

When Does 'Contemporary' End?

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Abstract

“When Does ‘Contemporary’ End?” deals with the problems surrounding the specious nature of the term “contemporary”. Starting with induction in a dream, where current institutional critique is presented through various metaphorical and allegorical devices, the paper situates the discussion of “the contemporary” in an institutional setting which is transcended later on to acquire a more encompassing range suitable for the magnitude of the topic. The argument is focused on current discourse dealing with understating our historical time and the structural forces that shape it, or in other words, how we define contemporaneity. Concerned with the inability to agree on a coherent definition that sets a course for contemporaneity, the paper is focused on proposing an alternative approach that posits the possibility of gradually disposing of the term “contemporary” in order to make space for fresh insight that is devoid from the connotations that the old term carries.

Keywords: contemporary, contemporaneity, institution, temporality, art

*“MoMA Contemporary Galleries 1980-NOW
Over two hundred new works in all mediums
ALWAYS NEW ALWAYS ON VIEW.”¹*

¹ Terry E. Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 78. An advertisement in the New York Times (November 18, 2011, C27)

Introduction to a Dream

I had a very vivid dream last night. I was at The Art Museum. I am sure you know The Art Museum, it is one of those all-encompassing behemoths where you can spend a whole day, they have them everywhere. Perhaps it is exactly the ubiquity that is preventing me from remembering the name. As I walked up the stairs and through the doric columns, its gravity dawned upon me. I felt conflicted. How is it possible for an institution that had its conception a little more than two centuries ago, an “accidentally assembled mass”² until the end of the 19th century, to possess such gravitas? When did it become so entangled with the universal flow of history that it can claim a righteous spot as a propagator (and narrator) of its laws and nature? When did it acquire a status of unquestionable authority, a guardian of what’s true and sacred?

The massive automatic gates opened up and I was subsumed by the museum’s gaping maw. I started walking down the overlong corridor as images of international exhibitions, world fairs, and national pavilions flashed before me. With every step I took new images of exhibition halls, colonial loot, and miniature models of industrial technologies sprung on the walls. The formational moments of cultural institutions, and their relationship to nation-states, that took place in the dawn of modernity, were unravelling before me.³ A structural device, a spectacle, a socio-historical event where the cultural meaning of art and social significations are constructed, propagated, solidified, and eventually deconstructed.⁴ And just like those who have come before me, be it to fairs, pavilions, or halls, it was now my turn to go inside, and tomorrow it will be yours. Or did you come here yesterday? Of course you did, each of us has to go. I think it was Patricia Flaguières who said, “The key is the perpetuation of this foundation beyond the natural replacement of generations: the institution survives its founder and those who serve it.”⁵

In the middle of the main hall there was a platform standing on a million needles, on top of it was the ticket office. I walked up the platform and approached the desk, “One ticket please.”, I said, as I pulled out my wallet. “Oh, sir, you don’t have to pay for a ticket here”, the clerk rushed. “So it is free to enter?”, I asked, “Yes, of course”, he answered as he handed me my ticket and a needle, “you just have to put a needle underneath the platform and you can go inside”. I took them both and descended the platform. I knelt down and yet another needle went in to solidify its structure. I stood up and brushed off the dust on my knee as I glanced over at a metal plate at the corner of the platform. It read, “We

2 Julia Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display: Museum Presentation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century: Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2012), 34

3 Alhena Kotsof, “The Arched Bow of the Institution of Display,” in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, ed. Paul O’Neil et al. (Feldmeilen, Switzerland: LUMA Foundation, 2017), pp. 221-226, 222. Alhena Katsof defines the world fairs and their auxiliary interpretations that took place in the dawn of modernity as the moments that exhibitions established themselves as a “mode of knowledge distribution” and indoctrinated their observers in the unambiguous narrative and “representational understanding of the world” which was responsible for situating the modern individual in the new political, economical, and subjective fields, introducing them to concepts such as national identity and heritage.

4 Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Hans Ulrich Obrist: A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2011), 6-7

5 Patricia Flaguières, “Institution, Invention, Possibility,” in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, ed. Paul O’Neil et al. (Feldmeilen, Switzerland: LUMA Foundation, 2017), pp. 27-35, 31.

appreciate your contribution to the support system of the social imaginary.⁶ Sincerely, The Art Museum."

At the end of the hall, a cotton candy scale model of the museum was displayed. There was no glass encasement, so I looked around and quickly poked a hole in one of the walls with my index finger. "Don't be shy", said the clerk, "give it a taste." I was startled and ashamed to be caught in the act, "Are you sure? I am going to ruin it. What if everybody just takes a piece?", "It is meant for consumption. That is how 'The Art Museum' transcends its physical container.", he answered. I was hesitant at first because I was not sure what he meant. I timidly reached the closest corner and pinched off a piece of the roof. As the feathery texture dissolved on my tongue it became evident to me, the epistemological boundaries of the museum spread to our languages, histories, beliefs, social norms, values, relations and ultimately, to how we make sense of the world.⁷ It is what Adorno and Horkheimer call the "cultural industry" that acts as agents of the production of cultural value⁸. Did you grab a piece as well? Good, in that case, if you just take a step back you will notice the institutional patterns in the industry's model of acquisition, presentation, narration and dissemination. Although each time we visit The Art Museum, the title of the exhibition may be different and the layout adjusted, the set of prescribed values remains the same. The act of this tiresome reification of the guidelines on how to interpret our surroundings solidifies the status of our social imaginaries and simultaneously produces and reproduces chosen versions of reality.⁹ However, constructing reality is not merely enough, it has to be maintained and that requires gaining control over how its future iterations are projected on an individual scale. Castoriadis claims that the imaginary is not solely what institutes society, but it spreads to the imagination of the individual, his dreams and dreamworlds, and ultimately a sense of self that are partially a result of our socio-historical situation and social imaginary significations.¹⁰ After this you might think that it is not governments, politicians, financial markets, etc. that have constructed and governed our society, but museums. However, it is important to make a notable distinction between means and ends. The Art Museum, and by extension exhibitions, fall under the umbrella of a wider infrastructural network, a grouping of individual institutions, each with a distinct function differentiating from the one of the encompassing network itself.¹¹ Therefore, we have to perceive exhibitions as "contemporary forms of rhetoric, complex expressions of persuasion."¹² That being said, do not rush to take a condemnatory stance, but a rather critical one. The Art Museum is neither a fascist propagator nor an innocent mediative system.

I made my way to the first exhibition space to find a group of people waiting in front of the entrance. There is a timer on top of the empty door frame, six minutes and twenty-

6 Simon Sheikh, "The Magmas: On Institutions and Institutions," in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, ed. Paul O'Neil et al. (Feldmeilen, Switzerland: LUMA Foundation, 2017), pp. 125-131, 126. Simon Sheikh dwells on Castoriadis' argument that "It is the instituting social imaginary that creates institution in general (the institution as form) as well as the particular institutions of each society [...]" In other words, our belief in the instituted social imaginaries, a purely imaginative social act, translates into very real effects. Going even further, what is instituted is not only the societal building blocks and its subjects, but subjectivity itself, penetrating our imagination, dreams, and dreamworlds.

7 Sheikh, "The Magmas", 127

8 Paul O'Neil, "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse," in *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, ed. Michele Sedgwick and Judith Rugg. (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 15-16

9 Sheikh, "The Magmas", 127

10 Sheikh, 127

11 Dave Beech, "Structure, Subject, Art," in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, ed. Paul O'Neil et al. (Feldmeilen, Switzerland: LUMA Foundation, 2017), pp. 133-142, 140.

12 O'Neil, "The Curatorial", 15-16

three seconds left. When did The Art Museum become such a popular destination? I joined the queue and a staff member gave me a brochure. The first page was a floor plan of the museum. It was subdivided into three areas, first "The (Classical) Art Museum", then "The (Modern) Art Museum" which had a sub-category, "The (Post-Modern) Art Museum" and finally was "The (Contemporary) Art Museum". The second page was a "Visitor's Rule Book". It went on like this:

Dear Visitor,
Welcome to The Art Museum, we are glad that you have chosen to spend your precious time with us today. Due to the vast amount of visitors we have to accommodate, we have devised a system to keep the people in the galleries at a limited capacity. To make your experience better and more fruitful we have outlined a set of rules that we kindly ask you to follow:

1. A new group of visitors enters the gallery every 10 minutes, please be patient and wait for your turn in the queue.
2. Once you have entered the exhibition space you are allotted a maximum of 5 minutes in each gallery. Once the buzzer goes off you need to proceed to the next gallery. (To purchase a premium package, with an allowance of up to 8 minutes, you can visit our website www.theartmuseum/premium.com or scan the QR code at the back of the brochure.)
3. You are not obligated to spend the whole 5 minutes in the gallery and can proceed to the next one at any time. However, the unused minutes will not be transferred to the next gallery.
4. Please keep a respectful distance from the artwork and stay behind the red line. Please do not lean over the red line. If you wish to take a closer look at the artwork use the zoom function on the camera of your smartphone.
5. The museum is a place for quiet and peaceful contemplation, please wait until the end of your visit to vocalise your impressions and opinions.
6. Do not forget to stop by the Museum Shop at the end of your visit.

The buzzer went off and I was taken up by the stream of visitors into the "Classical" gallery. All four walls were overflowing with content as paintings overlapped each other, even one of the exquisitely crafted, gold-coated frames was protruding into the opening leading to the next gallery. The other visitors had already formed a belt of bodies at the periphery of the room. They were moving in unison, like a human centrifuge. The continuous march of footsteps combined with the creaking of the parquet floor was echoing throughout the whole room. I did not know where to begin, I was not sure if the artworks were coupled thematically or chronologically. Although I recognised a few motives, my eyes kept jumping from one work to another, lumping them together in my mind. Have you experienced this before? David Lowenthal calls it "heritage", similarly to popular memory, it combines the lack of historical references and "commingling epochs without regard to continuity or context."¹³ The buzzer... time to move on.

¹³ Julia Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display: Museum Presentation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century: Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2012), 217. According to Lowenthal the coupling of recognisable pseudo-references, stories or specific moods is what makes exhibitions accessible to the general audience, where "heritage" divides artworks into general categories such as, 'the good old days', 'the bad old days', or the 'once upon a time'. When combined with the minimal information provided by the captions, "the evocation of some vague past with theatrical means" engages the public emotionally with the exhibits.

As I was making my way to the “Modern” gallery, I ducked to avoid hitting the protruding frame. The space was similar in shape and size, the walls were crisp white, completely free from decorations, stripped to the bare minimum - a parquet floor and a single chair in the furthestmost right corner for the staff member to sit down - however, this time there was only one artwork in the whole room. It was displayed along the opposite wall and had a glass case over it for protection. We formed a line and everybody waited patiently for the chance to take a photo of it. We all had our turn and then we formed a semi-circle around the masterpiece. “Anaemic, isn’t it?”¹⁴, remarked the lady next to me. I quickly looked around to make sure she is not talking to somebody else and I whispered back, “I thought we were not supposed to talk, it ruins the unmediated and direct experience of the artworks.”¹⁵ “Unmediated ...? This is a designated contact zone that prioritises its understanding of spectatorship, it is quite audacious to claim to be neutral.”¹⁶ Look around, it is sterile, if a dust particle falls from the ceiling, the clerk will catch it in the air.” “Shhht!”, shushed the lady behind us. “The “transparency” implies a message: “Everything you see here is important art.”¹⁷, she whispered and we moved on to the “Postmodern” gallery.

It was the same white room again, with more artworks this time. Some of them were on the walls, some of them were on the floor, some of them were floating, and some of them were on the ceiling, evenly spread out, with adequate space in between. The vivid colours of the artworks popped on the white background. Once again I found myself taken up by the stream of people. We paced between the artworks, our gaze moving up, down, left, and right. Each artwork is a stop with a repetitive routine. You stop and look for a second on two, then you search for the label, you look back, then back at the label, maybe it makes sense now, maybe it does not. If it did make sense take a picture of it, and do not forget to take a picture of the label as well. The buzzer.

The “Contemporary” gallery was much larger than the previous rooms. Its white walls stretched more than ten meters high and ended right before meeting the industrial trusses supporting the roof, revealing a brick wall behind. The exhibits were diverse and dispersed all around. Tens of staff members were walking around bringing new exhibits in and replacing the ones that were already there. Before I could focus on one of them, a crew of dusty blue overalls would surround the piece, lift it and take it out of the room. Soon enough I gave up on my efforts to ponder the works and marvelled at the processes going around me instead. The staff members carried out their duties seamlessly, uninterrupted by their audience. I stopped one of them, “Excuse me, sir, why are you replacing the exhibits with new ones all the time?”, “That’s my job, sir.”, he replied, “We are here to present you with the continuously updated artistic output of our time.”¹⁸ He rushed off to demount a monitor and I glanced up to check the remaining time. Forty seconds left. I stood motionless as the workers were passing by, waiting for the buzzer to go off. Twelve, seven, four, one ... no buzzer. The clock reset itself to five minutes and we remained in the “Contemporary” gallery. The sequence repeated itself two more times before I realised we were not going anywhere. I walked towards the furthest corner of the room, and as my back was sliding down the wall and my palms reached for the chipped concrete floor, I heard a child’s voice ask, “Mom, when will contemporary end?”

14 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2005),4

15 Noordegraaf, “Strategies”,149

16 Katsof, “The Arched”,223

17 Noordegraaf, “Strategies”,197

18 Terry E. Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012),72

Is 'Contemporary' a syndrome or a condition?

Even after waking up, one might find themselves as a passive observer of the increasingly accelerating, automated processes that constitute what we tend to call “contemporaneity”. The term “contemporary” is casually tossed around in conversations, an obligatory adjective in curatorial discourse and sesquipedalian art discussions, an all-encompassing adjective regarding anything that falls in the wide-encompassing spectrum of “the now”. You will read about it, you will see it on labels, and eventually use it. Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund begin their series “The Contemporary Condition” with the question “What do we mean when we say something is contemporary?”¹⁹, a main focus also for Terry Smith in his book “Thinking Contemporary Curating”, among others. Although there is no common agreement among the experts on the topic, there is a consensus on the dubious nature of the term “contemporary”. Its “seemingly self-evident description”²⁰, which has led to its widespread application, is surprisingly specious. It is notoriously difficult to put a finger on the essential qualities of “the contemporary”, its building blocks and its defining features. The general understanding is that when labelled “contemporary”, the subject is an expression of the present. However, this hardly denotes anything significantly symptomatological, apart from coincidental chronological coexistence. Smith argues that the term has operated largely in reverse, “that has been put forward, in other words, as a meaningful denomination and subject of inquiry in advance of any actual, deductive relationship to the surrounding world.”²¹ In that sense, we could compare it to a prop facade on a movie set. Only useful as a front, its perception relies on the careful positioning of the camera that does not reveal its supporting structure and the lack of substance behind it, which in turn supports the illusion of its actual presence.

Even if we do accept the defining feature of contemporaneity as being representative of the current manifestation of the present, Claire Bishop raises a valid concern in her book “Radical Museology” regarding the problematic periodisation of “the contemporary”. Paradoxically, its unifying feature, the conception of a common and universal present, is impossible to date. Hence, she describes the definition of “the contemporary” as a “moving target par excellence”.²² Bishop points out the relocation of the starting date of contemporaneity from the years after 1945, which is now regarded as “post-war”, to the sixties and seventies, later defined as “high-modernist”, to the eighties and beginning of nineties, which later fell under the umbrella of “post-modernist”. Yet Bishop emphasises that all these periodisation attempts have a major drawback - their Western-centric purview. She goes on to list the examples of China, India and the various African states, which had entirely different historical turning points that signified the dawn of contemporaneity, or even Latin America, where there is no hard line separating modernism from “the contemporary”, concluding that “the attempt to periodise contemporary art is dysfunctional, unable to accommodate global diversity”.²³

Excluding the possibility of a definite starting point of the period, one may turn to identifying the qualities that differentiate current artistic production from its modernist and post-modernist predecessors, to concretise the contemporaneity in contemporary. While it is commonly accepted that the modernist movement is characterised by the radical break from traditions and post-modernism with the adoption of the notion that

19 Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016),9

20 Smith, “Thinking”,53

21 Smith, 53

22 Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology: Or, What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (Köln: Walther König, 2014),18

23 Bishop, “Radical”, 18

there is no such thing as a right way to make art, contemporary art seems to be stuck in between those two categories. Charles Esche notes in his essay “The Demodernising Possibility” that the contemporary art world is still reliant on modernity for its legitimacy, which is expressed in the recurrent attempts to reinstate modernist principles under the pretext that true modernity was never truly accomplished.²⁴ His claim is supported not only by the “endless rehashing and repetitions of the forms of modernism in the currently successful market”²⁵ which removed from their initial social and political context rely solely on “avant-garde transgressions”, but also by the immutable forms of dissemination and spectatorship. The habits of the mediative structures that propagate art have proven to be incredibly persistent and stubborn, finding a way to creep in every new iteration of curatorial practice. Regardless of whether it is a Modern Art Museum, a Contemporary Art Museum, Art Fair, or a Biennale when the fanfare of visual spectacle is removed, the user experience boils down to a “matter of visual registration of coded messages”.²⁶ It follows that the problematics surrounding the term “contemporary”, specifically in the art field, are indeed a part of a larger sequence of tiresome replacement of terminology, as a consequence of the exhaustion of a given artistic expression. Such conclusions are drawn once again in Coxx and Lund’s “The Contemporary Condition” where they argue that the past three decades of accelerated globalisation, neoliberal ascendancy, and ubiquity of informational technologies have formed global networks of influence, during which we have witnessed the replacement of term “modern art”, with “post-modern art”, and currently “contemporary art” as the “descriptor of the art of the historical present.”²⁷ Or as Bishop puts it, “Once again, “the contemporary” refers less to style or period than to an assertion of the present.”²⁸

In his “Essays on Deleuze”, Daniel W. Smith dwells on the notion of “vital concepts”, referencing Deleuze’s “The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque”. Similarly to Baroque, “the contemporary” falls in the category of vital concepts - ones that have to be created.²⁹ Smith drives a comparison between the formation of such concepts and the derivation of syndromes in medicine, where the process of “isolation” of a disease identifies the meeting point of its constituent symptoms (components), therefore coining the syndrome.³⁰ As discussed previously, such symptomatological attempts to arrive at the constituent parts of “the contemporary” have been fruitless. More importantly, if we decide to treat “the contemporary” as a vital concept, we witness a rupture in the inherent self-referentiality of the becoming of vital concepts. Whereas in the case of the Baroque, the “concept posits itself and posits its object at one and the same time”³¹, in the case of “the contemporary”, the syndrome has been named prematurely, without a clear definition of its symptoms, or demarcation of their meeting points. Furthermore, following Ian Hacking’s argument that formulation of concepts results in possible new modes of existence³², we have to question

24 Charles Esche, “The Demodernizing Possibility,” in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, ed. Paul O’Neil et al. (Feldmeilen, Switzerland: LUMA Foundation, 2017), pp. 211-219, 216.

25 Esche, “The Demodernizing”, 216

26 Kenneth Frampton and John Cava, “Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture,” in *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 1-27.

27 Coxx and Lund, “The Contemporary”, 10-11

28 Bishop, “Radical”, 12

29 Daniel W. Smith, “Analytics: On the Becoming of Concepts,” in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 122-145, 128

30 Smith, “Analytics”, 128

31 Smith, “Analytics”, 129

32 Smith, 129

what happens in the case of contemporaneity, what are the consequences of futile conceptualisation and does it result in futile modes of existence? An alternative would be to come to terms with the inconclusive attempts to make a syndrome out of contemporaneity and question its position as a critical category. We can break from the stagist, linear representation of history that is inherent to Enlightenment discourse.³³ This ideological shift was prompted in 1979 by Jean-François Lyotard in his “La Condition Postmoderne”. His choice to opt for the term “condition” instead of “society”, “culture”, “era”, or “movement” is significant because “by contrast, [it] signifies a specific, contingent social system.”³⁴ In other words, a syndrome is implicit, while a condition is subject to formative, external forces. This takes us back to the importance of institutional framing in such structuralist views. In his essay “Structure, Subject, Art” Dave Beech elaborates on Luis Althusser’s argument that human individuals “were not the constitutive subjects of history, but constituted subjects of history.”³⁵ He goes on to propose that in this schema, where subjectivities are a product of its regulating structures, post-modernism is defined by “the framing of affect” within the aforementioned institutional bodies, therefore becoming the first historical episode not only to be perceived as a condition but conceived as one.³⁶ As its natural successor, “the contemporary” bears the same principle of conception, however, the question of how to deal with the fraudulent replacement of terms that leads to an illusory sense of progress persists.

When does ‘Contemporary’ end?

It would be unfair to dismiss the significant philosophical leaps in the past few years when it comes to narrowing down a definition of contemporaneity. Although a feeling of atemporality prevails, the work of Coxx and Lund, and Benjamin Bratton, among others, have set milestones in understanding our surroundings and the constitutive structures that shape us. As Claire Bishop has observed, there are two prevalent discourses; the first one equates contemporaneity with stasis and the immutable post-historic deadlock that was characteristic of the post-modern condition; the second, more generative one, implies a break with linear historic discourse and defines the contemporary experience as an interconnected multitude of temporalities.³⁷ If we go back to the end of the introductory dream we find ourselves “stuck in the present as it reproduces itself, without leading to any future.”³⁸ While it is demoralising and cynical to invest ourselves in such views, the issues that they raise are pressing and deserve to be accounted for. Although the image of existing in a temporal void, yet completely aware of the physical passage of time seems like a tough sentence, it illuminates the institutional patterns that are responsible for the constant reification of our constraining social imaginaries. As part of her essay Marina Gržinić “How Institutions Think? Institutions Do Not Think, They Simply Act!”, she puts forward the term “performative repetitive mechanism” when talking about the main aspects that describe contemporary art institutions.³⁹ She defines it as a “mechanism that produces and

33 Beech, “Strucutre”, 136

34 Beech, 136

35 Beech, 136

36 Beech, 136

37 Bishop, “Radical”, 19

38 Bishop, “Radical”, 18

39 Marina Gržinić, “How Institutions Think? Institutions Do Not Think, They Simply Act!”, in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, ed. Paul O’Neil et al. (Feldmeilen, Switzerland: LUMA Foundation, 2017), pp. 145-155, 151.

eschews content at the same time, leaving us with an empty form.”⁴⁰ Apart from actual artistic production the repetitive nature of institutionalisation is also evident in the process of archiving. Setareh Noorani defines current archival practices as a “closed loop”, a system whose objective is to safeguard the knowledge that has been passed down by our predecessors within the institutional structure, preventing any ambiguous interpretations, and disseminating it outwards.⁴¹ Such internally oriented practice, Noorani argues, is deeply entrenched in the “Eurocentric epistemic canon”, enforcing “institutional amnesia”, “binary oppositions” and “voids of knowledge” that can only be placated with information from the already “sanitised” archives.⁴² The alternative discourse of the “intersection of multiple temporalities” is the obvious candidate that can shake off the linear historicity of modernity and the “schizophrenic collapse of past and future into an expanded present” equated with postmodernism.⁴³ Coxx and Lund, who are champions of the aforementioned discourse, recognise this and acknowledge the crisis of historical agency and the challenge of reframing how we understand our historical present.⁴⁴ Hence, their belief that identifying contemporaneity as the intersection of multiple temporalities is a possible solution to the “suspension of the futural moment and our inability to conceive of another world.”⁴⁵ While I agree with the potential of such epistemological change, I find it crucial to distance such discourse from the label of “the contemporary”. As a term, it has been the cause for controversy for decades, embroiling itself in polemics up to this day. The result, its meaning has become increasingly blurry and loaded. The extensive stamping of the contemporary label in front of countless discourses, practices, institutions and many more, without any clear intention, has solidified its generic usage, depleting its capacity to produce or carry a fruitful definition. Hence, a symbolic rupture from the term “contemporary” and the surrounding lexicon, can gain therapeutic significance. This takes us back to the question, “When does contemporary end?” The answer is rather anti-climactic. Contemporary ends whenever we define what it never was. Due to its historically negligent use, the term cannot produce any new meaning that is devoid of its past contaminations. Therefore, instead of ascribing a new meaning, that would always have to be consciously differentiated from the old one, the alternative would be to expose its specious nature as a way to move away from it. That being said, what is being called for here is not a clean break from all things “contemporary”, but rather a smooth transition out of the “contemporary” swamp. Not simply a process of replacing the old term with an equally premature and inadequate, new one, but a process that embraces the timelessness that we are suspended in, allocating time and resources to allow for a better understanding of temporalising tendencies to be formulated, and only after that label “our” time.

In that proposal, the multi-temporal theory plays a transitional role, it is the signifier of change. The ideas put forward in “The Contemporary Condition” are naturally complementary in this case. A better understating of the systems that we have become functions of is increasingly important as their influence grows exponentially. The day-to-day dependency on the “planetary-scale computational system” or as Benjamin Bratton names it “The Stack”⁴⁶ is becoming more and more evident. Building upon Bernard Stiegler’s argument that it is technology and media that frame our understating of

40 Gržinić, “How Institutions”, 151

41 Setareh Noorani, “Queer Life(lines) Within the Death of an Archive”, *Footprint: Delft Architecture Theory Journal* 16, 158

42 Noorani, “Queer Life”, 160

43 Bishop, “Radical”, 19

44 Coxx and Lund, “The Contemporary”, 14

45 Coxx and Lund, 14

46 Coxx and Lund, “The Contemporary”, 17

time⁴⁷, Stamatia Portanova claims that our experiences are becoming increasingly aligned with the temporal operations of the informational machines that enable, gather, and compress them.⁴⁸ Further intertwining informational technologies in our intimate sense-making, Coxx and Lund posit them as cultural and artistic agents that not only create meaning but play a constituent role in the shaping of those fields.⁴⁹ They go on to refer to Tiziana Terranova's "infrastructure of autonomisation", the notion of informational structures enabling the coming together of times and the folding of human, non-human, social, and technological layers, which in turn produce new forms of subjectivation that "limit our operative and imaginative potential."⁵⁰ Elucidating the processes of the networked informational technologies is essential if we want to gain a better understating of the spatial and temporal compressions that take place in our inundated reality. In the concluding section of "The Contemporary Condition" Coxx and Lund call for a better "techno-materialist understanding" which will be a step towards a better understanding of contemporaneity. Throughout their work they claim to have painted a picture of what predicates contemporary art - it is the concern with some or all of the aforementioned notions regarding the constitution of subjectivity and issues of temporality⁵¹. However, I would like to propose that they have listed all the issues that eluded "contemporary art". It is, in fact, a detailed account of all the subjects that should have been addressed, but remained distant, hidden, or peripheral. A sort of reverse symptomatological process has taken place, and the concept became defined not by what it is, but by what it isn't, or never was.

What comes after 'Contemporary'?

No imaginary institution of society can ever be complete, neither historically nor actually. It can never be eternal, and it can never be total, despite stronghold, or stranglehold for that matter, on our reality. Ironically, what then escapes any instituted social imaginary "is the very being of society as instituting, that is to say, ultimately, society as the source and origin of otherness or perpetual self-alteration."
- Simon Sheikh⁵²

Instead of remaining stuck in the loop of the "Contemporary" gallery of our introductory dream, I would like to propose a new dream, one with diverse institutional modes of activity, but also, more importantly, one where we can fathom new futures. That would naturally align itself with Castoriadis' view of an autonomous society, as opposed to our current heteronymous one, where its members are "aware of its imaginary institution and thus explicitly self-institute."⁵³ It is vital to distance the notion of self-instituting from anti-institutionalisation, in fact, radical viewpoints that define institutional infrastructures solely as instruments of power are obstructive and prevent any attempt for reimagining alternative forms of instituting that critically oppose the prevalent social forces.⁵⁴ Given

47 Coxx and Lund, 26

48 Stamatia Portanova, *Whose Time Is It? Asocial Robots, Syncolonialism, and Artificial Chronological Intelligence* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021), 16

49 Coxx and Lund, "The Contemporary", 16

50 Coxx and Lund, 18

51 Coxx and Lund, 13

52 Sheikh, "The Magmas", 129

53 Sheikh, 129.

54 Beech, "Structure", 142

the seemingly immutable forces that drive our social and economic discourses, it is within the cultural realm that an epistemic change can thrive. An overlooked benefit of a Neo-liberal state is the autonomy granted to artistic expression and the artist's right to speak without being silenced.⁵⁵ Furthermore, there is an increasing interest in public art, and although this trend-like attitude may pose the threats of over-aestheticisation and increasingly populist and spectacle-oriented exhibitions, if used right it can be a catalyst for re-imagining our modes of spectatorship and consumption. Then, the visitor is no longer just an akratic spectator, whose role is to quietly contemplate, but one that recognises the cultural institution as a place for ambiguous interpretation of histories and through this process deconstructs the fetishised image of works of art, that has been put on a pedestal ever since the conception of the White Cube.⁵⁶ What would follow is a politically aligned cultural institution that Esche and Bishop are calling for. That means no more relative pluralism where "all styles and believes are considered equally valid" and "everything is equalised by exchange value".⁵⁷ It means leaving behind the practices associated with the speciousness of "the contemporary". That includes the abandonment of the linear understanding of historical time, hinting of the embracing of the transformative power of heterogeneity.⁵⁸ Therefore, the importance of the label, or more likely the multitude of labels, that will be the heir of "the contemporary" is of much less importance. Driven by temporal awareness and a better techno-materialist understanding, this new dream dares to turn its back on contemporaneity, to face the future(s) that come after it.

⁵⁵ Esche, "The Demodernizing", 213

⁵⁶ Bishop, "Radical", 59

⁵⁷ Bishop, 33

⁵⁸ Yuk Hui, "What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment" *E-Flux Journal* 96, no.1 (2019), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/96/245507/what-begins-after-the-end-of-the-enlightenment/>

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