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Futures of the Contemporary

Contemporaneity, Untimeliness,
and Artistic Research

Edited by Paulo de Assis
and Michael Schwab



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Introduction

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Journal for Artistic Research (JAR)

The *contemporary* points towards incommensurable definitions. Largely debated in the fields of visual arts, art theory, and philosophy, the concept of the contemporary describes different practices, addressing diverse realities, and relating to disparate conceptual horizons. However, if distinguished from the *contemporaneous* of a given historical time, the *contemporary* becomes a selective concept that promotes or excludes things and practices according to their ability to respond to ahistorical or transhistorical aspects of the present. In this sense, the contemporary gains a critical function, involving particular modes of relating to history and to one's own time.

Since the contemporary is itself a historical concept that inscribes into its very diagnosis an image of the (global) present, problematisations are required that further complicate our relationship to history. Taking Roland Barthes's famous claim that "the contemporary is the untimely" as a seminal idea (quoted and expanded on by Agamben 2009), this book uses the link proposed between the notions of "the contemporary" and "the untimely" to engage anew with the temporality of artistic practices, in particular those that run against their own time and epoch, thus challenging history by engaging with its productive ground rather than by fleeing from it. The reader will see this link return again and again throughout the different chapters (starting with a discussion of these concepts in Chapter 1 by Paulo de Assis). By emphasising the notion of the untimely (Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäss*), a relationship to contemporaneity's historical blind spot is developed, offering more diverse entry points to pasts, presents, and futures. More than futures of the present, what is at stake are futures of the contemporary, implying a move beyond historicising frameworks, and asking which futures are possible for an untimely contemporariness.

With contributions from scholars and artists who have been highly engaged with the topic for several years—coming from fields as diverse as music performance, composition, art theory, visual arts, art history, critical studies, and philosophy—*Futures of the Contemporary* offers different perspectives on contemporary art practices, the temporality of artistic works and phenomena, and new modes of problematising the production of art and its public apprehension. The variety of the chapters offers not only different views on "the contemporary" but also different critical attitudes and creative gestures towards it, including different literary styles and formats that range from more speculative and abstract essays to concrete discussion of artworks done today. Bringing



together artists, musicians, and philosophers, the book moves the field of discussion from where it has been for the last decades, namely the fields of philosophy and art theory, to the emerging area of artistic research, thus pointing towards future work that might have the power to critically disentangle our global present and our presence within it (a topic that is discussed in the final chapter by Michael Schwab).

Diverse threads run throughout the essays, including ontological queries (What is the contemporary? What is the untimely?), epistemological discussions (Which forms of knowledge does the contemporary entail and how are they affected by the untimely?), methodological frameworks (Which artistic practices might be labelled *contemporary*?), ethical debates (How can the contemporary positively disturb and offset dominant structures?), and a transdisciplinary opening of horizons (What is the relationship between the contemporary and artistic research?).

Without proposing clear definitions of what “artistic research” might be—an almost futile endeavour given the institutional investments in the term—we use it to signal the possibility for new departures bewildered as we are by philosophy’s distance from the motivations of artists as well as a certain outdatedness if not superficiality of artistic discourse. “Artistic research,” if deployed as a speculative concept, may signal the arrival of a new paradigm for sense-making; it aims to work through—in all possible ways—a phenomenon’s implications, accepting the disturbance of long-held beliefs, disciplinary striation, and taste to the point at which artistic labour becomes unrecognisable to those bound up by whatever presupposition they bring to the table. It is in this sense that we see artistic research implied in the *futures* of the contemporary.

The origins of this book go back to the Fourteenth International Orpheus Academy for Music and Theory, held on 8–10 May 2017 in Ghent, where some of the authors gave lectures, namely Babette Babich, Zsuzsa Baross, Heiner Goebbels, and Peter Osborne, as well as both editors (Paulo de Assis and Michael Schwab). During these lectures, but also in the preparatory work leading to the Academy, a tension between two different understandings of the word *contemporary* became relevant. On the one hand, the word has been used in recent decades to refer to a specific concept that critically scrutinises any historical time and period, thus being “ahistorical” (the *contemporary* as an untimely category); on the other hand, it has also been used as a word describing current (global) artistic practices, thus being highly situated in time (*contemporaneity* as the radical now of the global present). This tension between “untimely” and “timely” modes of expression—which is implied in the Barthes–Agamben statement “the contemporary is the untimely”—lends itself to becoming a cultural and philosophical *aporia*, risking repeating the old song of the end of history, not positively contributing to renewed artistic practices, and actually excluding art and music practitioners from the debate. However, for the practitioner, ideas of the end of history or of a perpetual state of ending can have a positive effect, allowing for the recalibration and reinvention of concrete practices and phenomena. While a philosophical or art-theoretical notion of a “concluding history” is certainly possible, it comes

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at a price, namely the curtailing of the practitioner's agency. And this is why the voice of artistic research matters today. It is not a question of how we can solve or contain the *aporia* of the contemporary, but of whether questioning the contemporary in this way actually does justice to what is happening on the ground. For maybe, contemporaneity is not a description of something but a mode in which certain temporal phenomena are proposed to be conceptualised. Are we getting these phenomena right when we speak of "the contemporary"? To be sure, we have no answer to this question; all we can do is try again in confronting practice with the notion of the contemporary—this time within the horizon of artistic research—observing the effects this has not only on possible understandings of "contemporaneity" but also on practice itself.

The book is organised in three parts: Part 1 (The Contemporary and the Untimely; Assis, Babich, Baross) considers the contemporary in relation to Nietzsche's "untimely" (*Unzeitgemäss*), including elaborations on texts and concepts not only by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Jean-Luc Nancy, but also by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Charles Péguy, Paul Virilio, and Arthur C. Danto; Part 2 (Contemporary Practices; Goebbels, Cox, Prior, and Nolan, and Capdevila) presents and discusses recent artworks and practices by composers and visual artists such as Heiner Goebbels himself, Martin Howse, Shintaro Miyazaki, Christina Kubisch, Joyce Hinterding, Antonio Vega Macotela, and the Forensic Architecture studio; Part 3 (Problematising the Contemporary; Osborne, Lund, Schwab) returns to philosophical questions, but from a perspective that situates "the contemporary" as having been "worked" by history itself into a global form.

Starting from Nietzsche's notion of the untimely, Paulo de Assis's "The Contemporary: In the Midst of Multiple Hurricanes of Time" develops reflections on time, temporality, and the contemporary, extending Nietzsche's remarks on history to other concepts, such as Barthes's *contemporary*, Foucault's *actual*, Péguy's *aternal*, and Deleuze's *haecceity*. All these notions help define a new regime of temporality, a proto-theory of time in which art-makers (not only visual artists and others, but also composers and performers) can effectively operate and generate new problematisations of (and at) any given historical time. To live in a given time is to be contemporaneous with it, which is a piece of factual evidence and does not carry any critical stance over one's own presence in that particular time. This chapter claims that the most important role of "the contemporary" is to establish a critique of one's own time, otherwise the artist's surrounding contemporaneousness will condemn him or her to historicism. Critically, if distinguished from the contemporaneous of a given historically situated present, the contemporary becomes an ahistorical mode of relating to any given presence. It gains a critical function (on the identity of the present), enabling a clinical glance (symptomatology) at our own time. The present, and our presence within that present, is surrounded and over-layered by a multiplicity of temporalities, which are at work in every single thinkable and experienceable here and now, and which are perceptible as otherness or

uncanniness. The present is not One, and it is not a stable entity. Like the inner eye of a hurricane, it is a complex arrangement of different temporalities moving at different paces (fast and slow), with different accelerations (strata and becomings), and different temperatures (hot and cold). Problematising the archive, Michel Foucault ([1972] 2002, 147) identified a “border of time that surrounds our presence,” a particular zone in which human beings problematise what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live. But this differential critical temporality can also be explored and creatively expanded in relation to the future. The fundamental step is to grasp the extent to which these borders of time are out of phase with the *zeitgeist* of their present, which they surround and latently threaten. To be at the border of time is to resist the centre, to resist servitude, habits, clichés, intolerance, common sense, and consensuality, that is, the present. Looking toward the future (and not to the archive) with the aim of constructing futures (and not at idealising them) is simply the desire to actualise different configurations of materials, connectors, and affects in a new present, which exists in the present but remains concealed to itself. Questioning our own presence and our responsibility within any given temporality, this chapter aims at opening discourses and practices to the simultaneous co-presence of different times and temporalities in the historical, social, political, and artistic worlds.

Babette Babich questions the notion of the contemporary in and through the works of Giorgio Agamben, Paul Virilio, and Arthur C. Danto, which are brought into dialogue with Nietzsche’s artist’s and spectator’s aesthetic, as well as with the art historians Terry Smith and Michael Fried. For Babich, beyond the currently contemporary, the notion of “contemporary art” cannot but be problematic in the one-upmanship of art history and art theory where failure to use categories properly not only risks the categoriser’s reputation as a historian and a theorist but leaves the categoriser embroiled in what Jean-Luc Nancy (2010, 93) identifies as a “great dispute about art.” In this sense, the contemporaneity of contemporaries reflects the fact that “contemporary art” takes “the form of a question.” According to Babich, Giorgio Agamben’s essay *What Is the Contemporary?* points to an ecstatic “irrelevance” [*inattuale*] characteristic of those contemporary to, in, and with their own time. The reference, via Roland Barthes, as Agamben emphasises, cites Nietzsche’s reflections on history and life. If Nietzsche uttered his reservations contra theatricality in art, as Fried would come to do, Nietzsche specifically indicted what he named a “spectator’s art” in his effort to write on behalf of an “artist’s art,” contra the dominant cult of the spectator that however and forever sets the spectator out of bounds, as a non-performer, non-congregant, non-participant, lacking a literal presence; as Fried ([1967] 1998, 168) concludes with a quasi-mystical recollection of the literal: “Presentness is grace.” Reflecting on Pater’s ([1893] 1998, 86) maxim “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,” Babich’s conclusion seeks to raise the question of the “artist’s art” of contemporary music to ask whether, in music, we are left yet more exposed to what Nancy, after Heidegger, calls “the question.”

Scrutinising the question of the contemporary today, Zsuzsa Baross, explores three artworks—a poem by Paul Celan, a song by a throat singer, a composition by György Kurtág—from the perspective of “the instant,” which is understood as an instance of contemporaneity actualised. Instead of entering a debate with three of the most influential voices speaking on the subject currently (Nancy, Agamben, and Badiou), Baross works toward opening a space for posing a series of questions regarding contemporaneity today, not as an aesthetic category, genre, or period in art history, but as a historical and historically determined “sensibility,” an endeavour that she considers difficult yet imperative today. Qualifying our current present as “dark times,” Baross argues that it is art that will guide the passage toward a formulation, or indeed, provide a concrete demonstration of contemporaneity as a relation to be imposed, accomplished, or actualised.

Heiner Goebbels’s essay “On Aesthetic Experience as Anachronic Experience” discusses the singular character of aesthetic experience in works of the performing arts. To get around the trap of familiarity and recognition, Goebbels seeks to avoid the vicinity of common text structures, linearity of narration, stereotypic images, and representation. He considers the work as an anachronic reality in itself; interpretations and the “contemporary” are not intentional and can only occur as a discovery by the listener or spectator—as a result of perception.

With “The Crackle of Contemporaneity” Geoff Cox, Andrew Prior, and Ryan Nolan move away from questions like “What is the contemporary?” or “What constitutes contemporary (visual) art?,” engaging instead in a discussion about how artists are embracing and interrogating contemporaneity as opposed to breaking from it—either through nostalgic art-making, or through the so-called modernising avant-gardes. Through a reading of Martin Howse and Shintaro Miyazaki’s project *Detektors* (2011), they look at artistic interrogations of the contemporary that place emphasis on reflective practices. *Detektors* represents research into the profusion of electromagnetic signals that populate our environment, explored particularly through the demodulation of these signals into the audible frequency spectrum. In part it sits within a sonic art tradition, close to the work of Christina Kubisch and Joyce Hinterding—both of whom are interested in sonifying the hidden electromagnetic soundscape—but it is framed specifically by Miyazaki and Howse in archaeological terms as a means to interrogate the material and processual conditions of contemporary information technology. This chapter’s focus on *Detektors* provides a means to think through the slowing down and deep (forensic) consideration of an extended present. *Detektors* operates onto-epistemologically in approaching contemporaneity by simultaneously representing both what is in the world (via demodulated signals), and what we know about what is in the world. And, at the same time, it is illustrative of a “hacker” ethos that combines applied technological research, aesthetics, and planetary connectivity (through the sharing of circuit diagrams and instruction manuals, along with a project website where users can upload their own “detektions”). In this sense the project highlights an important feature of the contemporary as the ongoing tempor-

alisation of history, which is to say that it cannot be fully grasped through symbolic transcription (as written history is, for example). It presents a new way of understanding contemporary (signal) conditions through the combination of human (aesthetic, affective) and non-human (the *Detektor* as techno-archaeologist) means.

In “Aporetic Temporalisations and Postconceptual Realism,” Pol Capdevila works from the hypothesis that contemporary art, as such, is not to be defined as an art of our time but as an art that questions dominant historical narratives and, through its critical potential, the very structures of those narratives. Art produces temporal experiences that, from the narrativity standpoint, are aporetic. However, by virtue of contemporary art’s performativity, these experiences motivate a reactivation of the historical sense. Capdevila argues that contemporary art, by generating aporetic temporalisations of aspects of our reality, seeks an immediate effect on the present: not only as a semantic rearticulation of the horizon of meaning but above all through an active participation, on however small a scale, in the production of the material conditions of our lives. First, this chapter contextualises artistic practices as a critical reaction to the dominant cultural tendency to impose closed narratives. Narrations are temporally articulated visions about the world and the subjects that inhabit it. Regarding narratives, Capdevila follows Agamben’s critical insight that being contemporary consists of looking at the darkness of one’s own time. That which is contemporary is anachronistic and introduces anachronism in the predetermined historical evolution in order to reactivate the historical course (Rancière). Next, the chapter addresses the question of the “resumption of history” by contemporary art (Osborne), understood here as a self-conscious reaction to the postmodern narrative model, which explains the historical social and artistic evolution as a process that has come to an end, either as a happy end of time (Danto) or as an attitude of resistance (Foster). After briefly explaining three main artistic strategies used by contemporary art—the appropriation of different pasts, the performative articulation of their elements, and, finally, the willingness to involve the public in an active reception—this essay presents two artistic projects that were shown at documenta 14: Antonio Vega Macotella’s *The Mill of Blood*, and Forensic Architecture’s *The Society of Friends of Halit*.

Peter Osborne’s “Working the Contemporary: History as a Project of Crisis, Today” considers what it might mean to “work” the concept of the contemporary, under current conditions, in the sense of Georges Canguilhem’s famous account of “working a concept.” The contemporary, it is argued, has been “worked” by history itself into a global form. Two aspects are especially stressed: its immanent relationship to the temporality of crisis, and a renewed sense of history itself as a “project of crisis” (Tafuri), a putting into crisis, or a production of the present as crisis. This essay suggests that history as a project is the negativity of the unity of global crisis.

In “Untimeliness in Contemporary Times” Jacob Lund claims that we live in a crisis of time, marked by the uncritical radicalisation of the present, the sense that only the present exists, generating an overwhelming “presentism.” At the same time, Lund identifies that we have lost the future as a political object, and his essay discusses the temporal complexity of our current situation, to which extent it even makes sense to speak of *our* situation. Agamben’s influential text “What Is the Contemporary?” (2008) includes notions such as “of their time,” “their own time,” and “the epoch,” but Lund asks, “What is *our* own time and *our* epoch? Who in the post- or decolonial situation actually takes part in the possessive determiner *our*?” This chapter argues that it has becoming increasingly difficult to identify a hegemonic time in relation to which one can be untimely; that the current contemporaneity—understood with Peter Osborne as a technical term designating the coming together of different times in the same historical present—makes it practically impossible today to be untimely and thus avant-garde in the traditional sense. Thus, for Lund it is no longer useful to employ Agamben’s notion of *untimeliness* when trying to engage with the present in order to reinstall a futural moment, nor other temporal horizons than the one in which we live. The artistic practice of Kader Attia is discussed as a possible example of how a contemporary kind of untimeliness—characterised by operating in relation to several times at once and thus differentiating the presentist present—may find ways of expression.

Appropriating Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s work on *experimental systems*, Michael Schwab’s essay establishes links to theories of contemporary art, suggesting a possible departure of artistic research from contemporary art by deploying Nietzsche’s notion of the *untimely* against Barthes’s claim that “the contemporary is the untimely.” More specifically, this chapter traces the temporality of epistemic things as they emerge from an experimental system and how Rheinberger can—through Derrida’s notion of historicity—claim that experimental systems are designed to make history. Aligning this discourse to theories of contemporary art (Peter Osborne, Boris Groys) this chapter highlights differences and overlaps in an attempt to situate both approaches within Nietzsche’s problematisation of “history,” suggesting that artistic research, rather than a philosophy of contemporary art, is able to deliver a Nietzschean solution to the problem of art in contemporary—that is, globalised—conditions. This entails both a criticism towards “contemporary art” and an opening towards “untimely” research practices.

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