings (Kleine politische Schriften) published by Habermas in 1985; it has remained untranslated to this day, but has mistakenly been referred to as “the new confusion”: the untranslatable “Unübersichtlichkeit” is something very different from “confusion,” suggesting something close to “unsurveyability.”


10 Isabelle Graw, Stefanie Kleefeld, and André Rottmann, “Preface,” trans. Karl Hoffmann, Texte zur Kunst 73 (2009): 122. Their editorial concludes: “It is once again criticism, which under these conditions must lend sense and meaning to the products and make them more credible. . . . The precariousness of the entire art system, which is based on the assessment of value that is not seen in the object itself, and for this reason is built on sand, is now evident to all. We are neither happy, nor do we lament the state of affairs. We instead seek to reflect upon it” (ibid., emphasis added). I, however, am perfectly happy to admit that I am happy with this state of affairs – and one reason for this is suggested by my decision to italicize what I believe to be the crucial fragment in the passage quoted above. The authors of these lines may not have meant to insinuate this, but the implication here is clearly that it is time to revert (or, better still, move onwards) to a system for assessing the value of art as something that is in essence seen in the object itself. One of the challenges lying ahead for criticism, then, may well be located in drawing the outlines of such a system, or in providing its basic methodological and epistemological moorings. This is arguably an exercise in ontology, which I should like to expand upon in a future essay, countering the charge that we live in “post-ontological times.”