1 But I am afraid it is the same.
2 Alain Badiou, Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12. Badiou's identification of art, science, politics, and love as the four fields of human activity that yield truth is a central claim of his philosophical project.
3 There are many reasons for the German idealists' depreciation of the artistic achievements of their own time, but one reason is why Schelling and Hegel, among others, underrate German art in particular. This is noteworthy in the current context: it concerned their belief that in times of progress, art's primary task is the rule over art: in other words, little reflection on art. Thought about art, and philosophy of art, arise only when art is in decline...
6 A classic example of the persistence of this vis-à-vis negative in our time is presented by Giorgio Agamben in his essay “Les jugements sur la poësie…: “Caught up in laboriously constructing this nothingness” – i.e., the “negative theology” (this is the term Agamben actually uses) of criticism – “we do not notice that in the meantime art has become a planet of which we only see the dark side, and that aesthetic judgment is then confined to the edge of the universe of art and its shadow. If we wanted to express this characteristic with a formula, we could write that critical judgment, everywhere and consistently, envelops art in its shadow and thinks art as non-art. It is this “art” that is a pure shadow, that reigns as a supreme value over the horizon of pure aesthetics, and it is likely that we will not be able to get beyond this horizon until we have inspired about the foundation of aesthetic judgment.” See The Man-Without-Content, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 43-44. A more elegant proposal, no less negatively worded, however, is formulated by Thierry de Duve in the justly celebrated opening pages of his landmark tome Kant After Duchamp, where he invites the reader to imagine himself an anthropologist hailing from outer space trying to figure out what humans mean when they name something, anything “art.” “You conclude that the name ‘art,’ whose immanent meaning still escapes you – indeterminate because overdetermined – perhaps has no other generality than a gigantism that is possible,” (See Kant After Duchamp, Cambrige, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 5–6.
7 I am of course perfectly aware of the apparent arbitrariness with which different nations of culture are bandied around and played out against each other here; as is the case with “art,” the impossibility of really defining “culture” is partly determined by the culture to which such questions of definition necessarily belong. The question of contemporary culture as that which presently engulfs art and from which, I believe, “art” should be saved, is a central concern of Terry Eagleton’s After Theory (both of which Raymond Williams are, of course, key authors in the art- and culture debate): “pleasure, desire, art, language, the media, body, gender, ethnicity: a single word to sum it all up would be culture.” After Theory (London: Basic Books, 2004), 39.
8 The reference here is to the following celebrated, oft-quoted (and just as often misread) passage: “In all these respects art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past.” Hegel, Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics, 13. This statement has often been misread as a proclamation of the end of art; Hegel himself provides the qualifying commentary, stating that “this claim excludes the possibility of great and intellectually authoritative art in the future, since in the future art will no longer play the same role in society as it does now; and since in the future art would not be ‘for us.’” (Ibid., 10). (It would be “for us,” though). The amount of commentary this seemingly casual remark has spurred continues to bubble and astound; Arthur C. Danto and Donald Kuspit are some of this aesthetic tradition’s most prominent representatives.
9 There is no more powerful symbol of this state of diffusion, which Agamben (see note 5) would describe as “de Manoker,” than the series of books published under the best-selling title “Art Now” by Taschen Verlag.
and I conceive of it, “a thing of the past” – and here, of course, the Hegelian circle magically closes itself, for that is precisely why Hegel-the-art-theorist is probably best remembered today: for calling art (“on the side of its highest destiny”) a thing of the past long before art, as we came to know it, came into its own. The view from Jena was already a melancholy backward glance, “theory” or philosophy its only remaining source of solace (and in this sense I certainly continue to reside in Jena anno 1806).

But didn’t we just call art “the name of a hope and of something that has yet to come: the unfulfilled and/or that which eternally lies ahead”? Indeed we did. Now if art is both (and simultaneously) a thing of the past and a thing of the future, this merely means that there is no art “now” – and that, indeed, is precisely what contemporary art foolishly claims: it wants to be culture instead.6

This may all sound very grim perhaps – but it really isn’t. We just patiently wait for the clouds to clear and the confusion to cease; it won’t be long.

The author would like to thank Will Holder and FR David for allowing some of these thoughts, first formulated for the latter, to appear online. I would also like to acknowledge Jørgen Lund from the University of Bergen for sharing some of his beautifully formulated ideas on art (paraphrased in chapter III) with me at a conference organized at the Bergen Kunsthall in August 2009.
About a year ago, while trying to develop a wiki archive for contemporary art at e-flux, I not only encountered a small technical problem in deciding how to implement a simple menu structure to allow readers to navigate such an archive. We thought first to organize it according to a variety of different, and more often hybrid, ways. By geographic region? Well, that approach is probably better suited to the CIA. In the end, we found that no objective structure or criterion exists with which to organize artistic activity from the past two years or so, and the question of how to structure such an archive—to make it intelligible—proved to be so difficult to address that it completely derailed the project for the time being.

Of course, we accept that a primary source of the hesitation in developing any kind of comprehensive strategy for understanding art that emerged in the past two decades is a general assumption that it is still in its emergent stage. Meanwhile, however, the work produced during this time has made its way into museum collections, academies, and auctions—forming a very concrete context for art production with parameters that are somehow taken for granted but not actually explained as such. So it first has to be acknowledged that much of the activity responsible for the current condition of art is no longer under development, but has assumed a fully mature form—and it still somehow refuses to be historicized as such. Or are we simply not trying hard enough? Perhaps it is time to approach the notion of contemporary art as a fully formed cultural project with certain defined parameters, complete with logics of inclusion and exclusion not so different from those of the modernist project. There is a lot of work to be done here. How do we begin to recognize these parameters that have already been established? At the same time, there is some agency in the idea that they remain open: how can we also take advantage of this to develop our own criteria for browsing and historicizing recent activity in a way that affirms the possibilities of contemporary art’s still-incompleteness, of its complex ability to play host to many narratives and trajectories without necessarily having to absorb them into a central logic or determined discourse? As this process of exclusion really goes hand-in-hand with a process of confusion—and art’s own confusion, that is, concerning its relationship to a cultural system (one that used to be called “mass culture” or “popular culture,” but whose terms have certainly lost their legitimacy) that it clearly desires to be immersed in, or just belong to, a confused desire for its own disappearance into something other, bigger, badder. Now, in thus constructing a one-dimensionally affirmative relationship (namely one of mimetic desire) with an essentially affirmative cultural complex, contemporary art has become a hugely influential affirmative force in itself—and once again, its insistence on being “contemporary” is precisely what helps to define and determine its affirmative character: not only is it merely “of” the times (the minimal definition of contemporaneity), it basically bestows value upon these times simply by so desperately wanting to infiltrate, inhabit, and if possible even shape it. This great yea-saying ritual is best expressed in contemporary art’s reluctance, if not outright refusal—and that is as close as it comes to assuming a programmatic stance—to preclude certain (that is to say, any) forms, practices, or tropes from being named art. We have long known that anything and everything can be art, but in our contemporary cultural climate this equation has taken on a different quality, one in which, conversely, contemporary art can be anything and everything. [Or that everything is permitted, to paraphrase Ivan Karamazov.] The critical question then becomes not so much “what is contemporary art?” but much more typical for contemporary art as such: “what is not contemporary art?”

IV.

Let us return to the alarmist, apocalyptic tenor of Alain Badiou’s indictment of the “cultural-technology-management-sexuality” system as that which has come to occlude the “art-science-politics-love” system. We have already noted how this process of exclusion really goes hand-in-hand with a process of confusion—of art’s own confusion, that is, concerning its relationship to a cultural system (one that used to be called “mass culture” or “popular culture,” but whose terms have certainly lost their
emergence/emergency; philosophy’s relationship with art is much more complicated than this – while art’s relationship with philosophy is probably much less complicated.2

Here follows an extensive quote from Andrzej Warminska’s illuminating introduction to Paul de Man’s Aesthetic Ideology – and we really could not have put it any better:

For both Kant and Hegel, the investment in the aesthetic as a category capable of withstanding “critique” (in the full Kantian sense) is considerable, for the possibility of their respective systems’ being able to close themselves off (i.e., as systems) depends on it: in Kant, as a principle of articulation between theoretical and practical reason; in Hegel, as the moment of transition between objective spirit and absolute spirit. . . . For without an account of reflexive aesthetic judgment in Kant’s third Critique, not only does the very possibility of the critical philosophy itself get put into question but also the possibility of a bridge between the concepts of freedom and the concepts of nature and necessity, or, as Kant puts it, the possibility “of the transition from our way of thinking in terms of principles of nature to our way of thinking in terms of principles of freedom.”. . . . The project of Kant’s third Critique and its transcendental grounding of aesthetic judgment has to succeed if there is to be – as “there must after all be,” says Kant, “it must be possible” – “a basis uniting [Grund der Einheit] the supersensible that underlies nature and that the concept of freedom contains practically”; in other words, if morality is not to turn into a ghost. And Hegel’s absolute spirit (Geist) and its drive beyond representation (Vorstellung) on its long journey back home from the moment of “objective spirit” – that is, the realm of politics and law – to dwell in the prose of philosophical thought’s thinking itself absolutely would also turn into a mere ghost if it were not for its having passed through the moment of the aesthetic, its phenomenal appearance in art, “the sensory appearance of the Idea.” In other words, it is not a great love of art and beauty that prompts Kant and Hegel to include a consideration of the aesthetic in their systems but rather philosophically self-interested reasons. As de Man put it in one of his last seminars, with disarming directness and brutal good humor: “therefore the investment in the aesthetic is considerable – the whole ability of the philosophical discourse to develop as such depends entirely on its ability to develop an adequate aesthetics. This is why both Kant and Hegel, who had little interest in the arts, had to put it in, to make possible the link between real events and philosophical discourse.”4

I have long liked the fatalist sound of this “had-to-put-it-in” – in particular: it speaks to a basic reluctance on the part of philosophy to accept that only one thing is more important (“higher”) than philosophy, namely, art – the grudging acknowledgement (and this grudge may well be the source of all critique) that art, as a very precisely delineated philosophical concept that is absolutely distinct from the general notion of culture, is simply the most important thing, namely, that on which all other thinking (including that of “culture”) hinges.

III.

Although we have, of course, long since given up any attempts at truly defining this thing called “art” (and already in German Idealism it is clear that not so much as its concept is the object of reverence and scrutiny, and that it will henceforth be approached purely negatively), today we continue to live and work, to labor and love, under the aegis of this one tenacious assumption – that art simply is the most important thing, and that if a thing is named art, it is thereby made the most important thing, possibly even the only thing. And perhaps this is all the definition we need.

“Art” is not just (it is in fact far from) a maddening crowd of images, objects, and pictures of objects, nor does it name simply refer to the mass of people who produce the aforementioned; art is not just that which is shown or talked or written about in the various spaces of art, however fleeting or fixed, “solid” or “melting”; and it certainly is not just the subject that still evades definition.

This is the first of a two-part issue of e-flux journal devoted to the question “What is Contemporary Art?” as it was addressed in a public lecture series of the same name organized by Anton Vidokle at ShContemporary, Shanghai in September 2009. Special thanks go to Colin Chinnery, Liam Gillick, and all who contributed to the series: Zdenka Badovinac, Hu Fang, Hal Foster, Boris Groys, Jörg Heiser, Carol Yinghua Lu, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta), Dieter Roelstraete, Martha Rosler, Gao Shiming, and Jan Verwoert.
When the editors of e-flux journal invited me to write about contemporaneity, they suggested that I take my own professional experience as a starting point. And it seems that, in order to understand contemporaneity, we cannot neglect the particularity of various approaches. Contemporary theory, however, and especially Badiouian theory, teaches that this can lead us astray and we should rather devote ourselves to thinking about a new understanding of universalism. For this reason, I have tried to place my own particular story — which is linked to the broader context of Eastern Europe and, more narrowly, to my work at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana — in connection with other, related experiences, especially those linked to the issues surrounding the Global South. One might even suggest that sharing various points of connection is, in fact, one of the key concepts of contemporaneity.

I. Narratives in the Plural

If we can no longer speak of the evolution of art over the course of history, we can certainly speak about the evolution of its accessibility. Accessibility to art increased exponentially in the twentieth century, primarily through the power of reproduction and the work of museums open to the general public. The democratization of art is, certainly, one of the important aspirations of modernity, although in many ways this is still limited to educating from above and the selective standards that entails. But today this enlightenment model is already being threatened by knowledge penetrating from below. I am speaking especially about current processes that oppose the various hegemonic models created by Western modernity. In this essay, I use the word “contemporaneity” as an alternative concept to modernity — a term which I do not connect with any specific time period.

“Modernity” is not a historical period but a discursive rhetoric, that is, a persuasive discourse promising progress, civilization and happiness.1 This is how Walter Mignolo describes modernity, especially with regard to its darker side, which he calls “coloniality.” For theorists of decoloniality, “coloniality” is something that still persists today, and in opposition to the processes of decolonization.2 Linking the issues surrounding the Global South, may also apply, at least in part, to Eastern Europe. Despite the fact that socialism was itself a unique project of modernity with its own globalization project, its own colonialism, and its own (pop) culture and art, the socialist countries, like other parts of the world, were hardly immune to Westernizing processes.

II. There are three moments, events, conjectures in the history of philosophy — which is always already a history of art (in that it is always also already a history of the philosophy of art) — that would undoubtedly make for great, unforgettable movies, maybe even for great-theory of art. In fact, the inevitability of their greatness is probably the one reason why I would want to entertain the fantasy of venturing into the world of movie-making proper, with or without the help of an artist friend. The first of these scenes would be set in Athens around the time of Socrates’ trial; the second one in Jena during the early years of the nineteenth century; the third in Pacific Palisades and neighboring Brentwood during the Second World War. The first scene would feature Socrates himself, of course, along with his heir apparent, Plato, and a motley crew of Atomists, Eleatics, Pythagoreans, Sophists, and the like; in the second scene, such notables as Fichte, Hegel, Novalis, Schelling, Schiller, and (only passing through!) Schiele would appear; in the last scene, Charlie Chaplin would be playing tennis with Sergei Eisenstein while Theodor Adorno and Arnold Schoenberg would be caught bickering over the former’s preparatory notes for Doktor Faustus at a barbecue hosted by the author of this dodecaphonic novel, Thomas Mann. If a fourth scene were to be called for, it would probably show Plato, Hegel, and Adorno crossing paths on Manhattan’s Lower East Side — or in a studio in the Soho of the seventies, perhaps Lawrence Weiner’s. (Indeed, it is very tempting to imagine the Soho of the seventies as the last great art-historical-eccentric of 1800s Jena).

So we have called these three high-water marks in the history of philosophy “moments” in the history of art. And surely the scene set in Jena AD 1806 captures the history of philosophy as a history of the philosophy of art (and hence also of art proper) at its undisciplined acme — a triumphant scaling of the heights after which nothing but the long descent to the banal plains of the “now” would follow. If German Idealism is indeed often referred to as the World Spirit’s finest hour, this is no small measure because of the centrality accorded to the question of art at the very zenith of philosophy’s historical development: German Idealism needed art to become what it became — or rather, it needed its conceptualization (again, much like Concept Art itself in our beloved, bedeviled twentieth century).

This relationship of inner (“philosophical”) necessity and profound dependence is not necessarily one of great love or even sympathy — its roots reach far deeper. Indeed, if one thing is especially noteworthy in this respect, it is the fact that neither the father of German Idealism, Immanuel Kant, nor his talented, rebellious philosophical offspring (Hegel first and foremost, but the now more easily forgotten Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling) occupied a position of similar prominence, were terribly interested in the practical reality of art, let alone very artistically minded themselves. Present-day readers of Kant’s Critique of Judgment or Hegel’s Aesthetics will fruitfully look for passages that reference to actual artworks produced in their lifetime (certainly of the visual kind), and it is truly frustrating to realize that they were the contemporaries of such iconic image-makers as J. M. W. Turner, Caspar David Friedrich, and Jacques-Louis David, about whose work they remained incredibly silent. On the contrary, they were primarily interested in aesthetics — but still needed the extremely powerful idea of “real” art to lend this primary interest a salient quality, thus shaping a blueprint of sorts for all future engagements of established philosophical concepts with artistic practice. (It is far too facile to say that philosophers do not “understand” art, or habitually only “discover” certain artists, art forms, art practices, and/or artworks long after their prime or the moment of their historical
Ask not what contemporary art is, but what contemporary art should be.

– Oksana Pasaiko, 2009

I.

“What is contemporary art?” is (clearly) not the same question as “What is art?” The former basically asks us to define what is particularly “contemporary” about art — not, significantly enough, what is particularly artistic about it. The question of what is “contemporary” about contemporary art seems straightforward enough: answering it would simply require our invoking all the art that is being made now — but of course there is more.

Now, answering the question as to what is particularly artistic about art (contemporary or not) is famously impossible, and it belongs to the specific condition of contemporary art (or at least of the contemporary art world, which may or may not be the same) to have made the very act of asking this question not just impossible, but also unreasonable, even irresponsible — a show of poor taste or, worse still, of irreversible disconnect from the daily practice of (contemporary) art. Contributing to, or participating in, something that does not tolerate definition or other forms of circumscription (so being part of something that is ultimately unknowable: not knowing what we’re doing) is one of the ways in which “culture” in general essentially reproduces itself. This is an important nuance to distinguish, for it necessarily means that contemporary art belongs to the general field of “culture,” whereas art does not (that is to say, not necessarily). And this, in turn, is not necessarily a good thing: in fact, it may be a bad thing. It probably is a bad thing. Alain Badiou, in his introduction to Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, remarks that

the contemporary world is doubly hostile to truth procedures. This hostility betrays itself through nominal occlusions: where the name of a truth procedure should obtain, another, which represses it, holds sway. The name “culture” comes to obliterate that of “art.” The word “technology” obliterates the word “science.” The word “management” obliterates the word “politics.” The word “sexuality” obliterates love. The “culture-technology-management-sexuality” system, which has the immense merit of being homogeneous to the market, and all of whose terms designate a category of commercial presentation, constitutes the
Although Rogoff is speaking here primarily about the interlacing territories of various fields of knowledge that are connected by a shared sense of urgency with regard to certain common questions, we could apply a similar model to the exchange of knowledge between various geopolitical territories. Access to different kinds of knowledge through various points of connection as well as the possibility of participating in common debates may be counted as part of the same set of concerns that characterize concepts of decolonization. Issues of access and participation in various processes of knowledge are also shaping, to an increasing degree, the basic features that define the imagination of contemporary art.

In “Who’s Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?” Hal Foster discusses the need to create a new narrative that, following the psychoanalytical model, would treat neo-avant-garde art concepts in terms of their repeating the unfinished work of the artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century. Foster writes:

> The status of Duchamp as well as Les Demoiselles is a retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings, and so it goes across the dialogical space-time of avant-garde practice and institutional reception.

The mature art system and its market contributed crucially to the fact that a given artwork could become part of history through countless cycles of repetition. Regardless of how we define the repetitions of the historic avant-garde vis-à-vis those of the neo-avant-garde—merely as farce or as the full, if deferred, realization of the avant-garde’s potential—the story remains embedded in the logic of that same art system. The hegemonic art system, with its museums, theory, and market, makes possible the repetition of artistic concepts over various historical periods.

But that which the system assimilates must conform to its standards. If, as Foster writes, the institution of art was something the artists of the historic avant-garde wished only to do away with, and something that was in fact analyzed by the neo-avant-gardists, then it must be made clear that this applies above all to the Western space. Even if, for instance, the Russian avant-gardists wanted to burn down everything old, including the bourgeois institutions, we do not see in the works of their heirs in the East any kind of repetition in the sense of an institutional critique, at least not to the same degree as we have in the West. For the Eastern neo-avant-garde movements, the primary target of their participation in discussions about unstructured exchanges and in particular spheres of life. Irit Rogoff describes contemporaneity as a sense of participation in discussions about unstructured forms of knowledge:

> “Contemporaneity” is our subject—not as a historical period, not as an explicit body of materials, not as a mode of proximity or relevance to the subjects we are talking about, but rather as a conjunction. “Contemporaneity” for us means that in the contemporary moment there is a certain number of shared issues and urgencies, a certain critical currency, but perhaps most importantly a performative enablement—a loosening of frames all around us, which means we can move around more freely, employ and deploy a range of theoretical, methodological and performative rhetoric and modes of operation, inhabit terrains that may not have previously made us welcome or, more importantly, which we would not have known how to inhabit productively.
contextualize, understand, and present the international artistic language and practice of Zhang Huan. He remains an enigma for the art scene in China today.

Meanwhile, many people in the Chinese art scene are still perplexed and constrained by doubts of a general and primitive nature. One afternoon when I walked through the art district of Beijing, the few people I ran into — gallery directors, art spaces — coincidentally told me the same thing: now that the market is down, they want to discover new talent and work with young artists. This is as much an illusion as the idea that older and more established artists are no longer active or involved, and have thus lost their value. Like anywhere else, people are obsessed with youth and emerging talent, yet the difference is that the Chinese art structure hasn’t diversified enough to gain the intellectual and theoretical momentum necessary to address the ongoing practice of already established artists and their relevance. The roles of the institutions are not clearly defined and everyone is competing for the same resources, while being simultaneously unable to develop a stable discourse through which to position the actual work.

What Fei Dawei argued almost two decades ago is unfortunately still a valid premise and goal for those of us working in China: how do we examine and activate our own cultural conditions and contexts in a global discourse, rather than emphasize our own uniqueness and become burdened by it? It’s not international attention that will release us, but our self-discipline and critical engagement with our own practices and ideas that will possibly make us active participants in the global art scene, artists who do not lose sight of the rest of the world. Maybe it’s less relevant to ask what is “Chinese art” than to think about what is contemporary in our own particular context and how it relates to the larger context of the world.

It seems that we are living in a contemporary world just like everyone else, and we have the same kind of exposure to news and entertainment. If we look hard enough, we find that we drink the same kind of coffee and are sensitive to similar kinds of things. But for many of us living in China, it’s as if we are only beginning to make the journey to the contemporary. For China, the 1960s and 70s were periods of temporary suspension and removal from the modernist movements — and more importantly, from the transition from the modern to the contemporary — that took place in other parts of the world, and this distance proved to be devastating. In the past few decades, we have slowly built up a degree of confidence and resources, sufficient perhaps to finally examine the same sets of concerns and issues on the same level, and to finally make the transition to the contemporary.

attack was ideology and not the art system, which even today has, for all practical purposes, not yet developed in the East in any form comparable to that of the West. So when we speak of a new narrative that would be more suitable to the present and the global situation, we can only speak of narratives in the plural.

While the concept of the plurality of narratives can be connected with the idea of the unfinished nature of the historic avant-gardes, it should, however, be linked first and foremost to the unfinished project of decoloniality. The production of local bodies of knowledge, which include the genealogies of local avant-gardes, is a precondition for establishing an equal basis. We could relate such thinking to the notion of “transmodernity” put forward by the proponents of decolonialist theory. The decolonialists oppose the concept of transmodernity to the Western concepts of postmodernity and altermodernity, as well as to such notions as alternative modernities, subaltern modernities, and peripheral modernities. In Mignolo’s view, all these concepts still maintain “the centrality of Euro-American modernity or, if you wish, assume one ‘modernity of reference’ and put themselves in subordinate positions.”

We would be very mistaken if we inve any way supposed that emancipatory ideas come only from the non-Western world. This would be like saying that socialism was solely the project of the East. Susan Buck-Morss has nicely stated that this was not the case: “The historical experience is so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question.”

No single place can claim exclusive rights to emancipatory knowledge, which is important to the entire planet. It is true, however, that certain spaces have a particular intellectual knowledge than others. Those that are in a better position in this regard also, therefore, contribute more to the positive or negative development of global society. Spaces with a weaker infrastructure, which might otherwise serve the ongoing structuring and distribution of local knowledge, are here in a disadvantaged position. The most advantageous connections with other, similar conditions in the struggle for greater participation in the global exchange. That something of this sort is already happening can be seen in the congruity between various theoretical concepts, such as the notion of pluri-versality that Mignolo describes: “Pluri-versality requires . . . connectors, connectors among projects . . . moving, advancing, unfolding in the same direction (departing from the colonial matrix of power), but following singular paths emerging from local histories.”
the particular nature of the moment we were living in. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Moderna galerija had become the central art institution of a new country, whose birth had been accompanied by a ten-day war, a war that had then shifted the Balkans, where it continued for the next several years. The proximity of war, the old/new nationalisms, the blurring of the progressive ideas of communism and nationalism, the increased emulsion of the West, and the beginnings of a new liberal economy – all of this helped to create the conditions into which was already so different from that of the late eighties, when I had started working at the Moderna galerija.

Along with my colleagues, especially Igz Zabel, with whom I had worked for many years, I asked myself how a museum can move forward in its work when it has been primarily dedicated to a national-political mission, such as the ambitious studies that took pains to stress, lagged eternally behind Western art. The prevailing criticism and theory would, sometimes at quite ludicrous, place our art in the “universal” Western context and blithely neglect anything that was associated with our own avant-garde traditions and the very powerful processes of self-contextualization that are a series of shifts in art-making practices in Slovenia, particularly throughout the 1980s. And I am not even speaking here of the absence of a critical theory that could place these relations in broader political and social contexts – a critical theory of which even today we find no trace, at least not in the way art history is taught. A great lack of self-confidence, which at times borders on servility toward the West, exists not only in Slovenia but in all the so-called peripheral spaces; this was, and still is, responsible for everything we might designate, at least conditionally, as coloniality. How do we remedy such a situation? How do we improve our self-image?

These and similar questions encouraged us to find a different way of defining the priorities of our work. Our museum, founded in 1948 in a country that was just emerging from a long war, has always considered itself as a socialist tradition of national museums, a refusal to accept the “universal” Western example, and a search for a museum model that would suit its own time and space. The concept of contemporaneity became the idea that we ourselves would be the producers of our own knowledge and, as much as possible, that we should stop being merely the recipients of Western ideas. In this process we relied, right from the start, on the experiences of artists and small venues in Slovenia, which had in the eighties, developed particular strategies for self-organization, alternative networking, and operating internationally, and that were significantly more successful at doing this than the official cultural policy was. I said, then, that in our future operations we would use knowledge that came “from below,” and that we were often forced to heed the demands and expectations that came not only from the official cultural policy but also from a certain general standard of institutional behavior. Our understanding of contemporaneity was also dictated by our interest in other spaces that had till then been shut out of the artistic “mainstream” and, culturally, which shared a number of similar priorities in the new historical moment. And it was our direct proximity to these priorities with spaces that saw our national-political mission as necessary, new, which we also started to understand as our principal international context.

Throughout the 1990s, then, the Moderna galerija put together a number of projects connected with the Balkans and, more generally, Eastern Europe. In 2000, we also inaugurated the first museum collection of Eastern European art, which is a testimony to our ongoing work of contextualization as itself as soon as possible, that it must become the subject of its own historicization and not merely an object for the Western art market. To the best of my knowledge, the acquisitions we have made, and my experience with these issues, I have on a number of occasions already pointed to two possible ways for Eastern European art to be musealized. The first is based on the mere inclusion of non-Western art, through its best examples, in the master narrative and in the hegemonic institutions; the second way has been to offer more possibilities for local institutions to produce knowledge about their own history, and thus indirectly influence the global art system. Of course, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive; the question is which of them will end up becoming dominant in the future.

When I talk about the Moderna galerija as a museum of contemporary art, however, this is not merely in the sense of the topics discussed above, but also in the very concrete sense of the actual functioning of this institution. The Dynamic galerija was founded as a museum of modern art, but after more than sixty years, its official mission became too narrow and its physical space too small. In order to solve its space problems, the Moderna galerija acquired a new space and became the real “native culture.” It’s time to reverse what Lu Xun proposed in the thirties, “what is more national is more international” into “what is more international is more national.”

What we are doing, and what we want to do, is gradually to place issues brought from the Chinese context into the larger cultural background in which they are seen and operate by renting out exhibition spaces and curating programs with paying shows, completely lacking in curatorial framework or presentation. Art centers operate by renting out exhibition spaces and filling programs with paying shows, completely lacking in curatorial framework or presentation. Art centers accept shows supported by gallery projects, which are rarely critical, and feature critical theory that could place these relations in a more international context. Throughout the past two decades, under the influence of the art market, an infrastructure for contemporary art has slowly taken shape. Yet although it bears all the familiar characteristics of a mature art market – with galleries, contemporary art museums, art centers, art archives, and so on – it is just as much a product of international relations, articles, which are rarely critical, and feature neither reviews nor art criticism. Art museums operate by renting out exhibition spaces and filling programs with paying shows, completely lacking in curatorial framework or presentation. Art centers accept shows supported by gallery money or the investment of private art dealers and so-called collectors (who are actually speculators). Art archives and triennials are initiated, funded, and curated by private gallerists who seek to feature their own names instead of being more authoritative. Art historians compile bulky histories of contemporary art heavily informed and influenced by their close circle of contacts.

While these roles in the scene are often very blurry, the more profound and problematic aspects of what makes an institution a “name” is the formation of personal alliances, and the necessity of strategic maneuvering in order to seize a primitive market appetite. It is this very way of being that characterizes the local art system, which seems to have a hard time finding a way to collective situation. Collectivism is about the loss of individual desires, as well as of individual responsibility.

As for the Chinese artists based abroad, it would take longer for them to be recognized. However, the fourth generation’s multi-locational mentality prevalent in China was also hindering leading critics like Li, who was once among those making headway by looking beyond his own locality. In the 1980s and 1990s, many of the “exiled” artists who left China to live and work abroad in the 1980s and 1990s have gradually returned to major cities in China, many with admittances and careers behind them. More importantly, these figures brought back not only their practice and artistic ideas, updated “always two times and over, but also a formidable number of possibilities for influencing the art scene within China. In the case of Zhang Huan, an artist who lives in New York but has had left China for the United States after gaining prominence in the performance art movement of early nineties China. Once in New York, it didn’t take long for him to be invited to perform and work with important American and international institutions. He proved able not only to overcome the constraint of cultural contexts, but also to transcend national territory between two cultural entities in either direction. In 2005 he moved back to Shanghai and established a fifteen-acre studio and production center on the outskirts of the city. Zhang’s continuing international success is the object of envy for many local artists and his way of working has certainly presented a new model for the local art scene. Here, he hired and trained skilled why三个月 technicians and producers from various regions across the country, whose technical competence complemented his own training. This systematized and well-managed production workshop churned out a great number of Zhang’s physically imposing oversized sculptures.

Although made in China, Zhang’s current works are rarely exhibited inside the country, even though he exhibits actively and sells work on an international level. His first solo exhibition in China, planned for the Shanghai Museum of Art, was eventually cancelled due to sensitive content. The last decade of market inflation has created a false confidence and belief in the sustainability of the local system. Here the lack of criticality and intellectual scrutiny is replaced by an overemphasis on a strong invention of personal alliances, and the necessity of strategic maneuvering in order to seize a primitive market appetite. It is this very way of being that characterizes the local art system, which seems to have a hard time finding a way to
with the challenge of having to decide what to choose. Often this made-based upon an instinct or an attitude, and this would become the operational basis on which artists would form their own artistic structure and language. Although parallel practices continued to exist from the 1980s up to the present day, the international art and market have been mostly focused on works that prioritize socially and politically charged subject matter over stylistic experimentation and conceptual investigation. Artists that created cynical realist, social realist, political Pop, that feeds into a kind of collective imagination of a Chinese party have been gaining so much recognition since the early nineties that the artists even strove to minimize technological and formal complexity in order to focus the attention of the viewer on the depicted content. Their method of referring to social content has become the central theme that runs through their entire practice and leaves little room for anything else.

Li Xianting, who wrote the above-quoted letter in 1991, was an important figure in the 1980s whose editorial work in art publications such as Meishu (Fine Arts) gave crucial visibility and endorsement to promising young artists and artist groups. It was a time when artists and critics seemed to venture hand-in-hand into completely new territory, later overlooked by the political hype of proceeding years. This new territory involved recovering the normal need to express and experiment artistically without being bound by ideological or political obligations. Formal and conceptual investigations were considered to be a matter of intellectual awakening. The “China/Avant-Garde” show was less a thematic group exhibition than a platform and occasion, as well as a valid context, for an outburst of emotional and spiritual energy pent up in the previous decades. Just two years after the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, the museum of a culture much farther away. Contemporary art somehow took a back seat to what the country was occupied primarily with, namely, economic development. There were considerably fewer opportunities to exhibit publicly within China, and those who had been actively involved in the 1980s took the time to reflect on building group dynamics and collective ways of working such as through political activism, which offered a source of emotional comfort and courage. Artists and critics were also pondering and searching for a new future in the absence of a clear model to follow. It would take a few more years before the knowledge, understanding, and capital from the Western art structure, along with what Li called “the international system of value,” would trickle down to have an effect on the formation of the art system in China.

In 1991, when Li wrote the letter to Fei quoted above. It reflected a rather conservative and fundamentalist mindset, one that rejected and criticized the position of those artists and intellectuals who worked outside of China. He attributed the temporary inactivity of Chinese artists residing overseas to the fact that they were outside of their context. Fei pointedly responded by saying that the inability to respond to new contexts was deeply rooted in the education and ideology these artists were subjected to in China, and argued that only when the artists were able to surpass their given cultural and social contexts would they be able to truly succeed internationally. As Fei himself put it:

Most Chinese artists who have left China couldn’t fully realize their talents as they did back in China. Besides the issues of language and practical life, the main reason was precisely the particular intellectual quality and way of thinking that were cultivated in their intellectual native land. It prevents them from entering the contemporary cultural issues in a new context. This kind of creative “drought” comes from the inability of these artists to turn what they have learned in their own country into something that can transcend cultural and continue to be effective. Yet this “inability” is exactly the result of the long-term influence of the closed and conservative cultural spirit unique to Chinese society. Thus, I think what you said might be reversed: “Art must die out without leaving its cultural motherland.”

Naturally, what I meant by “leaving” is that art must have a side that transcends its native culture in order to develop. The world today is in the era of globalization and openness. We can only truly discover our own uniqueness and enable our native culture to gain momentum by perceiving and learning from others. Thus the need to think of transcendent culture . . . To reflect on ourselves while keeping the door closed is like building group dynamics and collective ways of working such as through political activism, which offered a source of emotional comfort and courage. Artists and critics were also pondering and searching for a new future in the absence of a clear model to follow. It would take a few more years before the knowledge, understanding, and capital from the Western art structure, along with what Li called “the international system of value,” would trickle down to have an effect on the formation of the art system in China.

At a time when museums of modern art are increasingly becoming museums of what are now historical styles from the twentieth century, an art that has been accumulated over decades, the museum of contemporary art needs a new definition. Above all, contemporaneity needs its own museum, just as, in the early twentieth century, modern art – the art that was then contemporary to its time – needed its own museum. In a certain way, the Moderna galerija was lucky. Circumstances of various kinds have always forced us to continually define our position toward contemporaneity and thus, in a way, to defend it. From my own experience, then, I would summarize the definition of the museum of contemporary art – which is different from the museum of modern art – as follows: If the museum of modern art served certain universal paradigms, a master narrative, and the hegemonic goals of the big Western institutions,
Contemporary art practice in China hasn’t followed the linear logic of Western art history. Intellectual development was basically stagnant and taken hostage by political movements during the preceding decades of Communist rule. This situation worsened with the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which severed not only the link between the country’s intellectual life and the outside world, but also the bloodline that connected it with its own history and cultural traditions. Education was suspended and knowledge and ideas were dismissed. Thus, when the country reopened its doors and resumed its interest in culture at the end of the 1970s, there was already a great discrepancy between what was going on in the heads of Chinese artists and intellectuals and what was happening in the rest of the world. Chinese artists rush to assimilate disjointed and sometimes misinterpreted information and adapted it to the social, historical, and cultural specificity of the country in order to shape their own methodology. Modernism, postmodernism, classical philosophy, eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, liberalism, anti-imperialism, and other intellectual movements from the Western world were introduced into China all at once to become parallel and mixed influences on the practices of artists. The 1989 “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition can be considered a rather extensive and reliable gauge of the mixture of styles and thinking that contemporary Chinese artists were keenly exploring during the 1980s. All of it, however, was somehow missing from the opportunity for education during the Cultural Revolution and from a missing link to the traditions that were wiped out by it. On the other hand, the sudden shift from having one type of visual and cultural experience, which was telling with regard to the intellectual and political situation of the country, to a dazzling diversity of aesthetic and conceptual possibilities presented the artists with a multiplicity of decisive critical responses to Eurocentred modernity from the subaltern cultures and epistemic location of colonized people around the world.”

Zdenka Badovinac has been director of Moderna galerija / the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, since 1993. She has curated numerous exhibitions presenting both Slovenian and international artists, and initiated the first collection of Eastern European art, Moderna galerija’s 2000+ Artcast Collection. She has been systematically dealing with the processes of redefining history and with the questions of different avant-garde traditions of contemporary art, starting with the exhibition “Body and the East – From the 1960s to the Present” (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1998; Exit Art, New York, 2001). She continued in 2000 with the first public display of the 2000+ Artcast Collection: “2000+ Artcast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West” (Moderna galerija, 2000); and with a series of Artcast Exhibitions, mostly at Moderna galerija: “Form–Specific” (2002); “7: Ljubljana–Moscow” (2004; co-curated with Victor Misiano and Igor Zabel); “Interrupted Histories” (2008); “Aaraat Collection 2000+23” (2006); “The Schengen Women” (Galerija Sku, Ljubljana, part of the Hosting Moderna galerija! project, 2008). Her other major projects include “(Un)limited ni”–3 (DeAppel, Amsterdam, 2000); “Ungeheuer, Sammlung Essl, Kunst der Gegenwart” (Klosterneuburg/Vienna, 2002); “a+e 2004, Imagine Limerick, OpenLimited” (various exhibition venues, Limerick, 2004); “Democracies: the Tiara Biennale” (Tirana, 2005). She was Slovenian Commissioner at the Venice Biennale (1993–1997, 2005) and Austrian Commissioner at the Sao Paulo Biennial (2002).
The conception of Chinese art as being unworthy of international attention or unable to have an “impact on the Western art world” was to quickly change with the increase in international attention on the political and social situation in China. In no time, Chinese contemporary art was embraced by the international art market as a hot item — not particularly for its artistic value, but for its ideological and sociological revelations. In this way, the label of Chinese art became extremely crucial to works that would command international recognition. For many years, even up until today, most Chinese artists, many of whom thrive in the art market, maintain a very strong national identity as compared to a very underdeveloped professional and individual identity. The biggest danger of all would be to then equate one with the other and enjoy artistic success based on identity politics without realizing its true nature.

The fad of buying and exhibiting Chinese art on an international level didn’t really speak to the quality of artistic thinking and working in the country, but instead indicated the growing importance of Chinese economic and social power. The consequences of this dimension of the Chinese art world are strongly felt today with the fall of the Chinese art market. It was a necessity of the so-called “cultural multiplicity” that the West was pursuing for their society to help sustain and glorify their global market activities. Chinese contemporary art was simply a souvenir one had to have to showcase one’s international lifestyle. But the question of how actual contemporary art practice in China is relevant and valuable to that of the Western world remains unanswered.

Since the 1990s, a newly developed and unconstrained art market took over the Chinese art world as it was still in its infancy, before it had achieved the institutional diversity that characterizes longer-established art infrastructures in other countries. As a result, contemporary art in China has become almost entirely dependent on market forces, which have set themselves up as the dominant, and virtually the only system of evaluating and crediting artworks and the success of artists. The vibrancy of the market gave a huge boost to the confidence and ambition of the players and fed into the “bigger means better” frenzy. There were bountiful resources available to open galleries of 1,000 square meters, stage expensive productions, mount large-scale exhibitions, produce bulky catalogues, and host luxurious

Boris Groys
**Comrades of Time**

Contemporary art deserves its name insofar as it manifests its own contemporaneity — and this is not simply a matter of being recently made or displayed. Thus, the question “What is contemporary art?” implicates the question “What is the contemporary?” Could the contemporary art as such be shown?

Being contemporary can be understood as being immediately present, as being here-and-now. In this sense, art seems to be truly contemporary if it is perceived as being authentic, as being able to capture and express the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted by past traditions or strategies aiming at success in the future. Meanwhile, however, we are familiar with the critique of presence, especially as formulated by Jacques Derrida, who has shown — convincingly enough — that the present is originally corrupted by past and future, that there is always absence at the heart of presence, and that history, including art history, cannot be interpreted, to use Derrida’s expression, as “a procession of presences.”

But rather than further analyze the workings of Derrida’s deconstruction, I would like to take a step back, and to ask: What is it about the present — the here-and-now — that so interests us? Already Wittgenstein was highly critical about his philosophical colleagues who from time to time suddenly turned to contemplation of the present, instead of simply minding their own business and going about their everyday lives. For Wittgenstein, the passive contemplation of the present, of the immediately given, is an unnatural occupation dictated by the metaphysical tradition, which ignores the flow of everyday life — the flow that always overflows the present without privileging it in any way. According to Wittgenstein, the interest in the present is simply a philosophical — and maybe also artistic — déformation professionnelle, a metaphysical sickness that should be cured by philosophical critique.

That is why I find the following question especially relevant for our present discussion: How does the present manifest itself in our everyday experience — before it begins to be a matter of metaphysical speculation or philosophical critique?

Now, it seems to me that the present is initially something that hinders us in our realization of everyday (or non-everyday) projects, something that prevents our smooth transition from the past to the future, something that obstructs us, makes our hopes and plans become not opportune, not up-to-date, or simply impossible to realize. Time and again, we are obliged to say: Yes, it is a good project but at the
coordinates that fuse Western and Chinese experiences. Today’s Chinese artists are more than ever before deeply entrenched in an ever-evolving and gradually more autonomous system of art production and circulation, invigorated simultaneously by the continuous inflow of international knowledge and capital, but even more so by the sheer excess of local interest, investment, and imagination. Artists, dealers, galleries, museums, art magazines, auction houses, biennials, and art fairs are interwoven into a tighter and tighter network, eagerly replicating the mature model established in the West, while, but it does exist. We cannot follow the postmodernist styles in the contemporary West using the so-called modernist and nationalistic term ‘avant-garde’. No matter what you do, it always appears to be familiar.2 At a time when international companies already spread their wings all over the world, speculating upon and investing in a near future when they would reap the benefits of building and becoming part of a global market, some Chinese intellectuals still cling to the idea of cultural locality, in doubt of this “new international system of value.” Such claims sounded extremely nationalistic and profoundly arrogant, lacking in curiosity or desire to understand the outside world. Unable to picture the West as an equal partner in cultural exchange, Li spoke about the West as both irrelevant and, at the same time, an impossible standard for the Chinese art world to emulate and be on par with. He certainly touched upon the issue of the impossibility of a contemporary avant-garde with his statement “no matter what you do, it always appears to be familiar,” which remains a relevant point that constantly shakes up our decisions and judgments today.

Here I quote Li Xianting again:

But we all cherish your activities abroad. Maybe every kind of effort has its value. We are all cornerstone and nothing (we do) would be worth international attention. Do you really believe that you yourself have had an impact on the Western art world?2

In this condescending letter, Li Xianting was not only referring to Fei Dawei but to a group of Chinese artists and intellectuals who left China in the 1980s and 1990s to pursue their careers in foreign countries. Among them were Huang Yongping, Chen Zhen, Wang Du, and Hou Hanru in Paris; Cai Guoqiang in Japan; Xu Bing, Zhang Huan, and Al Weiwei in New York, and so on.
national or urban framework in which they encounter the most diverse audiences. While art collecting has become en vogue on an unprecedented scale, it often lacks a common notion of art. Contemporary art also invades former ethnographic museums, which are forced to remodel their areas of collecting. As yet, the novelty of the situation defies any safe categories.¹

This ongoing project, consisting of a series of panel discussions, lectures, conferences, and publications, will lead to an exhibition at the ZKM in 2011 (whose vision to present what could possibly be the global image of contemporary art today is an enormous challenge in itself). Belting, who back in 1983 proposed the end of art history and the end of art’s historical narrative, has again stressed this context in which the modern perspective is a local one, and that Western art history is a time-based and culture-specific concept whose sensitivity and relevance to other periods of time and cultures should always be re-examined. A workshop he led on global art at the ZKM this past summer proposed a paradigm shift; we were reminded to no longer think about the West as the singular model to be applied worldwide, but to reflect on how to expand this concept whose sensitivity and relevance to other historical moments in precisely such a situation, defies any safe categories.

In the following text, I would like to respond to the question “what is contemporary art?” through a historical self-reflection and by looking at the specific scenario in China through a very local perspective. Even though China was absent from much of modernism’s chronological progression, it has followed a unique track and used a set of methodologies. Even though China was absent from much of modernism’s chronological progression, it has followed a unique track and used a set of models using experiences from elsewhere, or even to approach art from the perspective of a multitude of models.

As a participant in the workshop, I became more aware of my own specific local context, which is China, a country whose own position in challenging and redefining multiculturalism and global contemporality, both back in 1989 and twenty years later in 2009, has always been in question. Perhaps it’s not simply a matter of creativity and what artworks are being produced, it’s also a matter of perspective and methodology, how to view the works produced in this context and, more importantly, how to develop a way of working that is perceptive with regard not only to the works but also to their context, one that is closer to the works’ internal complexities and constant transfigurations than to their external features and general applications.

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substituted the religious promise of resurrection and eternal life. During the period of modernity, the “body of work” replaced the soul as the potentially immortal part of the Self. Foucault famously called such modern sites in which time was accumulated rather than simply being lost, heterotopias. Politically, we can speak about modern utopias as post-historical spaces of accumulated time, in which the finiteness of the present was seen as being potentially compensated for by the infinite time of the realized project: that of an artwork, or a political utopia. Of course, this realization obliterates time invested in this realization, in the production of a certain product — when the final product is realized, the time that was used for its production disappears. However, the time lost in realizing the product was compensated for in modernity by a historical narrative that somehow restored it — being a narrative that glorified the lives of the artists, scientists, or revolutionaries that worked for the future.

But today, this promise of an infinite future holding the results of our work has lost its plausibility. Museums have become the sites of temporary exhibitions rather than spaces for permanent collections. The future is ever newly planned — the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten — names and events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future — of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control. The only thing that we can be certain about in our present is that these historical narratives will proliferate tomorrow as they are proliferating now — and that we will react to them with the same sense of disbelief. Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future. We simply lose our time, without being able to invest it securely, to accumulate it, whether utopically or heterotopically. The loss of the infinite historical perspective generates the phenomenon of unproductive, wasted time. However, one can also interpret this wasted time more positively, as excessive time — as time that attests to our life as pure being-in-time, beyond its use within the framework of modern economic and political projects.

I was recently invited by the editors of Afterall to contribute to a book they are preparing on the monumental 1989 exhibition “Magicians of la terre” with a text reflecting on the impact of this exhibition on the practice of Chinese artists. On that occasion I had a discussion with Chinese critic Fei Dawei, who had introduced the curator of the show, Jean-Hubert Martin, to many of the key artists of the ‘85 movement in China prior to the exhibition and worked as one of its regional advisors. As one of the earliest attempts to exhibit contemporary art from non-Western parts of the world in the West and to deal with the possibility of multiculturalism, this exhibition set an important precedent for many projects to come with its ambition of offering a global vision for contemporary art.

What concerned Fei and the many artists Martin encountered on his visit to China was the question of how to formulate the image of the contemporary in Chinese art. For this purpose, Fei deliberately set up studio visits for Martin to first meet with artists such as Wu Guanzhong, who worked in the modernist tradition or were part of the official art circuit in China, before leading him to meet the artists and critics of the ‘85 movement. At that time, both Fei and the artists consistently tried to convince Martin that contemporary art was something unfolding in the most lively manner in the country and that it represented the most current climate of artistic thinking and energy in the country — not folk art, not traditional art.

This visit left a strong impression on Martin. In the end, Chinese artists Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang were invited to participate in the exhibition, which also featured, for example, tribal art from Africa. It was a fortunate setup for Chinese contemporary artists — the relevance of their practice, which had previously developed in isolation, bound to circulate only within China, was situated and viewed in an international context for the very first time. This would also have a lasting impact on how Chinese contemporary art would be represented in the many exhibitions and occasions that followed in the West.

In 2006, German art historian Hans Belting pioneered a project entitled “Global Art and the Museum” in an attempt to document the global changes in contemporary art and its institutions. Acknowledging the fact that economic globalization has — along with its own institutional practices — taken contemporary art practice beyond the restrictions of national borders, he states:

With the new geography of auction houses, the art trade acts on a global scale, art museums, by contrast, operate within a
1 Hu Fang, Garden of Mirrored Flowers (Guangzhou, China: Vitamin Creative Space, 2009).


3 See "China Tracy: i.Mirror," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSxR70Oe8qM.
Now, if we look at the current art scene, it seems to me that a certain kind of so-called time-based art best reflects this contemporary condition. It does so because it thematizes the non-productive, wasted, non-historical, excessive time—a suspended time, *"stehende Zeit,"* to use a Heideggerian notion. It captures and demonstrates activities that take place in time, but do not lead to real creation of any definite product. Even if these activities do lead to such a product, they are presented as being separated from their result, as not completely invested in the product, absent to it. We find in the exemplifications of excessive time, that has not been completely absorbed by the historical process.

As an example let us consider the animation by Francis Alÿs, *Song for Lupito* (1998). In this work, we find an activity with no beginning and no end, no definite result or product: a woman pouring water from one vessel to another, and then back. We are confronted with a pure and repetitive ritual of wasting time—a secular ritual beyond any claim of magical power, beyond any religious tradition or cultural convention.

One is reminded here of Camus’ Sisyphus, a proto-contemporary-artist whose aimless, senseless task of repeatedly rolling a boulder up a hill can be seen as a prototype for contemporary time-based art. This non-productive practice, this excess of time, has caught in a non-historical pattern of eternal repetition constitutes for Camus the true image of what we call "lifetime"—a period irredicible to any "meaning of life," any "life achievement," any historical relevance. The notion of repetition here becomes central. The inherent repetitiveness of contemporary time-based art distinguishes it sharply from happenings and performances of the 1960s. A documented activity is not any more a unique, isolated performance—an individual, authentic, original event that takes place in the here-and-now. Rather, this activity is itself repetitive—even before it was documented by, let us say, a video running in a loop. Thus, the repetitive gesture designed by Alÿs functions as a programmatically impersonal one—it can be repeated by anyone, recorded, then repeated again. Here, the living human being loses its difference from its media image. The opposition between living organism and dead mechanism is made irrelevant by the originally mechanical, repetitive, and purposeless character of the documented gesture.

Francis Alÿs characterizes such a wasted, non-teleological time that does not lead to any result, any endpoint, any climax as the time of rehearsal. An example he offers—his video *Politics of Rehearsal* (2007), which centers on a striptease rehearsal—is in some sense a rehearsal of a rehearsal, indeed as the sexual desire provoked by the striptease remains unfilled even in the case of a "true" striptease. In the video, the rehearsal is accompanied by a commentary by the artist, who interprets the scenario as the model of modernity, always leaving its promise unfilled. For the artist, the time of modernity is the time of permanent modernization, never really achieving its goals of becoming truly modern and never satisfying the desire that it has provoked. In this sense, the process of modernization begins to be seen as wasted time that can and should be documented—precisely because it never led to any real result. In another work, Alÿs presents the striptease as an example of a kind of work that does not produce any value in the Marxist sense of the term, because the time spent cleaning shoes cannot result in any kind of final product as required by Marx’s theory of value.

But it is precisely because such a wasted, suspended, non-historical time cannot be accumulated and absorbed by its product that it can be repeated—impersonally and potentially infinitely. Already Nietzsche has stated that the only possibility for imagining the infinite after the death of God, after the end of transcendence, is to be found in the eternal return of the same. And Georges Bataille thematized the repetitive excess of time, the unproductive waste of time, as the only possibility of escape from the modern ideology of progress. Certainly, both Nietzsche and Bataille perceived repetition as something naturally given. But in his book *Diﬀerence and Repetition* (1968) Gilles Deleuze speaks of literal repetition as being radically artiﬁcial and, in this sense, in conﬂict with everything natural, living, changing, and developing, including natural law and moral law. Hence, practicing literal repetition can be seen as initiating a rupture in the continuity of life by creating a non-historical excessive time through art. And this is the point at which art can indeed become truly contemporary.

Here I would like to mobilize a somewhat diﬀerent meaning of the word "contemporary." To be con-temporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be "with time" rather than "in time." "Con-temporary" in German is "zeitgenössisch." As Genosse means "comrade," to be con-temporary—zeitgenössisch—can thus be understood as being a "comrade of time"—as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has diﬃculties. And under the conditions of our contemporary product-oriented civilization, time questions with regard to social life and stimulate our consciousness of life in general, as well as our actions.

These individuals regard life itself as a process of experimentation and develop their own unique ways of perceiving the world. As opposed to an unconscious involvement, these figures always have the ability to "intend" movement in a certain direction, which is to say that they are always likely to construct a dynamic relationship between and around, to generate an integration of multiple relationships through their art practices, making the work itself a kind of Post-fact: both the result of a transformation and a proposal, which will in turn touch, and deeply inﬂuence the relevant groups, and reality itself. Based on such a premise—that is, if we regard the practice of art as a reconstruction of a relationship to life (such a relationship is no longer a deﬁnite social determination, but a fundamental and philosophical understanding)—it must be bound to the direction of its spaces and groups, and become a proposal for constructing the possibility of life. These different forms of creativity with different orientations respectively become different spaces, but they also suggest the existence of a truly diverse new species of space—one that will inspire a new space for life.
In this case, “I” am not the author of the novel, but rather, reality writes its own novel by my hand. This reality then grows increasingly surrealistic and begins to overflow, becoming saturated to a point where it is emptied of its own value.

If we agree that our reality becomes increasingly like the thoughts secreted by an insane collective mind, then can we even see this reality?

Spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified . . . To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself.

— Georges Perec

In the misty mist, you pass through a jungle or a mountain. At one point, the road forks: to the left is the first life; to the right, the second life. Without Cao Fei / China Tracy’s L.mirror, I would not have encountered a life called Second Life, where there appear to be new concepts of life and death, new histories and new worldviews. But soon we will find Second Life to be not an entirely new world, but rather the same life as the first one.

L.mirror shows the beautiful landscape at the end of the world’s wilderness; it is not about the future, but is a metaphor for daily life and the politics of the present. In other words, the aesthetics of the future are not mysterious. They exist along a blurry border between reality and fantasy, and will disappear over the horizon just as life will. But artists will be more engaged in life — no longer as a solidified reality with an original single meaning, but as a continuous flowing process.

I observe in the artistic works of the individuals around me — Cao Fei, Ming Wong, Xu Tan, Pak Sheung Chuen, Yang Fudong, Zheng Guagu — the recognition of a complex relationship between art and reality: art no longer operates in a laboratory of artists, but as intuitive and active participation in the possibility of life. In this sense, I think our question for art shall concern what it can “become,” but not what it “is,” and we can say that, from the beginning, the purpose of such creation will not be to produce something that becomes a work, but that acts as a force to be integrated in many different contexts. Such creativity shall and will continuously raise such unproductive time is excluded from historical narratives, endangered by the prospect of complete erasure. This is precisely the moment when time-based art can help time, to collaborate, become a comrade of time — because time-based art is, in fact, art-based time.

It is the rather traditional artworks (paintings, statues, and so forth) that can be understood as being time-based, because they are made with the expectation that they will have time — even a lot of time, if they are to be included in museums or in important private collections. But time-based art is not based on time itself. Art ceases to be present, to create the effect of presence — but it also ceases to be “in the present,” understood as the uniqueness of the here-and-now. Rather, art begins to document a repetitive, indefinite, maybe even infinite present — a present that was always already there, and can be prolonged into the indefinite future.

A work of art is traditionally understood as something that wholly embodies art, lending it an immediately visible presence. When we go to an art exhibition we generally assume that whatever is there on display — paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, readymades, or installations — must be art. The individual artworks can of course in one way or another make reference to things that they are not, maybe to real-world objects or to certain political issues, but they are not thought to refer to art, because they themselves are art.

However, this traditional assumption has proven to be increasingly misleading. Besides displaying works of art, present-day art spaces also confront us with the documentation of art. We see pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations — in other words, the same forms and media in which art is commonly presented. But when it comes to art documentation, art is no longer presented through these media, but is simply referred to. For art documentation is per definitionem not art. Precisely by merely referring to art, art documentation makes it quite clear that art itself
is no longer immediately present, but rather absent and hidden. Thus, it is interesting to compare traditional film and contemporary time-based art—which has its roots in film—to better understand what has happened to art and also to our life.

From its beginnings, film pretended to be able to document and represent life in a way that was inaccessible to the traditional arts. Indeed, as a medium of motion, film has frequently displayed its superiority over other media, whose greatest accomplishments are preserved in the form of immobile cultural treasures and monuments, by staging and celebrating the destruction of these monuments. This tendency also demonstrates film’s adherence to the typically modern faith in the superiority of vita activa over vita contemplativa. In this respect, film manifests its complicity with the philosophies of praxis, of Lebensdrang, of élan vital, and of desire; it demonstrates its collusion with ideas that, in the footsteps of Marx and Nietzsche, fired the imagination of European humanity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries—in other words, during the very period that gave birth to film as a medium. This was the era when the hitherto prevailing attitude of passive contemplation was discredited and displaced by celebration of the potent movements of material forces. While the vita contemplativa was for a very long time perceived as an ideal form of human existence, it came to be despised and rejected throughout the period of modernity as a manifestation of the weakness of life, a lack of energy. And playing a central role in the new worship of vita activa was film. From its very inception, film has celebrated all that moves at high speeds—trains, cars, airplanes—but also all that goes beneath the surface—blades, bombs, bullets.

However, while film as such is a celebration of movement, in comparison to traditional art forms, it paradoxically drives the audience to new extremes of physical immobility. While it is possible to move one’s body with relative freedom while reading or viewing an exhibition, the viewer in a movie theater is put in the dark and glued to a seat. The moviegoer’s peculiar situation in fact resembles a grandiose parody of the very vita contemplativa that film itself denounces, because cinema embodies precisely the vita contemplativa as it would appear from the perspective of its most radical critic—an uncompromising Nietzschean, let us say—namely as the product of frustrated desire, lack...
most fundamental cultural condition of urban life, namely that urban life has become a continuous system of self-reflection in which "I" can never perceive the existence of other people beyond my own mirrored image, just as the city itself cannot perceive any other parts of the world, but only its own reflection.

People experience an endless carnival within a cycle of their own mirrored images, and the city lives within its own mirrors endlessly. This is the beginning of exhausted self-experience.

Do we still have a real relationship with reality?

He withdraws his eyes from the flashing computer screen back to the gray horizon beyond the glass wall, where thick clouds are lit by a gloomy sunset, where high-rises extend one after another into the endless distance like reproducing cells, together creating our living borders through rapid replication and continuous hybrids.

Pressing the keyboard, a theme park weaves, accumulates, rotates, and diffuses in color.

In a city of constant destruction and reconstruction, history has been superimposed constantly, and to a point where it is so blurred that it can no longer be seen.

– Hu Fang, Garden of Mirrored Flowers

In a novel I wrote entitled Garden of Mirrored Flowers, I began to imagine the figure of an architect who gradually found the maze of life revealing itself to him as he constructed a theme park called "Garden of Mirrored Flowers."

In contrast to Borges’ "The Garden of Forking Paths," the maze of life in Garden of Mirrored Flowers could perhaps be a direct contact with reality itself, with the novel serving as a "documentary" of it – a collection of those traces in reality, such as television advertisements, stock market summaries, cell phone messages, shopping lists, and so on, which are always shown as dramatic events. From political performances to economic crises, the production of reality in the form of a story seems to occur in abundance today.

Thus, this novel becomes a "script" of reality, as the Russian writer Victor Pelevin suggests with regard to the Russian literary tradition in the preface to the Chinese edition of Generation "P." In Russia, the writers do not write novels, but scripts.

For Debord, the entire world has become a movie theater in which people are completely isolated from one another and from real life, and consequently condemned to an existence of utter passivity.

However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, art entered a new era – one of mass artistic production, and not only mass art consumption. To make a video and put it on display via the Internet became an easy operation, accessible to almost everyone. The practice of self-documentation has today become a mass practice and even a mass obsession. Contemporary means of communications and networks like Facebook, YouTube, Second Life, and Twitter give global populations the possibility to present their photos, videos, and texts in a way that cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptual artwork, including time-based artworks. And that means that contemporary art has today become a mass-cultural practice. So the question arises:

How can a contemporary artist survive this popular success of contemporary art? Or, how can the artist survive in a world in which everyone can, after all, become an artist? In order to make visible himself or herself in the contemporary context of mass artistic...
production, the artist needs a spectator who can overlook the immeasurable quantity of artistic production and formulate an aesthetic judgment that would single out this particular artist from the mass of other artists. Now, it is obvious that such a spectator does not exist – it could be God, but we have already informed of the fact that God is dead. If contemporary society is, therefore, still a society of spectacle, then it seems to be a spectacle without spectators.

On the other hand, spectatorship today – vita contemplativa – has also become quite different from what it was before. Here again the subject of contemplation can no longer rely on having infinite time resources, infinite time perspectives – the expectation that was constitutive for Platonic, Christian, or Buddhist traditions of contemplation. Contemporary spectators are spectators on the move; primarily, they are travelers. Contemporary vita contemplativa coincides with permanent active circulation. The act of contemplation itself functions today as a repetitive gesture that can not and does not lead to any result – to any conclusive and well-founded aesthetic judgment, for example.

Traditionally, in our culture we had two fundamentally different modes of contemplation at our disposal to give us control over the time we spent looking at images: the immobilization of the image in the exhibition space, and the immobilization of the viewer in the movie theater. Yet both modes collapse when moving images are transferred to museums or exhibition spaces. The images will continue to move – but so too will the viewer. As a rule, under the conditions of a regular exhibition visit, it is impossible to watch a video or film from beginning to end if the film or video is relatively long – especially if there are many such time-based works in the same exhibition space. And in fact such an endeavor would be misplaced. To see a film or video in its entirety, one has to go to a cinema or to remain in front of his or her personal computer. The whole point of visiting an exhibition of time-based art is to take a look at it and then another look and another look – but not to see it in its entirety. Here and there, anything that enters these spaces is noticed by other participants, provoking reactions from them, which in turn provoke further reactions, and so forth. However, this active participation takes place solely within the user’s imagination, leaving his or her body unmounted.

By contrast, the exhibition space that includes time-based art is cool because it makes focusing on individual exhibits unnecessary or even impossible. This is why such a space is also capable of including all sorts of hot media – text, music, individual images – thus making them cool off. Cool contemplation has no goal of producing an aesthetic judgment or choice. Cool contemplation is simply the permanent repetition of the gesture of looking, an awareness of the lack of time necessary to make an informed judgment through comprehensive contemplation. Here, time-based art demonstrates the “bad infinity” of wasted, excessive time that cannot be absorbed by the spectator. However, at the same time, it removes from vita contemplativa the modern stigma of passivity. In this sense one can say that the documentation of time-based art erases the difference between vita activa and vita contemplativa. Here again time-based art turns a scarcity of time into an excess of time – and demonstrates itself to be a collaborator, a comrade of time, its true con-temporary.
Bo wu zhi (History of Nature), compiled by Zhang Hua during the Western Jin Dynasty (265–316), is the first study of natural history in China. In this ten-volume book, Zhang recorded geographic features of the landscape, animals, biographies, myths and ancient history, immortals and ancient alchemy, and so on. He placed all that could not be categorized into a special section entitled “The Miscellaneous.”

If we take the whole world to be a book, then we are today lost in its multiple narratives and countless miscellanea. If we take it as a medium through which to reflect and explore the world, this book is no longer able to keep up with the speed at which narratives now unfold in it.

As a central building in the community, cinema is the largest luminous architectural body. Lights and film are cast in the sky of community, and linked with lights of city, of course, cast on bodies and faces from the bottom-up, as like the final scene in Genesis. A bustling city appears before us, and accomplishments under foot, there is an impassable and high aloft feel…

– Beijing-based real estate ad magazine
There is a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the often blunt commodification of art (and the processes of branding and generating wealth connected with it), and, on the other, the extremely heterogeneous, fragile practice of creating art. In fact, a good part of what makes an artist succumb to blunt commodification is the sheer anxiety caused by that heterogeneous fragility. Producing easily marketable, no-questions-asked work can offer a (deceptive) security no longer provided by classical avant-garde panace. There is no clearly distinguishable movement in sight that would lead out of this apparent deadlock. Given this, what are the options, the cracks of light in the otherwise uniformly dark, dystopian vision of poor, anxious artists doing irrelevant work for the rich? The answer to this question, as I will argue, is that today there is a kind of movement whose point is not to be clearly distinguishable, not to be “pure” anymore, not to allow itself to be historicized that way.

But before making that argument, it’s necessary to understand what the last clearly distinguishable movements were, and why there are none. The last period in visual arts that produced such movements was the 1960s: Pop Art, Minimal Art, and Conceptual Art. These movements were “distinguishable” because they were defined by a small set of methodological operations that could be identified as innovative in comparison to other achievements in art, whether earlier or contemporaneous. In other words, they were avant-garde. Still, defining the “essence” and “newness” of these movements, or deciding whose work belongs clearly enough to any of them, has remained an often ideologically charged issue for many artists, critics, and scholars alike. And many of them have abandoned the very idea of a “movement.” Usually they have done so in the name of either idiosyncrasy or the genius of the individual artist. Or they have done so, on the contrary, in the name of a more totalized idea of creative collectivity that supposedly “transcends” the limits of an “-ism” or mere “style.”

But whether or not you’re against the idea of movements no longer seems to be the problem. From the 1970s on, it has been difficult or next to impossible to clearly identify them in the first place. Everything became “neo-this” or “post-that,” or a pronounced crossbreed between previous movements. Around the early 1980s in Europe and the U.S., “neo-expressionist” painting set out to reinvigorate older ideas of artistic intensity and immediacy, but to generalize – remained less about changing the way you painted than about changing the way you presented yourself doing so. The method – paint fast, wittily – was considered a direct
On pressing the buttons in a panel in the wall, small lights lit up one by one accompanied by the rushing sound of an elevator in motion till the desired floor had been reached. On the basis of this work, it was possible to liken Artschwager’s position in the context of Pop, Minimal, and Concept art to that of an elevator in a New York office building, the kind one sees in the opening scene of Billy Wilder’s comedy The Apartment. Pop artists hang around on the streets and in the lobby, some have their noses pressed against the show windows of boutiques, some are leafing through fashion journals at the newsstand or buying themselves a hot dog at the kiosk. The eyes of the minimalists sweep indifferently across the scene, then travel along the flat and monochromatic grid of the facade all the way to the opaque paneling of the executives’ upper floors. The conceptualists are already looking around in the accounts-and-planning department when Artschwager’s elevator, paneled with Formica and resonant with surreal Muzak, glides past all the floors — from the lobby past the accounts-and-planning department to the executive floor and down again. Where are the young contemporary artists in this scene? They are taking on all of the roles available, as if they were on loan from a temporary employment company. They are the plumbers and window cleaners, the visiting CEO landing on the roof in a helicopter, the bike courier, the tourists who go up to the top-floor panorama restaurant. Whether this is all a travesty, or actually leads to something, will hopefully be clearer in a few years’ time. In any case, the diagnosis of a “corruption” of art by its conditions in capitalist society is to be taken as a starting point, not as the reason to bewail a final stage.

According to Marx, the fetish commodity, as if by magic, renders the work that went into producing it invisible. In contrast, luxury products often highlight the specialized handicraft that went into producing them. Maybe one of art’s jobs is to continue finding ways to position itself like a stopgap in the gap between these two versions of the object, playing them off against each other, even by way of repudiating objecthood itself. This also means preventing consumption and production from being presented as a seamless continuum. Against this background, denouncing the “now” as mere novelty is fruitless: it erases the question of what is new, the undeniable existence of, for example, new ways of waging war or torturing, or, just as well, new cures and remedies against diseases. The fact we have to face is that art, probably, is torture and remedy in one.

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Europe in mind, or re-evaluating gender and sexual orientation.

To some extent, I think that phase is over. Now these re-readings have basically been done. The upper echelons of the art business may have always preferred label clarity – an immediately recognizable visual style – and while this attitude may persist, it will be less than ever before when innovation actually occurs. Further mutations and atomizations will take place that not only question the distinctions and contradictions between genres and styles, but structurally evaporate the very notion of genre and style. This is actually less “new” than it may seem: since the 1990s, there have been artists such as Bruce Nauman or Mike Kelley or Rosemarie Trockel who absorbed an enormous variety of methodologies, ideas, and styles into their practice. Ai Weiwei is arguably another example. I would argue that this kind of approach, for the first time, will become fully hegemonic. Does that mean all will be ruled by indifference – anything goes, you can present any absurd, multiple combination of things as art? No; it just raises the bar. Amidst the sea of possibilities, in order not to drown, you have to make yourself a raft of whatever you find. It’s not the cleanest raft that counts, but the one that takes you the furthest. There are artists such as Ming Wong, a Berlin-based Singaporean artist making wildly eclectic but super-succinct “mutated” remakes of all sorts of scenes from film history; or Roee Rosen, an Israeli artist who – besides actually breaking taboos, in the guise of role-play and parody – leaves no stone unturned in mixing up genres and disciplines and political forms of expression and ways of embarrassing yourself, all to further the cause of art. When I see that kind of work, I think it proves that the perversely hybrid nature of today’s cultural and political landscape has had an effect on the tendency of art to settle into one aspect of the triad of production, distribution, and consumption I previously described – now, it seems all three are turned into a wildly whirling medley, and again it’s hard to resist the comparison to the Internet’s effect of equally blurring the lines between production and distribution, and consumption more radically and fundamentally than ever before.

In an article I wrote a few years ago about Richard Artschwager – another predecessor of today’s freestyle mutationality – I tried to explain his odd position at the edges of Pop, Minimal, and Concept with an allegory involving Romantic Conceptualism, the work of artists such as Bas Jan Ader seemed to call conceptual art’s apparent emphasis on cool rationalism into question. With regard to the 1990s and up until very recently, one can speak similarly of Psychedelic Minimalism, Libidinal Minimalism, Pop Abstraction. Not to forget the many re-evaluations of older avant-gardes: looking at constructivist or surrealist legacies with, for example, the new political landscape of Eastern Europe.
Still from The Apartment, 1960, directed by Billy Wilder.

almost as a collateral effect. Think of how conceptual art...
collage still suggests a meaning and an opinion, serially – by leaving the Coca-Cola logo, also presumably stems from this period – probably earning its name from the sound one hears when opening the bottle. Either way, what we have here is a convergent light-hearted pleasure and craving desire: the connection between innocent sweetness and bluntly sexual connotations, which the works by both Paolozzi and Hamilton display. In the latter's case, the lollipop, through its placement at the crotch of the muscular man, becomes a grotesquely bulbous phallus. The origins of Dada and Surrealism are here, but that is not the main point. Jörg Heiser's Torture and Remedy: The End of -isms and the Beginning Hegemony of the Impure 05/14 08.25.10 / 21:42:31 UTC

The art critic Lawrence Alloway is often credited with having first come up with the term "Pop Art." But he identified the movement without using the term in his 1958 essay "The Arts and the Mass Media," though he speaks of "mass popular art," he does not address fine arts to any great extent.2 Rather, he argues much more broadly for the vitality of popular culture itself, thus paving the way for this new art. In any case, here we have the more obvious, technical meaning of the word "pop" – as an abbreviation, simply, for popular: the culture of, and for, the many. But the onomatopoeic meaning of "pop!" – the sound of a conversion between light-hearted innocence and almost violent desire – permeates this technical meaning. This culture of and for the many is not merely defined by quantity but also by a particular quality, a kind of instantly inflating and deflating delight, like the refreshing sound of a bottle opening, or the silly "pop!" of a deflating balloon, a quality for which it is praised or scorned, sometimes both at once – Pop! 08.25.10 / 21:42:31 UTC

The Pop artists transferred this instantaneousness into the realm of art, turning slight delight into eternalized epiphany. But this "transfiguration of space," as Arthur Danto's phrase, does not turn Pop artists into priests of this transfiguration.3 Rather, they are just exceptional, or exemplary, in singling out the occurrences of pop-epiphany. This decidedly marks the shift from the first British Pop art of Paolozzi and Hamilton, still in the tradition of the Dada/Surrealist collage (as Peter Bürger had suspected), and that of Andy Warhol's substitution of collage with serialization. In doing this, Warhol is not just applying one more clever idea; he erases the "artistic" exemplification of composition still present in collage to expose the artist as simply, or merely, an exemplary or substitutional consumer – someone who makes a picture choice. At the same time, he also erases "comment": while a
The rock band Gogol Bordello are described as “a multi-ethnic Gypsy punk band from the Lower East Side of New York.”

The rock band Gogol Bordello are described as “a multi-ethnic Gypsy punk band from the Lower East Side of New York.”


intermingled more radically than ever before. It was already hard enough to distinguish production, distribution, and consumption from one another, since each reflects certain aspects of the other two. Any production is also a kind of consumption (for example, of resources), and consumption is also a kind of production (because without use the product is not “completed”); and distribution or circulation produce and consume simultaneously as well. Still, on a common-sense level, we sort of know the approximate difference. Yet in the age of the Internet, of financial markets so complex that the players themselves don’t fully understand its mechanisms, and of thoroughly global economic interdependence, it has become almost impossible to keep them apart. Information circulates so quickly, at such a high rate, and in such quantities that to sort it all out becomes a kind of production process in itself. The fusion of production and consumption has been heralded many times, by accentuating the classical way in which any production is a consumption of sorts, and consumption is always also a way of producing. But consumers of social networking Web sites such as Facebook are actually producing something beyond the mere completion or re-contextualization of a product given to them. And distribution or circulation is the very tool of that production. Whether this production is considered beneficial or not depends on many factors that need to be evaluated, which is not my concern here. Rather, I’m concerned with the effects this essentially technological and economic development has on the idea of distinguishable movements.

Classical avant-gardes were about generations in quarrel: Pop art, Minimal, and Conceptual art were not least rejections of the earlier Abstract Expressionism. But today, the idea of generations succeeding each other becomes blurred; as soon as you are willing to enter the circulation, it is possible to re-launch. Avant-gardes, in an odd way, were dependent on information, but also on a lack of information: a kind of productive ignorance of the contradiction of their rejections of previous generations, for example. This has become harder and harder: the more these contradictions have been discussed, the more it has become impossible to make the same “productive” mistakes again. So are we dealing here with a kind of “saturation” of the idea that art could progress? A kind of historic accumulation of already-achieved expansions and reinventions of what art could be, leaving us feeling stranded amidst purveying them; without the display of handicraft; replacing lyrical or dramatic movement with serial movement; and maybe most importantly: providing a structure in which production and reception can interact. In the serial music of someone like Terry Riley, the performers often have more to do than just “interpret”; or the “actual” performing is done (because without use the product is not “completed”); and distribution or circulation – the realm where relations between production and consumption, object and viewer are negotiated. To substantialize or eternize such a relational realm seems a contradiction in terms, but it’s not: what minimal artists offer in the way of viewer participation is an exemplary, simplified, model case. Its “minimal” quality is what makes its status as a model case apparent.

**Concept**

The term “Concept Art” was arguably first used by Henry Flynt, a writer and musician loosely associated with the Fluxus movement. In 1961 he wrote that the material of this kind of art consists of “concepts,” just as sound is the material of music. But it probably wasn’t until around 1968 that the term “Conceptual art” had fully established itself. Famously, Sol LeWitt stated: “the idea is the machine that makes the art.”

Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible”, establishing a form or manner in which something can appear, or “lend itself to participation.” Pop art hypostatized the receptive realm of consumption, while minimal art hypostatized the transitory realm of distribution or circulation – the realm where relations between production and consumption, object and viewer are negotiated. To substantialize or eternize such a relational realm seems a contradiction in terms, but it’s not: what minimal artists offer in the way of viewer participation is an exemplary, simplified, model case. Its “minimal” quality is what makes its status as a model case apparent.

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Lawrence Weiner’s 1968 “Declaration of Intent” is a good example of how this idea-as-machine is supposed to work:

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.11

This sounds more mysterious than it actually is. It’s like a manual, the kind of manual you get, say, to build a pre-fabricated shelf. “The piece need not be built” just means that the existence of the artwork, as an idea, is not dependent on a particular physical manifestation. The “receiver” decides whether they want to put the “thing” (even if it’s not actually a thing) together or not.

Conceptual art in this sense mimics what an industrial designer or engineer might do: they design a brilliant new car, and even if the company decides not to build it, or no one wants to buy it, the design has come into existence and might have an influence on other designers and engineers. Of course this comparison is a little unfair, because the point of Conceptual art is precisely to take the utilization of ideas towards a sellable “product” — whether a shelf or a car — out of the equation. The idea itself is what is supposed to count.

Many conceptual artists would read the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, attracted to the way he combined clearheaded analysis of language and logic with a playful, deadpan style of writing. A good example — though not by an artist whose work is “purely” conceptual — is Bruce Nauman’s adaption of a phrase from Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: he cast the sentence “A Rose has no Teeth” in lead, like a memorial plaque, and fixed it to a tree in a park (1966); later, he made copies in plastic and sent them to people in the mail. Wittgenstein had used the sentence in a comparison with the sentence “A baby has no teeth” — the problem he was concerned with being that grammar alone can’t distinguish plausible from implausible statements.

Nauman’s reaction complicates the matter by casting an absurd-seeming sentence in lead, as if a poetics could emerge that suddenly highlights the actual profundity of the sentence “a rose has no teeth.” It’s as if Nauman were saying: what seems like a faulty design — an absurd sentence — can actually be turned into something interesting. The conceptual artists, on the idea level, turned nothing into something; and on the physical level, turned something into nothing (even Nauman’s lead plaque would eventually be overgrown by the tree).

The conceptual artist — whether concerned about art alone, or about the social and political sphere as well — impersonated the unashamedly absurd producer: a figure that is half-smart engineer, half-eccentric dilettante. In any case, emphasis is placed on highlighting the idea as anticipating — and prior to — any physical manifestation, the circulation and reception of a work. LeWitt’s “the idea is the machine that makes the art” in this sense also marks the heyday of industrialization, the devaluation of handicraft, and the dawning of an era in which indeed ideas — or at least information — are the “means of production” rather than actual machines. This can obviously lead to all kinds of suspicions: was conceptual art merely celebrating the new capitalist culture, the fetish of information and communication technology, the de-subjectivation of production and administration? I think these suspicions are beside the point as long as they generalize about the whole movement — because ultimately the problem is not that you produce but what you produce; not that you have an idea, but what kind of idea.

Production, Distribution, Consumption

But in any case, in my own admittedly schematic characterization, these three movements of the 1960s captured the basic economic triad of production, distribution, and consumption. Conceptual art is about the production of ideas that in turn produce the art; Pop art is an artistic exploration of the standards of the contemporary spectator’s experience; and minimal art is about structural parameters of space, materiality, geometry, and so on, that form the conditions under which aesthetic experiences that might lead to ideas can occur. Distribution or circulation are the realms in which production is both engendered in the first place (the means of production need to be distributed before production can take place), and negotiated and compartmentalized in regard to consumption or reception. My argument however is not that these three artistic movements were simply illustrating the three basic aspects of the socioeconomic reproduction of society. Rather, I’m arguing that they are a seismic detector for a point in time when these realms became...