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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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AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH

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Contemporaneity, Untimeliness, and Artistic Research

Michael Schwab

Journal for Artistic Research (JAR)

Arguably, “contemporary art” is today’s standard model for artistic practice. As in physics, where its “standard model” combines various—but not all—phenomena into a coherent theory, a standard model acts as a norm against which new findings are to be evaluated. Given the historical stability of such standard models, the most likely outcome will be that they absorb what initially looked like departures. However, given their restriction, on the one hand, and their reflectiveness, on the other, such “standard models” can also act as a springboard for historical change. Paradigm shifts become inevitable when standard models lose traction.

However, despite the term’s ubiquity, claiming that “contemporary art” is art’s current standard model is perhaps problematic since clear definitions of how it is to be practised are missing. For instance, in places where contemporary art is taught—such as the art schools at which I have worked—nobody ever teaches definitions of contemporary art that a student could apply. At the same time, there has been a recent wave¹ of research into contemporaneity and writing about contemporary art that has started to affect the situation, lending concepts to practitioners who want to evaluate how what they do fits those concepts, and vice versa. Despite the various philosophical positions taken in this development, it seems clear to me that on the ground “contemporary art” is seen as a shared historical phenomenon rather than some form of ongoing “ending” of (art’s) history, which may have been modernity’s utopian or postmodernism’s dystopian narrative from which we have been recovering.²

However, despite acting as such a strong point of reference, at least to me, “contemporary art” does not look like a coherent whole. In moving away from those narratives, contemporary art seems to have managed to bind together two seemingly opposing forces, the aesthetic and the epistemic, without

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- 1 Recent books on the topic include Smith, Enwezor, and Condee (2008); Smith (2009); Aranda, Wood, and Vidokle (2010); Osborne (2013a); Cox and Lund (2016).
 - 2 Postmodernism’s historical relevance to the development of notions of contemporaneity is unclear. While the literature seems to suggest postmodernism’s role is reducing—say, from Antonio Negri’s text “Contemporaneity between Modernity and Postmodernity” (2008) to Peter Osborne’s *Anywhere or Not At All* (2013a, 17)—it is also the case that postmodernism must be put into perspective when assessing contemporaneity.



installing a meaningful relationship between them that could act as a fail-safe at its borders. On the aesthetic side, contemporary art seems to flirt with the spectacle (Guy Debord), which even when aiming at critical practice risks being quickly absorbed into the marketplace; on the other, epistemic side—sometimes in relation to aesthetics defined as *inaesthetics* (Alain Badiou) or *anaesthetics* (Wolfgang Iser)—we may have political art or institutional critique, in which art risks being overdetermined and made to fit into particular political programmes. (Although with a different aim in mind, Walter Benjamin already defined these two extremes in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* when in the epilogue he says: “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art” [Benjamin 1999, 235].) The problem, though, is not the existence of such extremes; rather, it is that in the centre both paradigms seem to sit side by side without a discernable relationship of a kind that could be open to a critique comparable to the one that might be deployed in the aesthetic or the epistemic alone. The aesthetic and the epistemic almost act as independent variables within contemporary art.

Assuming that there are limits to contemporary art and that notions of “contemporaneity” express historical conditions (as suggested in Geoff Cox’s and Jacob Lund’s Danish research project *The Contemporary Condition*³ and also in the writings of Peter Osborne [2013a] and Terry Smith [2009]), space is created for “artistic research” practices *not* to simply and automatically be part of contemporary art but rather to potentially be a border phenomenon during times of historical change. As such, artistic research may be a symptom indicating cracks in the standard model and shifting relationships to contemporaneity in artistic practice if not on even larger scales. This chapter explores this possibility.

To be sure, the field of artistic research that I am referring to is itself highly diverse to the degree that in a recent thread on the PhD-design JISC mailing list, Ken Friedman (2017) sought to find “articles, reports, and documents of any kind on the topics of 1) practice based research, 2) practice led research, 3) practice as research, 4) artistic research” in order to sort out “confusing” uses of terms and to determine how they may be differentiated. Given this confusion, it is crucial that a particular approach, for instance the UK approach to practice-led research, is not generalised so it can capture parallel developments. Personally, I have been part of a group of people that prefers option 4 (“artistic research”), with the caveat that this is not meant to ontologise what counts as artistic research, but, by also adapting Friedman’s third option, seeks *articulations* of practice as research. Combining two of the four options will surely add to the confusion that Friedman experiences.

With respect to such notions of artistic research, its practices may be seen as being outside contemporary art, part of contemporary art, or in a position at a distance from such inside–outside dialectics suggesting that “artistic research” can be *completely* understood neither from an exclusively academic perspective

³ See <http://contemporaneity.au.dk>.

nor from an exclusively artistic one. In “A Brief Survey of the Current Debates on the Concepts and the Practices of Research in the Arts,” Henk Borgdorff (2013, 148) seems to also follow this logic when he distinguishes academic, *sui generis*, and critical perspectives; nevertheless, it is problematic—as expressed in his careful wording—to conflate this set of perspectives with national research agendas, which he, however, does. While Borgdorff’s “critical perspective” seems to be driven more by a critique of the ongoing capitalisation of knowledge and less by questions of contemporaneity, it is noteworthy that even here, the *sui generis* perspective is breached by a third, critical variant at a distance to what I conceived as the standard model of contemporary art.

Approaches to artistic research tend to be top-down: that is, they tend to start from concepts or institutional realities rather than from concrete articulations of research to hand. In contrast to this, I would characterise my own work as a bottom-up approach that is engaged as deeply as possible in concrete research projects in my various functions as an artistic researcher in the Transpositions⁴ research project and the ERC-funded MusicExperiment21⁵ research project, as well as the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal for Artistic Research* (JAR).⁶ Across these projects, my colleagues and I have been investigating articulations of artistic practice as research, that is, how research can be made evident in artistic practice and in the secondary formats of artistic production in particular (artist’s books, journal articles, lecture performances, etc.). Using the concept of *expositionality* or *exposing practice as research* (Schwab 2011, 2012b; Schwab and Borgdorff 2014), JAR subjects both the form and the content of research articulations to a rigorous peer-review process (Schwab 2018a). However, to understand the epistemological implications of expositionality, I have also been investigating how Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s theory of experimental systems (1997) may be methodologically deployed, how it may help characterise what is happening in artistic research, and how, conversely, such a theory would have to be critiqued from the point of view of artistic research practice (Schwab 2014b). In what follows, I will develop aspects of my work in these different contexts in order to argue for the specific role artistic research can play in the current discourse on contemporary art.

Rather than starting from contemporary art and developing an epistemological basis within it—the paths here seem to invariably cross around 1800 either through Benjamin’s focus on Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel (Benjamin 2004) or Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s focus on Johann Gottlieb Fichte (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988), or even a variant that favours Hölderlin (Blanchot [1982] 1989, 269–76)⁷—here, I propose to use Rheinberger’s approach to historical epistemology as developed in the context of the sciences, to first seek comparable patterns of contemporaneity in contemporary art and, then, to speculate about alternative perspectives. It is striking that most discourses that seek to emphasise or even supply an epistemology

⁴ See <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/94538/94539>.

⁵ See <https://musicexperiment21.eu/>.

⁶ See <http://www.jar-online.net/>.

⁷ Leslie Hill (1997) calls Blanchot an “extreme contemporary.”

for contemporary art are more likely to approach it from an idealist rather than empiricist perspective, for which in particular the experimental sciences may stand.

Regardless of the approach, though, science and art in our *idea* of “c.1800” seem both to stem from the shifting *episteme* at the time—modernity—without suggesting, however, that their different subsequent historical trajectories would be historically overcome in a “re-examination” of the Renaissance (Wilson 2002) or a “third culture” (Snow [1959] 1998), a proximity also idealised in Helga Nowotny’s foreword to *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (2011). Rather, the suggestion is that as modernity has historically unfolded and the disciplines have diversified to a degree where integration seems virtually impossible, they may still harbour a relationship to a once-shared cultural space, which today needs to be constructed either as historically in the past or outside history in a temporal space that could be referred to as “the contemporary.” Historically, such a space could be suggested in the proximity of artistic and scientific practices in, for instance, Novalis, who was both a writer and a geologist, as well as, more than one hundred years later, in Kafka, where geology—through photography—and writing seem to have productively engaged each other.⁸

Those different disciplines, or cultures, are not so much shared than mutually informative of a space where strata—or words, or disciplines—are formed. It seems to me that in the same manner, in “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” Jean-François Lyotard ([1983] 2001, 79) refuses to give the now outdated notion of postmodernism a historical definition, when he says that “Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.” In other words, modernity and contemporaneity are structurally and not historically distinct giving validity to an approach that transposes a structure from one discipline—or its history—into another. More specifically, in this text, I am testing how a structure conceptualised in the history of science to describe temporal phenomena in early-twentieth-century laboratories may help shed light on something in art that is seemingly unrelated.

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When engaging with Rheinberger’s philosophy, the concept of *epistemic things* seems arguably to be the most productive to artistic researchers (Borgdorff 2012; Schwab 2013, 2014a). An epistemic thing appears as an as (yet) unknown

8 Franz Kafka was engaged in accident prevention in quarrying through his work at the Arbeiter-Unfallversicherungs-Anstalt für das Königreich Böhmen in Prague. “Kafka’s extensive use of photography as a source of information on accident prevention is remarkable. He ingeniously exploits the fact that in the case of quarrying, photography is not restricted to producing the surface (the horizontal dimensions of a terrain) but can reproduce the depth as well (the vertical layers of the soil). Here is a model of a Kafkaesque literary text: like the image of the quarry, the text yields its full richness only to a gaze directed both to the surface and the depth—the multitude of verbal citations and echoes evoked and concealed by this surface. Indeed Kafka himself used quarrying to denote the empirical pole of his empirical-transcendental model of aesthetic production” (Corngold, Greenberg, and Wagner 2009, 299–300; see also, Caygill 2017).



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material trace in an experimental system, which over time as it is increasingly understood is rendered into what Rheinberger calls a *technical object*, that is, a blackboxed, functional unit ready to be deployed either in future experimental systems or the marketplace.

An epistemic thing implies the future. While it is insufficiently known to be understood, it is known enough that it promises future understanding. To Rheinberger, a thing could not be called *epistemic* without such an anticipatory horizon. In effect, science or understanding in general may be seen as *consuming* epistemic anticipation, so that as it is more and more understood, the weaker a thing's epistemic potential might be said to be. Attention usually moves on as epistemic potential is lost; but Rheinberger is quite clear that epistemic potential can return should the closure (the blackbox) around the epistemic thing that makes it a technical object not retain its specific functional place in the ensemble of the experimental system—sporadic points of excess that float on an imperfectly connected, precarious network of functional units. However, below epistemic things is yet another procedural layer.

Experimental systems are material systems of differential play designed to register *unprecedented events*. Being unprecedented, those events must be of a type that exceeds what is currently known; thus, they tend to first appear as disturbance, irritation, contamination, or noise—that is, as by-products of what knowledge can already cover. Out of those traces that mark unprecedented events, epistemic things emerge as initial, tentative supplements to what is seen as the cause of those events. In line with Jacques Derrida's (1997) thinking, paradoxically, "origin" is always also after the fact. In other words, an unprecedented event becomes the origin for future knowledge not at the moment when it happens but later when a point in time becomes an origin; a structure of delay or deferral is part of the objects themselves and not a secondary effect of, for instance, a lack of knowledge on our part or communicative difficulties. Epistemic things can exist only as delay, which is the very reason why knowledge must structurally be positioned in the future: research as knowledge-to-come rests on an origin-already-passed.

The journey from trace (comparatively unknown) to technical object (comparatively known) is described by Rheinberger (1994) as *historial*, that is, history-making rather than *historical*, that is, made-in-history. The notion of *historial* here is also loaned from Derrida in order to express two different, simultaneous currents of history. The first looks forward into a future, open horizon built on past facts and secured by the chronological passing of time. The second looks backward into a rich bed of possible origins that need to be actualised should the future be possible. A historical perspective values only the first current, where events happen in history and affect only the future; a *historial* perspective, in contrast, accounts for both currents. An event looked at *historially* may be seen like a temporal mirror with time running both forward to a future and backward to its past.

These descriptions may sound very abstract, but they quickly become concrete when looking at a historian's work or even that of an artist researcher retracing his or her steps in a research project. Will I be aware of the differ-



ence between a past before today, and a past that “belongs” to today as if history, that is, historical difference, had not occurred? Rheinberger also quotes the words of Georges Canguilhem, who says that “the past of a science of today is not to be confounded with that science in its history” (as quoted in Rheinberger 2009, 182). Or, in Rheinberger’s own words, “the recent is made into the result of something that did not so happen. And the past is made into a trace of something that had not (yet) occurred” (Rheinberger 1997, 178). In “Translating Derrida,” Rheinberger also notes how Derrida saw in the late writings of Husserl (his *Origin of Geometry*, which Derrida translated into French) a move beyond phenomenology due to the effects of history that will always offset the meaning of a point in time depending on whether we encounter it up- or downstream. Maurice Merleau-Ponty made a similar point in his late, unfinished book *The Visible and the Invisible* when he says that “operations of reconstitution or of re-establishment which come second cannot by principle be the mirror image of its internal constitution and its establishment, as the route from the Etoile to the Notre-Dame is the inverse of the route from the Notre-Dame to the Etoile: the reflection recuperates everything except itself as an effort of recuperation” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 33). And later: “The whole reflective analysis is not false, but still naïve, . . . as long as, in order to constitute the world, it is necessary to have a notion of the world as preconstituted” (ibid., 34).

This challenge to phenomenology puts into doubt a whole strand of artistic research methodologies that rely heavily on experience, affect, or embodiment, as well as reflection of the kind suggested, for instance, in Donald Schön’s often-quoted book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). While it is clear that these phenomena exist and are valued, they may not be sufficiently problematised to carry more advanced epistemic claims. In fact, the need to account for deferral and historicity discussed above precludes historical approaches that take their object as constituted in history. Rather, it seems that the only suitable forms of historical epistemology are those that problematise the knowledge that can be had of the past. Historical epistemology is also not to be confused with classical epistemology, which seeks trans- or ahistorical theories of knowledge. Derrida puts it like this: “If we take for granted the philosophical nonsense of a purely empirical history and the impotence of an ahistorical rationalism, then we realize the seriousness of what is at stake” (Derrida 1989, 51). In this sense, historical epistemology represents a more advanced approach of going “back to the ‘things themselves,’” as Husserl ([1970] 2001, 1:168) famously put it, one that takes into account the temporal operations by which things come into being in the first place.

From a critical position we can thus not afford to pretend that history (and with it its origins) is simply given. Worse—and this is where my argument switches to Nietzsche—a simplistic understanding of history, best called “historicism,” is not historical in any meaningful sense at all since it misses precisely the fundamental quality of history: its plastic character. Nietzsche is quite direct with such historicists or “historical men” as he calls them: “looking to the past impels them towards the future and fires their courage to go on



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living and their hope that what they want will still happen, that happiness lies behind the hill they are advancing towards. . . . they have no idea that, despite their preoccupation with history, they in fact think and act unhistorically" (*UB* II.1, as translated in Nietzsche 1997, 65).

In the context of the argument about artistic research that I am attempting here, at least two aspects deserve attention. First, with regard to research, failures to engage with deeper, historical notions of history risk impoverishing the research to a degree at which it becomes impossible. Hence, Rheinberger (2016) argues for necessary encounters between the sciences and humanities to find an approach to knowledge objects mindful of their own inherent dynamism that neither an empiricist nor rationalist image of research can touch. Because of this, Rheinberger insists on the impossibility of technoscience, that is, the industrialisation of knowledge production. While new objects may emerge from "innovation incubators" and so on, historically speaking nothing new may have happened. As Rheinberger (1997, 32) says with reference to Helga Nowotny, "If the momentum of science gets absorbed into technology, we end up with 'extended present,'" which is of course reminiscent of Martin Heidegger's notion of "perpetual ending" ([1938–48] 1999, 113; *Verendung*⁹), that is, the ending of history in technology's "enframing" (Heidegger [1953] 2000).

A historical standstill in the name of progress in which technology seems to be codified may be the consequence of fundamental misunderstandings of how history comes about precisely through the success of the experimental apparatus, which in producing technology distracts us from fundamental atechnological necessities. Nietzsche already says as much when in his "An Attempt at Self-Criticism" from 1886 he says: "for the problem of science cannot be recognized within the territory of science" (Nietzsche 1999, 5). (I leave aside the point that for Nietzsche art is necessary for this recognition, which is not important to my argument.) Hence, when positioning artistic research, the issue might be that, for some, the notion of "research" is already too instrumental, too emptied of historical potentials in its institutional framework; or, conversely, when speaking of "artistic research," expectations may be raised about possible (seamless) integrations of art into the knowledge economy as if artistic positions could be had in the limited theatre of technology.

And, leaving questions of research aside, with regard to art one may wonder whether historical narratives still have traction and, if so, how. Thinking back to avant-garde times, one could imagine how a painting such as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) offered new formal solutions to painting—a new technical object of sorts relevant and usable for other painters. However, from the moment the historical gesture of the avant-garde was problematised (Bürger 1984), and despite arguments regarding the possibility for change in what has been termed the "neo-avantgarde" (Buchloh 1984), historical claims must at least be seen as problematic. Does the repetition of avant-garde gestures still promise the future history that they once had? And if yes, from where can the

⁹ The German word *Verendung* also denotes the (slow) solitary death of an animal.



historical relevance of art be recovered? Crudely, I would use the term *modernist* to describe what in retrospect—that is, as a continuing residue—looks like a future-directed but historicist notion of art, according to which, *very* generally speaking, formal solutions (of the kind that could be described as *technical objects*) appear as valid outcomes. Ironically, modernist art would tie *so* much better into policy-maker's ideas about artistic research—another Bauhaus, anybody?—were it not for the fact that, artistically, modernist approaches have very little current relevance.

In terms of art history (and in the field of my own practice) that paradigm seems at the latest to have been done away with around 1970, when conceptual art and Art and Technology came close in exhibitions such as *Software* (Jewish Museum, New York, 16 September–8 November 1970, curated by Jack Burnham) and *Information* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2 July–20 September 1970, curated by Kynaston McShine). These exhibitions suggested that art could be programmable, not only in the sense that concepts and rules could replace the actual making of the work as suggested in conceptual art, but also, more profoundly, where the aesthetic experience became technology's target. Such “generative aesthetics” was theorised by, for instance, Abraham Moles (1966) and Max Bense (1971) and put into action by the pioneers of early computer art. Nevertheless, it looks as if the modernist residue that gave technology such a prominent platform was not suitable to describe the art that was already emerging, and which—in retrospect—the exhibition *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970* (Tate Modern, London, 1 June–18 September 2005, curated by Donna DeSalvo) tried to frame and which should be described as post-conceptual.

CONTEMPORANEITY IN EXPERIMENTAL SYSTEMS

Bracketing out historicist positions seems to be the easy part, although in terms of funding for artistic research and the general tendency toward “outputs” and “impact” we may have a long fight on our hands. However, as indicated at the start of this chapter, while concerns about sufficiently complex notions of research and art suggest a possible affinity between artistic research and contemporary art, I would like to use the remainder of this chapter to complicate things. However, let's first look at the space they share.

As suggested by the above critique of a modernist approach, emphasis has to be moved from objects with a more or less stable historical identity—like “masterworks” that represent the achievements of the research—to more precarious, ambivalent, or provisional things. In line with this thinking, Borgdorff understands artworks as epistemic things rather than technical objects, as could also have been claimed. As Borgdorff (2012, 193) says, “within artistic practices, artworks are the hybrid objects, situations, or events—the epistemic things—that constitute the driving force in artistic research.” He attests a lack of completeness that indicates (via Adorno) both their status as art and their potential to continue to unfold into knowledge. However, there is also a modernist residue in Borgdorff's work concept, which, through registers of non-identity still rescues on a “higher” level the identity of the work of art.



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Paulo de Assis's assemblage theory goes a step further here (Assis 2018). To him, works are virtual entities, which can only be reconstructed from iterative, selective, and always different actualisations. Hence, because of the necessary inconsistencies between these material assemblages, a work can only be understood as a multiplicity rather than an identity, that is, there is no single and simple original point of reference. In my own practice I offered the notion of "proto-object"¹⁰ to replace the notion of "work," suggesting that since some assemblages made in a research setting may be registered as a work while others will not, aesthetic judgements concerning "art" may need to be suspended in order to appropriately engage with emergent and as-yet unidentified things. Esa Kirkopelto (2018) goes as far as to suggest that in artistic research the very notion of "art" may need to be jeopardised. Regardless of how one may finally decide on the ontology of contemporary works of art, when linking it to Rheinberger's philosophy, these diverse positions agree in one point: value lies with what is unknown, underdetermined, and open, as associated with epistemic things, and not with what is known, identified, and closed, which is the functional position of technical objects.

So what about an epistemic thing's temporal structure? To answer the question, it is important to remember that an epistemic thing is not a material object but an event emergent from the differential play of the experimental system and its resultant traces or *graphemes*, as Rheinberger prefers to call them. In effect, the event isn't first of all an abrupt rupture in the fabric of knowledge, although it may be retrospectively narrated as such (Rheinberger 2013, 203). Rather, traces have to resonate (Rheinberger 1997, 65) and come together within the different spaces of representation employed in the system as well as in its temporal structure. The event has to be multiple, that is, recurrent, since this is how difference is registered in time. Still, without such a coming together, there is no event and no epistemic thing. At the same time, and according to the Derridean framework that Rheinberger uses, this confluence is only accessible as delay, that is, regarding a future point at which we will know that something has happened. Hence, the coming together isn't actually happening, or if it is, it is diverted into a projected future. This means that this coming together is not synchronicity but a more or less focusable temporal distribution. This also means that "noise" is an epistemic phenomenon rather than an epistemic adversary, which corrupts channels of communication (Serres 1982; Malaspina 2018).

As a consequence, "time" does not refer to a universal chronology within which things are situated, but rather time is a quality of the things themselves. (In the last consequence, chronology itself is historicist and it is no surprise that "the clock" is linked to modernity both in terms of spatial order [the clock as a prerequisite for establishing longitude and, hence, navigation and global trade] and social order [the clock in the workplace and industrialisation] [Rossum 1996].) With reference to Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, Rheinberger (1997, 179) advocates "localized and situated time" where temporality is a quality of an entity that at first enables relations, that is, resonances.

¹⁰ <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/186304/186305>. See also Schwab (2012a).



In very broad terms, such a theory sees time not as a measure (a quantity) but as a quality. Without this move, the coming together of the traces of the experimental system would not really happen, since they would have come together already in the time in which they were measured. In other words, epistemic things can only be understood in their temporal structure if time is qualified rather than quantified. Usually, since time is represented in *chronos*, we will think of such time structures as singular events with associated time points, but this is just a way of representing them; when attention moves to aspects lost in chronology, that is, representation—or at least lost in the limited, universalising representational orders we usually refer to—phenomena that seemed secured need reassessment. If we accept, as Foucault or, differently, Rancière do, that our world has moved beyond “representational regimes,” it is on this level that representation needs to be challenged and new epistemic regimes described.

When it comes to the time structure of epistemic things, Rheinberger’s theory does not mention contemporaneity. If at all, he mentions the concept only in very general terms, such as “an epistemology of contemporary experimentation” (Rheinberger 1997, 1); but it should be clear from my analysis just now that in my eyes this also means “contemporaneity *in* experimentation.” When stepping across into the field of art, we may, however, feel handicapped by Rheinberger’s fairly frequent references to George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time* (1962), which proposes historical series of *forms* rather than something much less representationally stable. With it comes a certain emphasis on the artwork, or more generally, artefact, which as stated earlier has at least modernist connotations.

One may read Rheinberger’s interpretation as a contemporary critique on Kubler where “form” is seen much more as a “grapheme” rather than an “aesthetic form” in line with, for instance, Robert Smithson’s interest in Kubler. As Stefanie Stallschuss suggests, Kubler’s “temporal definition of form opens his theory to contemporary art production” (Stallschus 2013, 24), which to some degree requires us to look away from his examples to the way in which he approaches time. However, when citing Kubler, Rheinberger does not refer to the importance of Kubler’s work to many artists of the 1960s and the way this encounter prepared “c.1970” (Lee 2001), creating the link to contemporary art that I am suggesting here.

Ultimately, Rheinberger as well as Kubler—both as historians, either of science or of art—approach the objects of their investigations from a moment *after the fact*, that is, starting from and adhering to a historical perspective potentially limiting insights into processes of making. As Kubler says, “we cannot clearly descry the contours of the great currents of our own time: we are too much inside the streams of contemporary happening to chart their flow and volume. We are confronted with inner and outer historical surfaces. Of these only the outer surfaces of the completed past are accessible to historical knowledge” (Kubler 1962, 30). At the same time, approaching historical objects also as a historical epistemologist (with the knowledge and experience of a trained biologist), the “inner surfaces” that Kubler refers to are perhaps not



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as remote to Rheinberger, preparing, as it were, a step *through* those surfaces into “graphematic spaces” (Rheinberger 1997, 1998) that need not necessarily be historically represented (Schwab 2013).

THE CONTEMPORARY IN ART

Not through art historical references, but through Rheinberger’s focus on temporality, can a link to the recently emerging debates about contemporaneity in art be made. I will take Peter Osborne’s book *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013a) as my guiding text. Before looking at contemporary art’s particular temporality, though, I should stress that for Osborne, through a genealogical link to early German Romanticism of the kind that Walter Benjamin (2004) identified, contemporary art is seen foremost as an epistemic rather than aesthetic enterprise (Osborne 2013a, 44). While we may not necessarily define this enterprise as “research” we can say that with the Romantic project surely a demand against art has risen that sees art not so much only on the side of perception or imagination and not even located in a (Kantian) harmony between imagination and understanding, but in the understanding proper as a *special* way to think the world in the making of art (by romanticising it, as Novalis says). This approach bore the risk of drifting from somewhat innocent but politically potent art- and world-making to religion and mysticism of a kind against which Nietzsche would later revolt.

Second, Osborne sees contemporary art as a historical phenomenon against possible readings, which claim contemporaneity as an effect of the ending of history. As suggested above, from a critical point of view that aims to understand how the artistic may negotiate the aesthetic and the epistemic if both appear as independent variables, it is difficult to find contemporaneity’s historical dimension. It seems particularly difficult from a strictly philosophical position that may not be able to easily unpack in propositional language historical notions of history of the kind Derrida suggests. Hence, Osborne’s text is admittedly experimental. He uses, as he says, an “experimental method of montage as the means of production of historical intelligibility” (Osborne 2013a, 55), which I find very interesting: the historicity of contemporary art, in suspending history, cannot be engaged with using hermeneutic, that is, *passive* modes of understanding. Interestingly, Rheinberger also sees his major book as a writing experiment (Rheinberger 1997, 2).

Osborne accepts, as an effect of globalisation, a differentiated world, also on the level of temporality. As he says: “The root idea of the contemporary as a living, existing, or occurring together ‘in’ time, then, requires further specification as a *differential* historical temporality of the present: a coming together of different but equally ‘present’ times, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times” (Osborne 2013a, 22). Thus, in principle, we are dealing with a fairly similar differential spatio-temporal structure of contemporaneity across Osborne’s and Rheinberger’s writings. However, there are a number of differences between the two, which help me describe a possible pressure point of artistic research in contemporary art.



In a different way to Rheinberger, who highlights the materiality of traces, epistemic things, and technical objects, as well as the coming together of times in them, Osborne relates to the *fictional* character of the contemporary. He argues, given the emphasis on delay and the resulting speculative or projective attitude, that there is no will for *actual* historical action. In other words, Osborne does not understand contemporaneity historically as suggested in relation to Rheinberger's theory, but rather, he sees a "disavowal" at play (Osborne 2013a, 23). Hence, the coming together is historically negative and not historically productive. I will at this point not discuss other approaches to contemporary art and only mention with Boris Groys another theorist who sees in contemporary art a similarly negative expression, describing it in terms of "nostalgia" (Groys 2016, 21). These are indications that notions of contemporary art are constructed around passive rather than active responses to the problem of history. (In Nietzsche, as is well known, a distinction between active and passive nihilism is crucial for a move beyond nihilism.)

A critique of the notion of "fiction" in this context does not mean that the importance of the literary needs to be neglected. Rheinberger, too, stresses the need for narratives ("stories") and so does the wider field of science and technology studies, where, for instance, Steven Shapin (1984) emphasises the importance of what he calls "literary technology." However, Rheinberger does not question to the same degree notions of reality, which via unexpected incursions feature in experimental systems. For example, while he challenges the notion of "data" as a (passive) input into a scientific system, the term *facta*, with which Rheinberger (2004, 6) replaces it—from the Latin *factum* as "something done or made"—does not have the status of something fictional despite having been made; if anything, the opposite is true. In a similar vein, a "matter of fact," a notion that Shapin highlights in Robert Boyle's work, is something produced by an experimental apparatus, which we paradoxically must take as real. In other words, historicity's lack of historicity does not give it less agency, only a different one.

Second, and to some degree related to the problem of "fiction" is the ontological status of *contemporaneity* and *the contemporary*. Experimental systems border each other in what Rheinberger calls a "patchwork" but they are otherwise fairly isolated, specific, and fragmented, which to Rheinberger following Bachelard enables the epistemic complexity of modern science. In what I said above, I applied the notion of *contemporaneity* only to processes inside an experimental system, that is, the very limited and concrete space of a system and *not* the patchwork of experimental systems—micro- rather than macro-structures. In fact, when I asked Rheinberger in my interview with him whether the patchwork could itself be understood as an experimental system, he was very hesitant. "I prefer to characterise this higher level as an experimental culture. Its structure feeds back into its elements, but there is no mimicry between the levels" (Rheinberger 2013, 204). While an experimental system to Rheinberger is not (and, in fact, must not) be void of contradictions, it has to be sufficiently coherent to work. Epistemic cultures that combine experimental systems in a patchwork, in contrast, can be less coherent and their objects can be less con-



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crete, resulting in a less resonant temporal structure. Scale matters here—contemporaneity may locally be achieved but remains globally elusive.

Hence, slippages can be detected from smaller to larger constellations if attention is not paid to the qualitative changes that accompany such upscaling. Thus, “fiction” need not be associated with contemporaneity as such but only when it happens on the global scale of the kind Osborne is interested in, that is, when material, temporal structures are extended into more conceptual spheres, such as, for example, when the notion of “art” is at stake. In fact, in Osborne’s text such upscaling to the totalising perspective of the global can only ever happen in the mode of “as if” and, hence, as fiction. As he says, “there is no actual shared subject-position from the standpoint of which its relational totality could be lived *as a whole*, in whatever futural, temporally fragmented or dispersed a form. Nonetheless, the idea of the contemporary functions *as if* there is” (Osborne 2013b, 80). Assuming that contemporaneity is a temporal effect within a materially concrete situation, and as such is historically real, it is perhaps not surprising that when moving to the global scale one has to treat contemporaneity *as if* it were a locale, when, in fact, it is not, due to the lack of a possible subject-position as indicated. More simply put, we cannot inhabit “the globe” despite the famous image beamed back to us from Apollo 8.

So, what is behind the drive to a global contemporary art? Interestingly, if we discount the contemporary as having this kind of reach while maintaining its historical reality, contemporary art must, as a matter of fact, be a modernist residue. The disavowal or the nostalgia mentioned above as part of it is then an effect not of contemporaneity but of a *very* late stage of modernity just before what is happening on the ground has managed to shift, for instance, notions of art. The “global” is first of all a *modern* fiction as the imaginary perimeter of capitalist expansion. As suggested with reference to *experimental cultures*, such a global perspective is not required to explain the conglomeration of disjuncted temporalities. Furthermore, the associated problem of colonisation needs to be highlighted and the fact that “the globe” remains in the possession of the coloniser. Should (some) contemporary art be taken seriously in aspiring to postcolonial practices, assuming a global stage would miss representing those practices in their specificity (either by assuming an implicit global stage or by withdrawing notions of contemporaneity and ultimately art from it).

Finally, can *contemporaneity* really be treated as a concept or is it more like an event structure that is only accessible from within its locale and by no means something that repeats itself across events connected up externally? If, as argued above, we are dealing with more or less focused temporal distributions, contemporaneity always has a specific texture—things don’t come together in a single point, but enter a spatially as well as temporally distributed play in the concrete. While this play will have some spatio-temporal perimeter, claiming that it covers the globe misses its dynamic aspects of moving in time and space across its material basis. When challenging the existence of a global contemporary art, it is not that a global experimental system/contemporaneity categorically could not exist. However, first, we have to ask whether we actually have any experience of it, or whether it is not an abstract projection from con-



crete experience; second, if we had it, would we not lose a degree of complexity that a looser ensemble of multiple systems offers? What is the actual experience of contemporary art? Do we still find this on a global scale? This kind of slip-page may actually reflect a more general problem of philosophy rather than an issue with contemporary artistic practice: it could be that philosophy finds it hard to focus on the concrete and that, as suggested by Laruelle (2010), even under conditions of difference it tends to opt for transcendental and ultimately representational solutions. What might a local philosophy look like? Or, what might philosophy as locality look like? Is there agency between history and its end?

A philosophy of contemporary art certainly overlaps with a philosophy of experimental systems, but there is also reason to question how much these philosophies actually share. When the focus is on artistic research one may perhaps point out that aspects of fictionality and the speculative nature of the concept of contemporaneity move the focus away from the epistemic grounding that experimental systems provide. In turn, however, a philosophy of experimental systems seems to be hampered by notions of knowledge that require technical objects, without which it would amount to nothing. In the following last part, I will try to position artistic research in a particular relationship to contemporaneity through a further engagement with Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*.

UNTIMELINESS AND ARTISTIC RESEARCH

In taking Roland Barthes's statement "the contemporary is the untimely" as a starting point, Giorgio Agamben emphasises the relevance of Nietzsche in this context (Barthes quoted in Agamben 2009, 40). I have dealt with one aspect already, namely chronology: "It is important to realize that the appointment that is in question in contemporariness does not simply take place in chronological time: it is something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it" (Agamben 2009, 47). Second, Agamben also re-emphasises the disjointedness of time as the prerequisite for the coming together of times in the contemporary. The metaphor Agamben uses here is cosmological: points in time are as removed from one another as stars in the sky, which due to their distance can only be seen as darkness. So Nietzsche, in his self-declared untimeliness, at the same time breaks with his own time as he is able to bring times together—in his case, probably first of all, ancient texts as part of his work as a philologist, but beyond this, perhaps also in a more ethical dimension, as a suggested mode in which to encounter what is now.

But does "the contemporary is the untimely" do justice to Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*? In order to answer this question, I want to first bracket and put aside the historicist position (which Nietzsche calls the *antiquarian species of history* [see Nietzsche 1997, 67]). Furthermore, for the two other positions (the *monumental* and the *critical species of history*), we have to be clear that the notion of the contemporary is not of Nietzsche's time and does not feature in Nietzsche's text in any meaningful way. Instead, I propose to use those two pos-



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itions in Nietzsche's conception to critique notions of the contemporary that I previously introduced with Rheinberger and Osborne, using them to "split" a broader notion of contemporaneity into the supra-historical and the untimely, or the monumental and the critical notions of history.

According to Nietzsche, all modes of history are grounded in the ahistorical (*unhistorisch*), a ground only against which history becomes possible. That is, history is a representational figure suspended over, but nevertheless connected to, an ahistorical ground. I would compare this ground to Rheinberger's graphematic space, the space in which traces occur and resonate and from which epistemic things emerge, which ultimately turn into technical objects. As argued above, if an event's temporality is what emerges in this space, the space itself cannot have a fixed time (*chronos*) within which such an event would already have its place and where the different times as traces (of the experimental system) would come together. On this level, the emergent events in their nascent states (epistemic things) are connected, since if there is no history as yet, there is also no historical difference. Agamben (2009, 50) expresses this as the contemporaneity of "historical becoming." Nietzsche refers to it as "monumental history" since to him at the time of writing (i.e., the late nineteenth century), it was still monumental works of art that were historically relevant. He claims "that the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, [and] that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks" (Nietzsche 1997, 68). For this reason, in the first section of the text, Nietzsche refers to what he calls monumental history also as "supra-historical" (*ibid.*, 66). Furthermore, he assesses this position as "wise," that is, that it *understands* contemporaneity as history's substrate. I propose, in order not to get stuck with Nietzsche's nineteenth-century idea of monuments, to side with Robert Smithson's updated version. As Smithson says: "Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future" (Smithson [1966] 1996, 11). I think this plays precisely into Osborne's contention regarding that lack of a historical perspective in contemporary art, when he classifies the temporal unity as fictional and not materially real as we have heard. The untimely understood in this way, that is, supra-historically, may indeed be seen as the contemporary.

Nietzsche, however, proposes next to the monumental and antiquarian mode of history, a third, critical mode, which adds a crucial shift to the contemporary. The contemporary in being able to bring together different times in the time of the contemporary—the mountain peaks—may be philosophically right, but it pays a price in weakening one's plastic powers (as also stated by Osborne). In effect, if the unity of times, that is, the contemporary, is believed to exist, it cannot be challenged by anything new—which would become just another mountain peak were it not for the fact that to become a mountain peak the category of the supra-historical/contemporaneity would need to be departed from. In other words, "discovering" contemporaneity as the basis for history precisely disables its making. As Nietzsche says: "A historical phenomenon, known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for



him, who has perceived it, dead” (Nietzsche 1997, 67). It is because of unity, completion and, ultimately—in Nietzsche’s words—death that what Osborne defines as contemporary art needs to be challenged. Nietzsche’s untimely, despite the confusion that the Barthes quotations create in Agamben’s text, *can only be the contemporary as reality* in the sense in which I discussed it above with Rheinberger—and which includes literary elements—and *not as fiction*. Barthes/Agamben may not have wanted to associate the contemporary with the supra-historical, but Osborne’s analysis makes this unavoidable.

Hence, rather than suggesting that “the contemporary is the untimely,” the drift that Nietzsche gives the untimely splits the contemporary in two, a supra-historical, transcendental contemporary as philosophical speculation and an untimely contemporary experienced in concrete spatio-temporal acts of creation. Both can fold into each other insofar as the one does not exclude the other, but if looked at principally it is only the latter that promises to connect the aesthetic with the epistemic dimensions of artistic practice. To be sure, “the aesthetic” then is to be understood in the sense neither of *aisthesis* nor of philosophy of art, but “as part of the sense of world created through art” (Schwab 2018b, 194); while “the epistemic” does not offer a system of knowledge, but a project interested in expanding what can be understood—and how it can be understood.

Artistic research situated at this very point offers an untimely extension and critique of the contemporary. It sits within but on the fringes of contemporary art, at times accepted and at times rejected by the dominant narratives that act as its gatekeepers. The crucial assessment to be made when being confronted with a particular case is not whether it is or isn’t contemporary art, but whether a materially situated time structure of contemporaneity is presented and what this actually means to both our future and past. In this way, artistic research does not extend history in some form of aspired replacement of contemporary art (innovation); instead, artistic research makes different histories and futures possible (invention). How they may historically be acted upon is a different matter.

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