

Anachrony,
Contemporaneity,
and Historical
Imagination

Jacob Lund

An anachronistic manner of encountering actuality need not necessarily miss out on what is most present today.¹

Within the past three decades it has often been noted that contemporary art has replaced modern and postmodern art as designator of the art of our historical present, that contemporary art is emphatically the art of *today*, and thereby seems to have ceased to be a historical project, occupied more by transnational, global circulation — and by remaining in circulation — than by social change. Such circulation can be seen also as taking part in the coming together of different times, temporalities, and histories, that is, in the coming into being of con-temporaneity, which has become a defining condition of our historical present. “Contemporaneity” refers — as it says in the description on the first page of all the books in this series — to the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together in the same cultural space, and thus in the same present, of heterogeneous cultural clusters generated along different historical trajectories, across different scales, and in different localities. Our present, in other words, is formed by an intensified global or planetary interconnectedness of different times and experiences of time. If we bear in mind Giorgio Agamben’s observation that “every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time”² — which I understand as a particular experience of what is operative in the present, in the constitution of the present, a particular experience of which parts of the past that are shared — then this interconnection of different times, temporalities and histories challenges habitual ways of

1. Jacques Derrida, “The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 68 (1994): 31.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* [1978], trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 99.

experiencing time itself and history itself. It is, as philosopher Peter Osborne has remarked, about a changing temporal quality of the historical present.³

With reference to what might be called an “anachronic” exhibition by art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, I would like to discuss the notion of contemporaneity — understood as the coming together of different times in the same historical present — and how this relates to the end of a certain history of art, as theorized by art historians and theorists such as Yves Michaud, Arthur C. Danto, Hans Belting, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Didi-Huberman. At the same time I would like to also criticize a certain ahistorical notion of the contemporary as an “untimely” *person or subject* who is capable of entering into a disjunctive or anachronistic relationship with his or her own time, proposed by Agamben in an influential text published in 2008. The overall aim is to make an argument for what I call “the contemporary contemporary” as the point of departure for any anachronic — understood as adventitious — relationship with time today; and as the inescapable point of departure for any possible historical imagination.

3. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 17.

Exposition
SOULÈVEMENTS
 18/10/2016 – 15/01/2017



Hiroji Kubota, Manufacture de Ball Paume, Chicago, 1969. Photo de Hiroji Kubota / Agence Photo Paris (M. Giffard)

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Exhibition poster. "Soulèvements" at Jeu de Paume, Paris, 2016–17
 Photo by Hiroji Kubota: Black Panthers rally, Chicago, 1969

When discussing the art historical move from modern to contemporary art, philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto explains that his famous declaration of the end of art should be understood as the death of *a certain history* of art, namely, the linear and teleological one where each era builds upon and develops from the previous era: “It was not my view that there would be no more art, which ‘death’ certainly implies, but that whatever art there was to be would be made without benefit of a reassuring sort of narrative in which it was seen as the appropriate next stage in the story. What had come to an end was that narrative but not the subject of the narrative.” He then quotes art historian Hans Belting: “Contemporary art manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward.”⁴ Thus, Danto employs the notion of the contemporary to describe an art historical period when there are no longer any periods and unifying traits, or rather contemporary art is not a designation of a period but a designation of a post-historical era in which there are no more periods that constitute a grand art historical teleological narrative where each era relates to and develops the preceding one: Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, etc.

Danto claims contemporary art to be post-historical art. But this idea about art now being post-historical may not only pertain to contemporary art. A significant artwork or artistic practice—we need not confine ourselves to delimited individual objects—not only changes the way we see the work produced after but also influences how we conceive of the work that came before. Art after the end of the linear teleological history of art therefore also changes our relation to art that is imagined to belong to that history. It is not only contemporary art that is post-historical, it is also the artworks that the historical

4. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 4–5. Danto quotes Belting

from *The End of the History of Art* [1983], trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

narrative of chronological progression was based upon. Contemporary art questions the art historical narrative that has been established as the interpretive framework of the practice in which it takes part and renders this narrative obsolete or at least deficient not only with regard to itself but with regard to works of art in general and at all times. The art historical narrative is dismantled by its own subject. It therefore seems that we may have not yet learned the full lesson of Danto's art historical observation. What are its consequences for our experience of time? What are the consequences for the way we do art history? And for our historical interpretation of the world in general?

In 2016–17 Didi-Huberman curated the exhibition “Soulèvements” [Uprisings] at Jeu de Paume in Paris, and in the leaflet accompanying the exhibition he muses over what makes us rise up, and states: “It is also *forms*: *forms* through which all of this will be able to appear and become visible in the public space. Images, therefore; images to which this exhibition is devoted. Images of all times, from Goya to today, and of all kinds: paintings, drawings, sculptures, films, photographs, videos, installations, documents, etc. They interact in dialogue beyond all differences of their times.”⁵ The exhibition is a research exhibition not in the sense of showing and communicating the result of a research project but as a phase in an ongoing research project. Having traveled to Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Barcelona, Museo de la Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires, Sesc in São Paulo, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City, and Galerie de l'UQAM in Montreal, undergoing “site-specific” transformations along the way, it arranges uprisings in five sections whereby it rearticulates the very diversified image material in new constellations or narratives that in a sense disregard the temporal and spatial distance of

5. The exhibition was on show from October 18, 2016, to January 15, 2017.

See the website soulevements.jeuropaume.org.

the origin of the images in question. Across geographical places and historical situations from the French Revolution to the Arab Spring it thus explores uprisings: I. with elements (unleashed); II. with gestures (intense); III. with words (exclaimed); IV. with conflicts (flared up); and V. with desires (indestructible).⁶ What interests me is this “dialogue beyond all differences of their times” or what I see as an activation of a number of different images, articulating or giving form to uprisings at different times and places, to take part in the same present, constituted by the exhibition. The following is an endeavor to address some of the theoretical issues relating to time and history occasioned by Didi-Huberman’s exhibition rather than an analysis of the exhibition itself, which I see as a way to make art history after “art history” in the traditional sense, and as a way to practice historical imagination. It should be kept in mind that it is a certain understanding of history Danto’s prefix “post” refers to; it is still possible — and, as should hopefully be clear, urgently needed — to make history and to think historically. Before I return to some of the temporal implications of Didi-Huberman’s exhibition and his concept of anachronism I would like to touch upon a couple of other theoretical challenges to the idea of unification and progression in traditional art-historical thinking that have to do with the absence of generally shared aesthetic criteria and with formal and medial discontinuity.

Around the same time as Danto and Belting, that is, in the late 1990s, philosopher and former director of École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris Yves Michaud, in his book *La crise de l’art contemporain* [The crisis of contemporary art] also questions the validity of a certain interpretive framework of art.⁷ Thus, the crisis that Michaud

6. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Soulèvements*, exh. cat. (Paris: Gallimard / Jeu de Paume, 2016).

7. Yves Michaud, *La crise de l’art contemporain: Utopie, démocratie et comédie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).

detects in contemporary art is rather in the concept and representation of art than in contemporary art practice itself. In parallel to Danto's Hegelian declaration of the end of a particular art historical narrative he declares "the end of the utopia of art," which refers to a universal human community of taste, largely based on the Kantian concept of *sensus communis*.⁸ Today, there are no universal aesthetic criteria — if there ever were — and art in reality only gives rise to relatively small and limited communities of taste. Any group and any individual are endowed with a right to pass a legitimate judgment of taste, and this legitimization of any aesthetic judgment occasions a "multicultural" fragmentation of taste. In other words, the idea of the communicative function of art and a universal community of taste has been challenged by a democratic generalized pluralism or "multiculturalism" that does not profess to the ideal of a universal community, which was a cornerstone of modern art and of Kantian-inspired aesthetic theory. This democratization and pluralism also challenges the universalizing art-historical narrative. When the idea of a universal community of taste is dismantled, the history of the *objects* of taste is pluralized too. It is no longer one unified history of art, namely, the Western one — which in reality itself became internally pluralized in different modernisms long before "contemporary art" took over as designator of the art of our times — but multiple histories of art.

Nicholas Bourriaud formulated another important critique of traditional art historical thinking, addressing its inability to account for formal and medial discontinuity in contemporary art. In his *Relational Aesthetics* from 1998, Bourriaud

8. Yves Michaud, "The End of the Utopia of Art," in *Think Art: Theory and Practice in the Art of Today*, ed. Bartomeu Mari and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1999), 131–156. See also Jacob Lund, "Sensus Communis and the Public," in *Nyhedsavisen: Peer-Reviewed Newspaper*

about Public Interfaces (2011): 10–11; and Thierry de Duve, "The Glimpse of Hope That Religion or Politics Can No Longer Promise...": An Interview with Thierry de Duve," interview by Jacob Lund, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, nos. 36–37 (2009): 6–10.

understands art as a semantic remainder of a narrative called “art history” which is now obsolete: “A certain aspect of the programme of modernity has been fairly and squarely wound up (and not, let us hasten to emphasise in these bourgeois times, the spirit informing it). This completion has drained the criteria of aesthetic judgement we are heir to of their substance, but we go on applying them to present-day artistic practices.”⁹ Bourriaud therefore defines “art” as:

1. General term describing a set of objects presented as part of a narrative known as *art history*. This narrative draws up the critical genealogy and discusses the issues raised by these objects, by way of three sub-sets: *painting, sculpture, architecture*. 2. Nowadays, the word “art” seems to be no more than a semantic leftover of this narrative, whose more accurate definition would read as follows: Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects.¹⁰

In other words, art historical progression has now been suspended, as the coexisting contemporary art practices do not necessarily take part in the development of the same or a shared narrative. In the present context this art historical analysis is far more significant than the relational artistic micro-utopias or “arty parties” Bourriaud’s book has been thought to theoretically legitimize.

The art historical problematic outlined above and the move from modern to contemporary art is, of course, not independent of “history at large” and should be seen in relation to the modern concepts of time and history and how they have changed in the last decades of the 20th century (a conceptual

9. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* [1998], trans. Simon Pleasance et al. (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 11.

10. Bourriaud, 107.

change which of course is dependent upon the world's massive material transformations during the last century).

The dominant modern conception of time is based on continuity and progress. History—since the late 18th century unified in the collective singular, as shown by historian Reinhart Koselleck¹¹—was seen as a continuous process towards a qualitatively different future, a process that could be planned, created, and accelerated by humans. Thus, modernity is characterized by a “progress-oriented articulation of past, present and future, in which the future is constituted through the devaluing of the past and the erasure of the present.”¹² The qualitatively different future towards which the temporal logic of modernity is orientated implies a certain idea of historical linear progression. Modernity as a discourse of progress, acceleration, and teleology therefore also constitutes a practice of totalization, which excludes those who do not comply with its parameters. It attributes lateness to colonized nations and subaltern subjects, and progress is thus defined in terms of the projection of certain—that is, Western—people's presents as other people's futures.

The grand narratives and the all-encompassing history authorized by modernity claim to have unified a vast plurality—in particular in the “imagined communities” of the nation-states—but, as historian Harry Harootunian has pointed out, this history “is actually undermined by the special histories and coexisting mixed temporalities that have steadily resisted its assimilating ambition.”¹³

11. Reinhart Koselleck, “Neuzeit’: Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* [1979], trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 246: “The collective singular form of *Geschichte*, which since around 1780 can be conceived of as history in and for itself in the absence of an associated subject or object.”

12. Christine Ross, *The Past Is the Present; It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 7.

13. Harry Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 481. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) regarding the notion of “imagined communities.”

Philosopher and cultural critic Ernst Bloch remarked on this failed assimilation or synchronization as early as the 1930s where he writes of the temporality of “non-contemporaneous contemporaneities” (*die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*):¹⁴ “Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, through the fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living at the same time with the others. They rather carry an earlier element with them; this interferes.”¹⁵ In other words, there were experiences of time — in this case, in the developing national-socialist Germany of the mid-1930s — that could not be or resisted being included in the modern project and its temporality, that *interfered* with the temporality of modernity.

In our current times we seem to have lost the modern belief in progress and all societies moving towards a better future. This lack of futurity has generated a feeling that a contemporary extension of the present is substituting for the temporal logic of modernity, observed by among others cultural critic and media theorist Boris Groys: “The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future — of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control.”¹⁶ Thus, the self-reproducing presentness of the contemporary seems to have replaced the structurally momentary category of modernity that is defined by a permanent transitoriness, by an inherent self-surpassing character.¹⁷

The category of the present has developed into “presentism,” and according to historian François Hartog the

14. Cf. Ernst Bloch, *The Heritage of Our Times* [1935], trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 90.

15. Bloch, 97.

16. Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” in *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 90.

17. Cf. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 24.

present has now become omnipresent.¹⁸ In the modern regime of historicity, actions were guided by the future and they ceased to be understood in *direct* continuity with the past — the “horizon of expectation” was increasingly severed from the “space of experience” in the anthropological terminology of Reinhart Koselleck. In the contemporary regime of historicity, on the other hand, the present has become the privileged temporal category according to which the past and the future are conceived, but also a category that absorbs the past and the future,¹⁹ whereby historical time and any ideas about a qualitatively different future seem to be suspended. The present reproduces itself without leading to any future, creating a feeling that the historical present in which we live is no longer defined by any directional vector of historical development.²⁰ This was, of course, it may be parenthetically remarked, already Fredric Jameson’s understanding of the postmodern, which for him referred to a weakness in our imagination because it seemed easier for us to imagine the deterioration of planet Earth and its ecosystems than the breakdown of the capitalist system that had caused the climatic and ecological changes.²¹

The present ways of articulating past, present, and future therefore not only make our present, here and now, different from previous presents, but they also testify to a change in our experience of time itself; an experience of an ever expanding, perpetual present, which in a certain sense can be seen as a time-relation that has no temporal horizon other than itself. The virtual effacement of the categories of the past and the future means that the present is omnipresent, but if presence

18. François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* [2003], trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

19. Cf. Ross, *The Past Is the Present*, 13f.

20. See Juliane Rebentisch, “The Contemporaneity of Contemporary Art,”

New German Critique, no. 124 (2015): 225. For an analysis of a suspension of historical agency, see also Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Hegel after Occupy* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

21. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xi–xii.

is all there is, then nothing is present any longer. Presentism names the dissolvment of presence and the present. It is a crisis of time — a present marked more by presentist circulationism and accumulation of the same than by social change or historical transformation.

It should be noted, however, that Hartog deals almost exclusively with time experiences within a European framework. What I find crucial about our present, the present present, is that it is conditioned by *con*-temporaneity, understood as a *global* interconnection of *different* presents, with different prehistories, and of different time experiences or *Eigenzeiten* in the *same* present.²² It is an idea of contemporaneity as a shared present across divisive cultural and historical differences; of a temporary unity of the present across the planet.²³ This means that it is necessary to also try to establish a global or even planetary perspective on the present. As Okwui Enwezor remarks with reference to Hans Belting, one should also be aware, when analyzing the global art world, that

contemporary Western artists see themselves as being in a post-historical situation, whereas non-Western

22. On the notion of *Eigenzeit* see Helga Nowotny, *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience* [*Eigenzeit: Entstehung und Strukturierung eines Zeitgefühls*, 1989], trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge: Polity, 1994). My understanding of contemporaneity is explained in greater detail in Jacob Lund, “The Coming Together of Times: Jean-Luc Godard’s Aesthetics of Contemporaneity and the Remembering of the Holocaust,” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, nos. 49–50 (2015): 138–155; and Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity & Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

23. This understanding of contemporaneity as a *condition* has been developed by Terry Smith and Peter Osborne: “What seems distinctive and important about the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through the distinctive conceptual grammar of *con*-temporaneity, a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together ‘in time’ with our contemporaries — as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together — but rather the present is increasingly characterised by a coming together of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities or ‘times’, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*.” Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At all*, 17.

artists wish to be in a post-ethnic one. To be no longer identified by race, ethnicity, or tribe [...] The main struggle of contemporary Western artists is to come to terms with the logic of tradition, with the way in which history is both a resource and a negation of the now. In the rest of the world—India, China, Africa, wherever—the self-consciousness that follows from established historical identity has not been achieved.²⁴

We have, in other words, arrived at contemporaneity through different paths, but the post-historical situation and the struggle to become post-ethnic are now inevitably interconnected.

On this background I would like to argue that Didi-Huberman's concept of anachronism and "the dialogue beyond all differences of their [the images] times" in "Soulèvements" appear to pave the way for at least *imagining* a potentially qualitatively different world, for projecting a futural moment, that transcends the all-encompassing temporal horizon of presentism without falling back into the synchronizing and universalizing discourse of progress which characterizes Western modernity. An anachronic approach is furthermore a way to wrest the image, or the work of art, and its expressive value free from the straitjacket of a particular historical narrative and the restrained possibilities of generating signification that it provides. Thus, Didi-Huberman's anachronistic, or what I would prefer to call *anachronic* approach—to stress that I am using the term in a positive, not a pejorative sense—not only questions a linear teleological art history, but it is also a way to break with the impasse of presentism, understood as the regeneration of the past and the future only to valorize the immediate.

24. Okwui Enwezor, "World Platforms, Exhibiting Adjacency, and the Surplus Value of Art," in Terry Smith, *Talking*

Contemporary Curating (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), 91–92.

Didi-Huberman's notion of anachrony finds resonance in Giorgio Agamben's theory of the contemporary. In his often-cited text "What Is the Contemporary?" Agamben makes an explicit connection between anachronism and contemporariness. To him the contemporary is an *untimely* person. This apparently paradoxical idea of the contemporary is based on a particular *experience* of and relationship with time:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. [...] Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.²⁵

Agamben, however, like Hartog and Danto, deals almost exclusively with Western tradition and history, that is, with history in the singular. Therefore, his — in many respects compelling — understanding of the contemporary as a non-coincidence with one's own time, as a sort of refusal of contemporaneity, is not adequate to account for contemporaneity as the coexistence of a multiplicity of traditions and histories in the

25. Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?" in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* [2008], trans. David

Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41.

same here and now. Furthermore, his notion of the contemporary seems to be relatively ahistorical: a category that is applicable in any historical context. His conception of the contemporary is therefore in need of historicization. With Danto, Michaud, and Bourriaud in mind one could argue that the contemporary art-historical present makes it very difficult to be untimely or anachronistic as it becomes increasingly difficult to identify a hegemonic time and history from which to differ; how can one be avant-garde without any tradition or hegemony from which to break away and distinguish oneself?

The task is, in spite of this difficulty, to establish a disjunctive relationship with the presentist present, but also with a homogeneous linear history of art. Anachrony, according to Didi-Huberman, is the interconnection of heterogeneous times. Partly inspired by the psychoanalytical vocabulary of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan he thinks that images haunt time — somewhat similar to how Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* and Lacan's *après-coup* concern with a symptom as an eruption of the past into the present, an anachronism experienced on the body. What Erwin Panofsky wanted to exorcise from his iconology and art history was, according to Didi-Huberman, the "life" of images that haunt time, their over-determination and dynamic aspects.²⁶ Panofsky wanted to exorcise "the alteration effected by images themselves on historical knowledge built on images."²⁷ He did not want the images to interfere with the established historical narrative. The idea of anachrony is on the contrary related to the contemporary interest in heterochronicity and should be distinguished from achrony and anachronism in its ordinary art-historical sense of the assigning of a work to a temporal frame foreign

26. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Preface to the English Edition: The Exorcist," in *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* [1990], trans. John

Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), xxiii.

27. Didi-Huberman, xxi.

to it.²⁸ Thus art historian Terry Smith speaks of “the idea of anachrony, of an artwork being, in some or all respects, in an open, adventitious relationship to time,” and finds this “a much more interesting idea than achrony, and richer than anachronism, which implies being out of a determined temporal sequence.”²⁹ The idea of anachrony implies that an artwork might do more than simply embody its moment of origin, and that it articulates an intricate temporal complexity.

In an article with the telling title “Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” Didi-Huberman argues in favor of an anachronic interpretive approach to a fresco by Fra Angelico from the convent of San Marco in Florence, probably painted in the 1440s.³⁰ According to Didi-Huberman anachronism is something positive internal to the images themselves whose history the art historian tries to reconstruct. “Anachronism,” he states, “would be the temporal way of expressing the exuberance, complexity, and overdetermination of images.”³¹ When before the image by Fra Angelico, and any other image, we are thus before an object of complex, impure temporality,

*an extraordinary montage of heterogeneous times
forming anachronisms. In the dynamic and complexity of
this montage, historical notions as fundamental as those*

28. Cf. Hal Foster, “Preposterous Timing,” *London Review of Books* 34, vol. 21 (2012): 12. See also Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Mieke Bal, “An Ethically Nonindifferent Aesthetics: An Interview with Mieke Bal,” interview by Jacob Lund, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 42 (2011): 69–86.

29. Terry Smith, “Seeing Art Historically Today: Where We Are, and Ways to Go.” Power Lecture, Domain Theatre, Art Gallery of New South Wales, July 20, 2016. Full-text version of unpublished manuscript dated July 19, 2016.

30. Georges Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*, ed. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31–44.

31. Didi-Huberman, 37.

of “style” or “epoch” suddenly take on a dangerous plasticity (dangerous only for those who would like everything to be in its place once and for all in the same epoch: the fairly common figure of what I shall call the “historian with time phobia”). So to raise the question of anachronism is to question this fundamental plasticity, and with it the combination — so difficult to analyze — of the temporal differentiation at work in each image.³²

Images are temporally impure and overdetermined with a potential to activate and connect to a number of different temporalities and times.³³

Philosopher Jacques Rancière likewise relates anachronic thinking to making history. Understanding the meaning of the central terms differently, Rancière sees a critical potential in anachrony, which in his vocabulary is close to being a synonym of the positive version of what I — in continuation of Osborne and Smith — call contemporaneity, which, on the other hand, in the terminology of Rancière is a term that refers to something like temporal self-coincidence:

There is no anachronism. But there are modes of connection that in a positive sense we can call anachronies: events, ideas, significations that are contrary to time, that make meaning circulate in a way that escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with “itself.”
An anachrony is a word, an event, or a signifying

32. Didi-Huberman, 38. On Fra Angelico, see also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

33. In connection with the temporal overdetermination of the image, Knut Ebeling brought my attention to a passage Walter Benjamin wrote in a letter to F. C. Rang in 1923 where he muses over the question of

how the artwork relates to historical life. The artwork is without history (*geschichtslos*), he claims: “Der Versuch das Kunstwerk in das geschichtliche Leben hineinzustellen, eröffnet nicht Perspektiven, die in sein Innerstes führen [...] eine Geschichte der Kunstwerke selbst kommt dabei garnicht in Frage.” Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe, Band II: 1919–1924* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 392f.

sequence that has left “its” time, and in this way is given the capacity to define completely original points of orientation (*les aiguillages*), to carry out leaps from one temporal line to another. And it is because of these points of orientation, these jumps and these connections that there exists a power to “make” history. *The multiplicity of temporal lines, even of senses of time, included in the “same” time is the condition of historical activity.*³⁴

Rancière understands contemporaneity as a kind of undivided present, as time’s becoming present to and contemporaneous with itself. Such an achievement of Hegelian modernity, he argues, is, however, refuted by modernist avant-garde art forms, which are not ahead of their own times, but located in the difference of modern times with themselves.³⁵ I am interested in how such a temporal differentiation can be seen to be at work in (some) contemporary art practices which try to register and sometimes even produce different temporalities in the constitution of our—at a certain “higher,” more abstract level—globally shared present.³⁶ It is this globally and even planetarily shared present which makes the contemporary contemporary different from earlier spatially and culturally more restricted versions of the contemporary—including that of modernist avant-gardes whose untimeliness was established in relation to a relatively easily identifiable progressive and unified modern time.

Undeniably biased towards the Western history of art and image-making, Didi-Huberman’s exhibition seems to try to transcend this singular history of art by including images and material from historical and recent uprisings in South and Latin

34. Jacques Rancière, “The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian’s Truth” [1996], *In/Print* 3, no. 1 (2015): 47f., accessed February 8, 2019, <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=inp>. Emphasis added.

35. Cf. Jacques Rancière, “Rethinking

Modernity,” *Diacritics*, 42, no. 3 (2014): 10–11.

36. See Jacob Lund, “Untimeliness in Contemporary Times,” in *Futures of the Contemporary*, ed. Paulo de Assis and Michael Schwab (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Orpheus, forthcoming).

America, North Africa, Asia, as well as Europe along with online material of a transnational, more global character. The latter was presented in a commissioned section called “Résistances numériques” (Forms of digital resistance) by journalist Marie Lechner, which consisted of a selection of projects exploring the theme of uprisings on the internet and in social networks, including for example the online project titled “Anonymous: Shared Identity in the Era of a Global Networked Society” by Robert Sakrowski (2011).

“Soulèvements” could be — and has been — criticized for aestheticizing the gestures of uprising and for neglecting historical specificity, but this kind of Warburgian-inspired political anthropology of images is rather exploring the *forms* that the desire for emancipation and uprising take. It is, thus, about forms and images, but not an attempt to see a transhistorical “style” of past and present uprisings. It is rather a dialectical *montage* of images where they are brought into “dialogue beyond all differences of their times,” forming different constellations that make us see and imagine new histories. In the words of Didi-Huberman in the last section of the exhibition: “Whenever a wall is erected, there will always be ‘people arisen’ to ‘jump the wall.’ If only by *imagining*. As though inventing images contributed — a little here, powerfully there — to reinventing our political hopes.” With regards to the exhibition as a whole one also comes to think of cultural critic and theorist Mark Fisher’s observation — when it had become apparent that the global financial crisis of 2007–8 would not have any consequences for the capitalist system — that “when the present has given up on the future, we must listen for the relics of the future in the unactivated potential of the past.”³⁷

37. Mark Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2009): 53. Didi-Huberman’s strategy is of course debatable, and it could be objected that

“Soulèvements” actually returns the revolutionary energy — that I claim it actualizes — to history, thus making this revolutionary energy a thing of the past rather than the present (I owe this point to philosopher John Rajchman).

SOULÈVEME

18/10/2016 – 15/01/2017



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In the first volume of his large opus *L'œil de l'histoire* (*The Eye of History*)—which is a pun on George Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil* (*The Story of the Eye*)—called *Quand les images prennent position* (*When Images Take Positions*) Didi-Huberman claims—based on a reading of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin—that the political (*la politique*) can only be shown through the conflicts, paradoxes and the reciprocal shocks, of which all history is woven, and that the montage is the procedure *par excellence* to expose the political.³⁸ In the montage things only appear by taking position; they only appear by first having been brought out (*se démonter*) of the usual order, of their place in the usual order. Thus, the montage is to forms what the political is to actions, he argues. The montage is about positions and transgression, about making things exit their habitual or usual place and to affirm their existence beyond or outside of what he calls “the bed of time” (*hors du lit du temps*). The montage proceeds by reconfiguring or reassembling history (*remonter l'histoire*); in a dialectical deconstruction of historicism where all moments of history are taken out of their usual place and reassembled outside or beyond established facts (*faites constatés*).

Thus, Didi-Huberman draws also upon Walter Benjamin's critique of the historicist conception of time only in the abstract form of an “empty, homogeneous continuum” that the historian only needs to fill with a succession of facts, thereby producing a “history of events.” The problem with this abstract notion of time and the historicist notion of history as a linear development is that once time is divided into a chronological series of instants, any moment in the past becomes unreachable as it is irrevocably severed from the present by an infinite number of instants.³⁹ It becomes a dead object of knowledge, something

38. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position*, vol. 1, *L'œil de l'histoire* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009), 29ff.

39. Cf. Monica Dall'Asta, “The (Im)possible History,” in *For Ever Godard*, ed. Michael Temple et al. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 350–363.

that can be accumulated without end, but which will never form what Benjamin calls the “true picture of the past.” “The true picture of the past flits by,” Benjamin writes in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [...] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.⁴⁰

One can only construct historical knowledge philosophically by exposing — alongside the chronologically ordered stories, currents, and factual events — the heterochronies or the anachronies of the elements that compose every historical moment, by exposing also those elements which resist or work against the chronological narrative and perhaps suggest other possible stories. In Didi-Huberman’s vocabulary the term “heterochrony” stresses their effect of heterogeneity or disparity whereas the term “anachrony” stresses their effect of anamnesis or recollection. This implies that there is no teleology or progress in history, only heterochronies and anachronies of processes with multiple directions and speeds. Didi-Huberman thus understands Bloch’s notion of “non-contemporaneity” as a synonym of “anachronism” (or rather “anachrony”), and the montage is a means to render such “non-contemporaneity” dialectical, that is, politically fecund. In this way, montage is an *exposition of anachronies* while at the same time working as an *explosion*

40. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*,

trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

of chronology. It separates things that are habitually united and connects things that are habitually separated.

Any work of art embodies a complex temporality, not only as we stand “before the image” in “the present of our own experience,” as art historian and critic Hal Foster phrases it, but also as different times are inscribed in the work through its history of reception and through its travel through history (Picasso’s *Guernica* is an obvious case in point), “whereby it comes to double as the record of its own material alterations or programmatic transformations.”⁴¹ My point is, however, that we need to add to this complexity. Today “the present of our own experience” is a present that is constituted by a number of different, interconnected temporalities, including an omnipresent co-presence of others through digital technologies. And perhaps the sense of a shared present is most clearly articulated in the internet, where all the times of the world are present at the same time in a state of global interactivity. Or, as Sarai-CSDS and Raqs Media Collective formulate it in relation to the conference “What Time Is It? – Technologies of Life in the Contemporary,” which took place in New Delhi in December 2017:

Growing computational grids inaugurate storage and surveillance technologies that are affecting fields like the environment, finance and law. Machine time disturbs historical continuity and sequence. Genetic engineering and life storage technologies disrupt the idea of the biological life span; media memory and recording technologies have already transformed the lives of mobile phone users in the world. Media-enabled populations in Asia, Africa and Latin America are now part of a new infrastructure of the senses.⁴²

41. Foster, “Preposterous Timing,” 12.

42. See <http://sarai.net/what-time-is-it-14-16-december-2017/>.

“Soulèvements”’s formal interconnection of previously unrelated images of different origins opens up possibilities for other histories in which hitherto unseen and invisible elements become visible and perhaps active in a shared present. The exhibition rewrites or reimagines the prehistories of the contemporary present, and through these image constellations it articulates a desire for uprising and generates a sense of history and historical change being possible.

The anachronic intertwinement of heterogeneous temporalities should therefore not only be thought vertically, as connections between past, present, and future within one singular unified history (most often the Western one), but also horizontally as the interconnection of different vertical histories in the *same* present. The anachronic approach itself is practiced under specific historical conditions, and today these conditions are characterized by a global contemporaneity, constituted by the coming together of *different* times in the *same* historical present. A historical understanding of anachrony and how it challenges a linear, chronological, and unified understanding of history therefore has to take contemporaneity as a new historical condition and idea into consideration.

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PEN = 0,2,1,0, WEIGHT=70, SLANT= 0, SUPERNESSESS = 0.65

The typeface used to set this series is called Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font (MTDBT2F), designed by Dexter Sinister in 2010 after MetaFont, a digital typography system originally programmed by computer scientist Donald Knuth in 1979.

Unlike more common digital outline fonts formats such as TrueType or Postscript, a MetaFont is constructed of strokes drawn with set-width pens. Instead of describing each of the individual shapes that make up a family of related characters, a MetaFont file describes only the basic pen path or *skeleton* letter. Perhaps better imagined as the ghost that comes in advance of a particular letterform, a MetaFont character is defined only by a set of equations. It is then possible to tweak various parameters such as weight, slant, and superness (more or less bold, Italic, and a form of chutzpah) in order to generate endless variations on the same bare bones.

Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font is essentially the same as MetaFont, abiding the obvious fact that it swallows its predecessor. Although the result may look the same, it clearly can't be, because in addition to the software, the new version embeds its own backstory. In this sense, MTDBT2F is not only a tool to generate countless PostScript fonts, but *at least equally* a tool to think about and around MetaFont. Mathematician Douglas Hofstadter once noted that one of the best things MetaFont might do is inspire readers to chase after the intelligence of an alphabet, and "yield new insights into the elusive "spirits" that flit about so tantalizingly behind those lovely shapes we call "letters."

For instance, each volume in The Contemporary Condition is set in a new MTDBT2F, generated at the time of publication, which is to say *now.*

Dexter Sinister, 17/05/19, 11:51 AM