

There Is No Now:
An Archaeology of
Contemporaneity

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What is past has no reality: to me; only the contemporary is reality to me. What you live contemporary with, is reality: to you. And any human being can thus only become contemporary: with the time in which he lives — and then with another, with the life of Christ on Earth, the holy history stands alone for itself, outside of history.¹
 — Søren Kierkegaard

This little book carries with it a simple suspicion: Is the contemporary discourse on the contemporary not as metaphysical as it is tautological?² And might the — maybe theological — nature of this discourse (that might be emphasized by this prayer of Kierkegaard) be the reason for its gleaming, shimmering nature, as if the discourse on contemporaneity was the lip-gloss of actual theoretical production? And what would be the problem if it was theological or metaphysical in the first place³ — as art theoreticians and critics for a long time have acted as priests⁴ and the academic worlds have long overcome the Derridean realm of deconstruction of the notorious metaphysics of presence, giving rise to a new “longing for presence”⁵ and new ontologies?

True, the discourse on the contemporary has captivated the artworld with relative ease; it is as comforting as speaking to your psychoanalyst constantly about nothing but yourself,

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Indøvelse i Christendom* [Training in Christianity], in *Samlede Værker*, vol. 16 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962), 70f. Quote translated by Jacob Lund.

2. “Contemporary art deserves its name insofar as it manifests its own contemporaneity.” Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” in *What Is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 23.

3. See the discussion of the theological dimension of presence, in Jürg Berthold,

Philip Ursprung, Mechthild Widrich, eds., *Presence: A Conversation at Cabaret Voltaire*, Zurich (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 79.

4. “Some art critics are like priests,” Michael Hampe, in Berthold, Ursprung, Widrich, eds., *Presence*, 81.

5. Mechthild Widrich, in *Presence*, 11. “To me, it seems that after the success of the Derridean deconstruction of presence in the last decades, there is now again a longing for the authentic.” *Ibid.*, 12. See also Thomas Y. Levin’s remark on that issue, in *Presence*, 103.

indulging in your self-contemplation — which is probably the reason why there's rarely anything artworlds currently like to speak about more than the actual, contemporary nature of contemporaneity itself. If this diagnosis of the comforting, maybe consoling nature of a discourse is not proof enough of its metaphysical nature, it might be the neighboring methodological argument that when writing on contemporaneity, one is always writing *on* and *in* something at the same moment. One is always object and subject at the same time. Writing on the object of contemporaneity, I am also a subject of the contemporary moment in which I happen to write about it. If there is no dividing line anymore between object and subject, it seems as if the discourse on contemporaneity — and maybe also the entire discourse on contemporary art and the contemporary in art — is at risk of becoming highly metaphysical, theological, yet ontological in nature (all of which will be addressed in this text).

But proof of this suspicion is not only the comfortable and consoling nature of an academic discourse, it is neither the ungraspability of the very object of the concept of contemporaneity, whose “object is beyond possible experience,”⁶ nor the “slipperiness” of the concept, which has already been the topic of academic debate.⁷ It is also the very utterance of these concepts in the everyday life of the artworlds that somehow mirrors the same pleasant nature of academic discourse. The very word *contemporary* in itself sounds elegant in its even rhythm, sophisticated in its style and progressive in its significance. Most of the time used as an adjective or attribute to designate, describe, or to style something, it is hardly used as a noun at all.⁸ We hardly talk about *the* contemporary or about contemporaneity as such. This might also be the reason why it is so hard to pronounce for many: con-tem-po-ra-ne-i-ty

6. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 22.

7. Philipp Ursprung, in Berthold, Ursprung, Widrich, eds., *Presence*, 245.

8. Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Manifestos for the Future,” in *What is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Aranda, Wood, Vidokle, 65.

—an endless word made of infinite syllables that sounds as contemplative and mysterious as: so-phis-ti-ca-tion (which to many may sound like a synonym).⁹

A second reason that may contribute to the sparkle of the concept of contemporaneity is more disconcerting—that is the global claim of the concept, its totality on a spatial scale, which I misunderstood at first. When I was first invited to speak at a conference on the contemporary, it was in the context of global art history,¹⁰ and I wondered why they would let me speak on a mere *temporal* problem, whilst global art history seemed to play more on a *spatial* scale—a totally false assumption, which I soon noticed. Also without mentioning Peter Osborne’s now famous idea of a “disjunctive unity of present times,”¹¹ that I didn’t know well enough then, it has often been said that the contemporary is a temporality on the global scale, a brand for the globalized art market that is understood anywhere in the world. This is also why the contemporary, contrary to the neighboring concept of “presence”—the “short supply”¹² of which has also been subject of academic debate—seems to be in no danger of being in short supply, but on the contrary the contemporary is abundant, extremely abundant. It is everywhere as contemporary art has invaded everything. “The widespread diffusion of the term has placed it in danger of being emptied out of its increasingly complex meanings.”¹³ But isn’t there, next to the phenomena of either “being emptied out” or of a “broadening of presence,”¹⁴—concealed in the sophis-

9. This contradicts the diagnosis of Boris Groys in his “Comrades of Time,” 22–39, which describes the destruction of the culture of contemplation today.

10. *Present’s Disjunctive Unity: Constructing and Deconstructing Histories of Contemporary Cultural and Aesthetic Practices*, conference at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, November 26, 2015.

11. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 18.

12. See the arguments of various intellectuals (appearing in this text one after another), in *Presence*, 30.

13. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 17.

14. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in *Presence*, 197; Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2013), 11; Ludger Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” in *Notate für eine künftige Kunst* (Berlin: Merve, 2016), 67.

tication of a discourse and in the very emancipatory claim of “global contemporaneity”¹⁵—also a risk of a totality in it: that the contemporary may serve as the “temporality of globality itself”;¹⁶ that the claim of the contemporary serves, in the real functioning of artworlds, as a kind of international currency, as an American Express Card (or rather a functioning PayPal account) of the artworlds?¹⁷ This seeming “neutrality,”¹⁸ “simplicity,”¹⁹ and “self-evidentiality”²⁰ of the term fits the reductive but yet irrefutable definition of the contemporary as “whatever is present at the same time.”²¹ “Art seems to be truly contemporary, if it is authentic.”²² In this definition, as well as in its (maybe a little far fetched) comparison to the Renaissance,²³ we already have a full but concealed mythology of the contemporary: “According to common-sense understanding, defining what we mean by the ‘contemporary’ in art presents few problems: anything being produced in the present is always contemporary, and by the same token all art must necessarily have been contemporary at the time of its production.”²⁴

This Is So Contemporary

As the sophisticated yet irrefutable nature of the adjective “contemporary” is concealed by the noun it describes, it reveals itself in its use as such, as a noun—which is also why Tino Sehgal’s performance *This Is So Contemporary!*, first performed in the German Pavillion at the Venice Biennale in 2005, is already the classic work of art (which, as we know,

15. Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 16.

16. *Ibid.*, 17.

17. Osborne compares it to a passport, in *Anywhere or Not at All*, 27.

18. Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, 9f.

19. Obrist, “Manifestos for the Future,” 59.

20. *Ibid.*

21. See Cox’s and Lund’s opposition to this claim in: *The Contemporary Condition*, 22. See also Obrist, “Manifestos for the Future,” 59.

22. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 23.

23. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 17.

24. *Ibid.*

is not a work) of the culture of contemporaneity—and which is also why it sounds so smooth and odd at the same time. Odd as a judgment, yet familiar as an exclamation (for we normally expect people to say something like, “This piece of contemporary art is really interesting,” an utterance which by the way has its *genus loci* obviously at the Venice Biennale). The objectless utterance, “this is so contemporary,” somehow reveals the empty yet tautological nature of this concept: a judgment without judgment, impossible to specify, substantiate or concretize. Ironizing the impossibility of ever being contemporary, the performance also ridiculed the value of contemporaneity as a normative proposition. For there is no possible criteria for something to be contemporary (art) or not, it is an empty attribution almost like something sacred, invisible—present for some, absent for others. As with something holy, some people see something as being contemporary (or the contemporaneity of something), with sparkling eyes, which for others is simply nonexistent and transparent. This instable visibility of the contemporary phenomenon, its flickering nature, that is yet its very definition, calls for an epistemology of the contemporary phenomenon that clarifies it in the first place, under which circumstances it gets visible or not (an epistemology towards which Walter Benjamin, in his notes on the dialectical image within the *Arcades Project*, undertook the first steps²⁵).

The instable, yet transcendent, or even metaphysical nature of a discourse is revealed by the perfectly empty structure of a statement, a statement without proposition that says everything and nothing at the same time, which is performed in its original Venice 2005 version by a couple of performers that were identical to the trained guards of the exhibition hall; who are whispering and murmuring to each other, mirroring the

25. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 471ff.

reaction of the visitors: “This is so contemporary,” a purely meaningless formula, a perfectly empty judgment, transgressing all judgment, a perfect void, the ideal of the Kantian aesthetic judgment: the sublime.

One sees at first glance that the discourse on contemporaneity, supported by Sehgal’s masterpiece on the contemporary complex or not, has theological, even metaphysical potential—and this is why it seems legitimate to enlarge the argument and speak also about the incorporated metaphysics of contemporary art, or of the contemporary in art. It seems as if contemporary art, or better the contemporary in art, for many people is something religious or at least holy as well, loaded with encrypted theological potential, carrying a concealed metaphysical heritage, impossible to utter and articulate: an empty but yet infinite speech act that says everything and nothing at the same time, impossible to locate or pinpoint anywhere.

The built-in-theology of the discourse on the contemporary may originate from the first contemporary being, the first simultaneous thinkable entity that contained all times in itself: God—the one being present at different places at the same time who also did not differentiate between object and subject. Giorgio Agamben in “What is the Contemporary?”²⁶—a text produced in 2008, only three years after Sehgal’s performance (which Agamben might have seen in Venice)—seems to confirm the suspicion of the metaphysical nature of the discourse. In this very short and very beautiful text (that I will expand on later), Agamben writes about a “contemporaneity par excellence,” that would be “messianic time,” the “being-contemporary with the messiah,” the “time of the now.” In other words (and I will get back to this topic later with reference to Kierkegaard, the founder of the modern discourse on contemporaneity), contemporaneity, for the longest time, has been the contemporaneity of God with Jesus.

26. Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?” in *What is an Apparatus*

and other Essays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54.

Only because God created a contemporary being, is it possible for believers to be or become contemporary with Jesus — and for his followers to be contemporary at all.

To undermine the danger of theological or metaphysical discourse — repeating Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s question why theological discourse should pose a problem in the first place — this book proposes something like an archaeological discourse on contemporaneity, an archaeology of contemporaneity that tries to avoid the dangers of the metaphysical as well as of the historical at the same time (if we forget about Nietzsche’s best weapon against metaphysical discourse, which of course was history). In doing so, it proposes a shift from a singular philosophical interpretation of contemporaneity to its subconscious and epistemological meaning (from Osborne back to Freud and forward to Foucault), from psycho- to discursive analysis and from subjects to societies that use and demand the term contemporary.

If we thus examine the discursive formation inside of which the discourse on contemporaneity emerges, we observe that it is itself contemporary to another dominant theme of current debates in the artworlds: which is the discourse on “new materialisms” and “new ontologies,” which has arisen together with “post-internet art.” If I am proposing here an archaeology of the contemporary, I will thus hybridize the discourses on contemporaneity and new materialisms, trying to develop a more *material* approach to the philosophical debate on contemporaneity and temporality.²⁷

27. See Knut Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 1. Theorien der materiellen Kultur von Kant bis Kittler* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2012); Knut Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 2. Begriffe der Materialität der Zeit von Archiv bis Zerstörung* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2016); Knut Ebeling, “The Art of Searching: On ‘Wild Archaeologies’ from Kant to Kittler,” *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 51 (2016): 7–18.

The Discursive Formation of Contemporaneity

However, there are not only discursive settings for such a discussion but also institutional conditions.²⁸ There are institutions that execute power in the real world as well as in the real artworld. Looking at the institutions that somehow amplified the discourse on contemporaneity or within which the discourse simply takes place, it is obvious that the discourse on contemporary art finally invaded the academic field of art. As some people still remember, some ten or twenty years ago, there were hardly any academic chairs for an art history of the 20th century, let alone contemporary art. The contemporaneity of any given piece of art was rather a criterion of exclusion, a reason *not* to teach it in academic classes. Joshua Shannon describes this radical change as follows: "It is not so long ago that dissertations on living artists were all but prohibited, while statistics published this year by the College Art Association confirm that job searches in contemporary art history now outnumber those in any other specialization. We might wonder whether a discipline too long afraid of the present now has become besotted with it."²⁹

Formerly, the designation "contemporary art" seemed too vague to base any academic or historical judgment on, for its historical value had not been decided upon yet, which is why Pamela M. Lee concluded that "contemporary art history is premature because it is always in a perpetual state of becoming"³⁰ — an unimaginable situation compared to today, where the situation seems totally inverted. Today, any work of art cannot be current enough to consider for academic study; rather, the age of an artwork, which always seems too old to teach to young students, has become the most prevalent criterion of exclusion. In the past, artworks always risked being

28. See Hal Foster, "Contemporary Extracts," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Aranda, Wood, Vidokle, 142.

29. Joshua Shannon cited by Hal Foster, *ibid.*, 145.

30. Pamela M. Lee cited by Hal Foster, *ibid.*, 146.

too recent to be included in academic discourse; today, they are always already too old. If in past ages, it was the project to update and “contemporize” art history, we now seem to historicize contemporary art (which is a project in vain, for we first have to know what “the contemporary” is in order to historicize it afterwards).

This is how radically seemingly stabile temporalities can change—and what has changed are the very leading signs before time, that tell us how to interpret it in the first place. The historical became contemporary in itself, infected by the virus of contemporaneity as all of us are. In order to understand the radicality of the change, one has to understand, that we, in writing the history of contemporary art, are ignoring the wisdom of all historians of all ages—who have taught us in their first lessons that the present is fundamentally unknowable, that an elementary interval needed after presence has faded away in order to understand what has happened and what is meant by what. And we all know from Baudelaire, that presence is an “imperceptively short moment of transition.”³¹

With this current project of more theorizing than historicizing contemporary art or the contemporary in art, we finally enter a phase of its academization or institutionalization—which calls for some rough periodization of the development of the concept of contemporaneity itself.³² It all began (although I won’t begin at the beginning, obviously) with an overall economization of the contemporary, with the development of its own market and fairs for contemporary art. After this economization, came its institutionalization in universities as well as in art schools, a development that has reached its climax already, it seems, with the current effect that art school teachers nowadays seem to get scared of the loss of “ancient” art history (“ancient” meaning: being older than

31. Cited after Gumbrecht, in Berthold, Ursprung, Widrich, eds., *Presence*, 198.

32. See also Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 16.

the 21st century, for as we know since *documenta 12*: “modernity is our antiquity”).³³ But true, an epoch which was able to say “modernity is our antiquity” to us today seems as far away as antiquity itself; today, the contemporary is maybe not our antiquity, but our classicism, citing all other ages with ease. After this economization and institutionalization of contemporaneity,³⁴ we reach the phase of the current theoretical and philosophical debate on contemporaneity, which can be interpreted as the phase of the *epistemologization of the contemporary*, which means that it currently transforms into an object of knowledge itself (after having been, for the longest time, only the predicate of a certain kind of art)—that can be, following Foucault, also an object of an archaeology.

But even this current phase of the *epistemologization of the contemporary* can be defined in two different ways: either as a classic moment of contemplation, in which we are not looking at contemporary art anymore, but we now look at the contemporary in art, substantializing contemporary art to *the contemporary* or, even better, to the unpronounceable noun *contemporaneity*.³⁵ This would interpret the discourse on contemporaneity as an instance of pure self-reflexivity, of Hegelian metaphysics, that tries to stop time from passing and elapsing, a Hegelian coming-to-itself of the restless contemporary art, questioning this strange and all-too-evident self-reflection or substantialization of contemporary art becoming the contemporary becoming contemporaneity. What is concealed by this seemingly natural movement of coming-to-itself, of the seemingly self-evident fact, is the question of whether it is natural and possible to talk about contemporaneity? And why and how did it become an object of knowledge and discourse in the first place?

33. See Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 81.

34. See Amelia Jones on the “institutionalization of presence,” in *Presence*, 139.

35. See Obrist, “Manifestos for the Future,” 65.

Secondly, and this book follows this second option, we can interpret the discourse on contemporaneity as an emergence of an object of knowledge, that does not only tell us something about this object (that we thus should maybe not interpret as virtuously as we do), but that inversely also tells us something about the culture and *episteme* that called for it and let it appear in the first place. This is why this book does not reflect on contemporaneity out of a self-conscious philosophical perspective, articulated by a subject that is not (only) the author of its discourses, but tries to develop a broader perspective on this discourse, that also integrates material aspects of (our own) presence, that often are somehow smarter than we are. One has to look at the infrastructure of a discourse and describe its formation in the first place.

Looking at the discourse of the contemporary in art next to the discourse on contemporary art, both at first seem almost identical or at least inseparably linked (indeed many publications follow this route to reflect on the contemporary and on contemporary art at the same time). But then they somehow turn out to be completely different topics and discourses: Thinking about the contemporary in art must not only be thought of as self-reflection, as a Hegelian coming-into-itself, but can also be thought of as an optical illusion or distortion, with one topic slowly emerging behind the other, to the point that one topic substitutes the other so that we nowadays do not understand anymore how we ever could think about one without the other. How could we ever think about contemporary art without developing a discourse on the contemporary in art? How could we ever dare to say: *This is so contemporary!* without ever properly thinking about contemporaneity? Moreover what happens if we look at pieces of contemporary art after having developed this discourse on the contemporary in art? Or maybe it is even better that the phenomenon of the parallel lines of the discourse on contemporaneity and contemporary art itself stay separated from one another even though they

seem at first glance inseparably linked? Is it not a mistake to identify the temporality of contemporaneity with contemporary art? Should we not cut out the *theory* of contemporaneity totally from the *practice* of artists producing pieces of “contemporary” art? And should we do so, even though seen from a distance, the entire discourse on the contemporary in art seems to be a spin-off of the success of contemporary art?

So much for the diagnosis of the current (“contemporary”) moment; the discursive formation in which the discourse of contemporaneity emerges today. Furthermore for this discursive formation, last but not least, its medial conditions are obviously of tremendous importance—it is important to note that the contemporary becomes an object of knowledge in the exact epistemic moment in which a new medium of contemporaneity and simultaneity has emerged and “taken over,” which might be responsible for us discussing it. In other words, the change in temporality that the discourse on contemporaneity addresses, does not only have to do with *historical* changes that we might enumerate and periodize; it also has to do with *archaeological*, subterranean changes in our media environment that are much more powerful, that have radically changed our temporal perception, that have encoded anew the old analog slope ordering past, present, and future: “We no longer have a linear time, in the sense of the past being followed by the present and then the future. It’s rather the other way around: the future happens before the present, time arrives from the future.”³⁶ As it has often been said, the internet provides a simultaneity of all times and spaces into one temporality, the linearity of past, present, and future was nullified and deregulated by the internet, as it radically synchronizes and standardizes all planes of time into one medium and technicity. This is probably why the internet must be regarded as the historical

36. Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik, “The Time Complex,” in *The Time Complex: Post-Contemporary*,

ed. Avanesian and Malik (Miami: Name Publications, 2016), 7.

or medial or technical *a priori*, the “technological condition”³⁷ of reality for the current discussion of the contemporary. The entire discourse on contemporaneity seems to be an effect of the internet conditioned by its possible interconnection of contemporaries.

How Long is Now?

Another piece of art celebrating this sublime exhaustion of aesthetic judgment is Ceal Floyer’s *drop* (2013), which was presented in one of the very few exhibitions dedicated to the question of contemporaneity: “How Long is Now” (2016–17) in Kindl-Kunsthalle Berlin. This leads to the question why so few curators and institutions up to the present dared to create an exhibition of contemporary art on the contemporary itself that would approach the complicated question: “How could the contemporary as such be shown?”³⁸ In other words, it is quite surprising that the massive production of theoretical discourse on the contemporary does not correlate with a similar production of works of art which could easily be integrated and swallowed by the discourse, and which would thwart the inflated discourse on the contemporary in art theory. This absence on the side of exhibitions has had the effect that both phenomena — the elaborated theoretical discourse on the contemporary and “contemporary” pieces of art that somehow deal with contemporaneity — run in parallel lines alongside each other without ever touching, like two asymptotic somnambulants that never step on each others’ feet (which is the effect this text eventually tries to produce).

True, how should the contemporary itself ever be shown and displayed in an exhibition if every work of art produced today raises the claim of being contemporary? How can contemporary artists try to create “contemporary” works

37. Erich Hörl, “The Technological Condition,” trans. Anthony Enns, *Parrhesia*, no. 22 (2015): 1–15.

38. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 23.

of art, on the question of contemporaneity other than by just being our contemporaries? And has the epistemological rise of the format of the exhibition in itself—which today is no longer examined as a passive and neutral container of artworks but as an epistemologically active ingredient in the production of their meaning—something to do with the rise of contemporary art?³⁹ Or is the rise of the “exhibitionary complex”⁴⁰ just a sign of the spectacularization of art and its loss of infinity, surrendering itself to “temporary exhibitions rather than [to] spaces for permanent collections?”⁴¹

Let us look at Floyer’s *drop* in the above mentioned exhibition, for example: A video image visualizing the passing of time—and thus the contemporary moment—by showing a simple drop of water at a drain becoming bigger and bigger, until gravity pulls it down and it finally drops. The agonizing period of waiting for the water drop to finally drop down stretches time endlessly, displaying the time (of waiting) itself that becomes pure duration. But against the creation of a pure and empty moment of contemplation stands the physicality of the swelling water drop, swelling more and more like a water balloon that becomes bigger and bigger without ever bursting, an infinite plethora without end.

What Floyer’s artwork has in common with Sehgal’s is obviously the fact that they are both “time-based” pieces of art, as we say nowadays—if not that all art is always, and has always been, based in its timely condition (which is something different than its historical condition).⁴² That is to say that they not only exist within time, but that they consist of time, that

39. See Obrist, “Manifestos for the Future,” 66; Dorothea von Hantelmann and Carolin Meister, *Die Ausstellung: Politik eines Rituals* (Zurich: diaphanes, 2010); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Tony Bennett, “Exhibition, Truth, Power: Reconsidering ‘The Exhibitionary

Complex’,” in *The documenta 14 Reader* (Munich: Prestel, 2017), 339–353.

40. Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in *New Formations*, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 73–102.

41. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 27.

42. *Ibid.*, 32f.

they take place in time, in its simple running, elapsing, enduring, which is the case for video art (Floyer) as well as for performance art (Sehgal).⁴³ Nothing consists more *in* and *of* time than the simple and slowly filling of a raindrop with more and more water.

The Post-contemporary

Reading Floyer's work within the discourse on contemporaneity closely, one cannot but recognize one slight shift: the video does not show the razorblade moment of the present, that is so unnoticeably thin that it is always already over, but its before and afterlife. Looking at Floyer's hallucinative image, the spectator endlessly waits for the raindrop to fall down (which can be quite annoying) or recognizes that it has already fallen down. The actual *moment* of dropping and falling down happens too quickly for the eye to catch.

Eventually, the spectator finds himself either before or after the moment of dripping he is anxiously waiting for — for when it drips, it is always already over. The eye of the spectator experiences its non-experience: that it cannot grasp the present moment, and neither can the human mind. The temporality of our consciousness, in its most famous philosophical descriptions, is always pre- or post-contemporary. The present moment withdraws itself as the waterdrop melts away — with the consequence that absolute contemporaneity can visibly never be seized, it never takes place “here and now,” it never *happens*. We are never contemporary. The drop is — and we as its spectators are with it — always either before or after; thus contemporaneity is never present to itself, but always deferred.

The endless deferral of the present moment, the deferred structure of presence itself is not only bad news for

43. See Widrich on the paradoxical conjunction of performance art and presence in Berthold, Ursprung, Widrich,

eds. *Presence*, 10ff; and Jones on the art world's yearning for that, as got last visible in *documenta 14, Presence*, 113.

the metaphysics of presence,⁴⁴ it is probably also the reason why—and now I am actually linking the reading of a work of art to a theoretical discourse—besides or within the discourse on contemporaneity, another discourse has developed, another thinking of temporality or criticism of the contemporary, which has been simply called *post-contemporary*⁴⁵ (and that eventually relates to the discourse on the contemporary as post-colonialism did to colonialism, as its succession and critique). But the discourse of post-contemporaneity also signifies a visible demarcation from the narrow convergence of the self-indulging philosophical discourse on contemporaneity with contemporary art and integrates arguments from other fields instead such as technology and design, sociology and economics. In its outspokenness against (philosophical) aesthetics and the “experience” and perception of subjects, against the ontology of linear chronological time, this discourse takes a broader socio-technological perspective, which is quite pleasant.

If we define the temporal structure of our consciousness in Floyer’s piece as being either always before or after, pre- or post- the present moment, that can never be grasped in itself, there remains the world of things past—the realm of post-contemporaneity. The difference between the relation of the discourse on the post-contemporary to the discourse on the contemporary compares to the relation of post-structuralism to structuralism and lies in the fact that the post-contemporary does not succeed the discourse on contemporaneity, like post-structuralism did not only designate its historical position (coming after structuralism) and like post-internet art does not signify an art generation historically succeeding the internet

44. Nina Zschokke, *Presence*, 74, distinguishes between three uses of presence: a “heightened state of awareness,” “an ordinary, everyday experience of something as present, of a thing available for everyday use,” or

“the appearance of something unexpected.” See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

45. Avanesian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 7.

generation. This means that we are not “post-everything,” because something is over, but because something is sailing ballast, as Malik explains:

If we are post-contemporary, or post-modern, post-internet, or post-whatever—if we are post-everything—it is because historically given semantics don't quite work anymore. So, in a way, the present itself is a speculative relationship to a past we have already exceeded. If the speculative is a name for the relationship to the future, the ‘post’ is a way in which we recognize the present itself to be speculative in relationship to the past. We are in a future that has surpassed the conditions and the terms of the past.⁴⁶

Even though I would generally agree with this transgressive diagnosis of the post-contemporary, it remains questionable whether, firstly, this relationship to the past is called “speculative,” “constructive,” or simply “nostalgic” and, secondly, whether the speculative aspect of the attitude towards the past, that Heidegger already mentioned, has become so because of special historical conditions (e.g. digitality) or if it is an ontological structure, as in Heidegger?⁴⁷ I think that the speculative attitude towards the past differs from an archaeological perspective in that we can only belatedly reconstruct what “the present itself” once was—presence in my view is rather a retrospective reconstruction of the past and not a speculation towards the future. But there is also the technological aspect of digitality, of the digital condition. Obviously the internet did code or recode the aesthetic practices of an entire generation—and as every coding practice means a total renewal and destruction of everything there was before,

46. *Ibid.*, 14.

47. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*,

23, with reference to Martin Heidegger,

Being and Time (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 374, 437.

there is a new “natural” boundary, a new “before” and a new “after” — which is obviously the *after* of “post-internet.” So the “post” of “post-internet” doesn’t mean “after” the internet in a temporal sense like in postmodernity or that the internet is over, but it means *beyond* in a spatial sense, beyond the line that the internet has drawn.⁴⁸ We are after, post the internet interval, without any possibility to get back to a state before it. So the “post” here is more causal than temporal: “after” means in effect of the internet’s recoding operations, which means that you are always already inside, always already affected, assimilated, saturated, soaked. Alternativeless. As in every coding operation, there is no return to a before anymore. It has happened, it has become a fact, a new world, if you like.

As is the case of post-internet art, the discourse on post-contemporaneity emerges with the discourse on contemporaneity (just like post-internet art did not succeed art on the internet or web-based art but on the contrary came with it), not as its succession, but as its secession and criticism. The post-contemporary is also a reflection of temporality and contemporaneity, but out of a critical, yet deconstructive perspective — the main criticism being that the discourse on the contemporary has been too much driven by philosophical concepts and transcendental ideas of presence that end up in a metaphysics of presence that in itself is resurrected in the discourse on contemporary art. Repeating my suspicion at the beginning of this text, is the question whether the current discourse on contemporaneity in philosophy and within the artworld may not be a masked resurrection of the metaphysics of presence? Another question is: If the contribution of contemporary art can be summed up by simply saying, “contemporary art can be seen as art that is involved in the reconsideration

48. This is also why Obrist called his Munich conference “Ways Beyond the Internet” in 2012. See <http://dld-confer->

ence.com/events/ways-beyond-the-internet (accessed April 27, 2017).

of the modern projects,”⁴⁹ then what differentiates the “contemporary condition” from the postmodern one, that claimed the very same thing?

Regarding the project of deconstructing any metaphysics of presence, Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik, two of the protagonists of the discourse on the post-contemporary, articulate a general “deprioritization of the present” (more beautifully rendered in the German version by the same authors, who talk about an “erosion of the primacy of the present”⁵⁰): “The present as the primary category of human experience loses its priority in favor of what we could call a time complex.”⁵¹ If the experience of presentness was substituted by something else, by something that we don’t understand yet, it is no wonder that it is in “short supply”;⁵² and maybe, we really have, in this new situation, to “understand and operationalize the present from outside of itself.”⁵³ But what does it mean to “understand and operationalize the present from outside of itself”? Outside of what “self”? Obviously, as philosophical discourse, the post-contemporary has to understand the “self” as subject and as carrier of any idea of presence or the contemporary — a “self” within its temporality which this discourse tries to exit, trying to develop a position towards temporality that is not established from within the subject-position, but from its outside, outside the subject and its metaphysics, exterior to a subjectivity and subjective agency, a renewal of the famous “thought from outside” as in Foucault’s phrasing for Blanchot’s project.⁵⁴

But if it really is the project of the post-contemporary to “understand and operationalize the present from outside of

49. Groy, “Comrades of Time,”
26.

50. Avanessian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 8.

51. *Ibid.*, 7.

52. As is Gumbrecht’s main diagnosis in *Presence*, 30.

53. Avanessian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 16.

54. Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, *The Thought from Outside and Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987).

itself,” like Avanesian and Malik suggest, the question arises what this “outside” consists of, if not of subjective agency, far from philosophical reasoning and even from “an exteriority to experience or an exteriority of thought.”⁵⁵ In this book—and in the larger project it belongs to⁵⁶—I try to develop temporality not as a transcendental category, but as a material one, substituting historical for archaeological categories.⁵⁷ I try not to think of it as an *a priori* category of the mind, but as an *a posteriori* category of its surrounding (its outside)—and to think temporal or temporalizing techniques and media (beginning with the most simple ones like the clock) in reverse in a time critical analysis as *a priori* categories of knowledge, as Foucault’s “positive unconscious of knowledge,” collaborating in the formation of human temporality in the first place.⁵⁸ Not to look at the problem of temporality via the human mind and its undoubtedly setting conditions for a temporal understanding of the world means a complete methodological reverse, that demands to look at the human temporal mind as being *always already* conditioned by empirical techniques and media as simple as the watch. What are the empirical conditions for contemporaneity? What are the techniques and media responsible for the formation of an entire discourse on temporality and contemporaneity?⁵⁹

The Media of Contemporaneity

There emerges an entire history of knowledge in front of our eyes: a materiality not only of the mental product named “time,” but of the production of time by technological media—a materiality of time and of temporality: “Regimes

55. Avanesian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 16.

56. Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 1*; Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 2*; Ebeling, “The Art of Searching,” 7–18.

57. Cox and Lund, *The Contemporary Condition*, 27.

58. *Ibid.*, 29.

59. See Gumbrecht in *Presence*, 115; and Ursprung in *Presence*, 128, on the medial and social contexts of accessing temporalities.

of time structure, homogenize, mechanize and control time. The modern regime of time defines the public and continuity of the time that counts. The link of number and movement is achieved by cosmologies, calendars, regimes of time, all sorts of physical-technical apparatuses, but also micro-architectures and bodily techniques.”⁶⁰ Thus temporal concepts like contemporaneity are not as immaterial as philosophy or theology like to think. Time is not just in our minds as a transcendental idea, time and modern temporality were also produced in the empirical and mechanical world, they were historical productions of the nineteenth century with its technical synchronization and standardization of time,⁶¹ the empirical invention of clocks and watches, the technicity of all phenomena of isochrony and synchrony.⁶² Another media history to be told, that also altered our understanding of the present moment forever, is the one of the establishment of “live” broadcasting that created contemporary publics (in Berlin for the first time in 1936). The media history of the production of the *live* phenomenon and the massive production of synchronicity and simultaneousness via the technical medium of television broadcasting tells us that “time” as such was not only a production of the nineteenth century; and inversely that the idea of the “present” moment was a product of the twentieth century. Whereas “time” and therefore the possibility of synchronicity was invented in the nineteenth century, the idea of the present moment, Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*—the time of the now—was invented in the twentieth.⁶³

60. Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 77.

61. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

62. See Henning Schmidgen, ed., *Lebendige Zeit: Wissenskulturen im Werden* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2005);

Peter Galison, *Einstein’s Clocks and Poincaré’s Maps: Empires of Time* (London: Norton & Company, 2003).

63. See Knut Ebeling, “Städien/Medien. Eine Archäologie des Public Viewing,” in *Vom Publicum. Das Öffentliche in der Kunst*, ed. Dietmar Kammerer (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 141–160.

As one sees, there are also technical conditions underlying the establishment of the contemporary in the nineteenth century. Looking at the media history of time, at the huge differences between computational, material, and human temporalities with its “techno-material understanding”⁶⁴ of temporality, we realize that there remain entire media histories of contemporaneity to be told and entire discourse analyses to be done, telling us what contemporaneity meant in what historical epoch, how these meanings changed and under what historical and technical circumstances the discourse of the contemporary developed. This research on the very media history of the materiality of time — that has nothing to do with the materiality of language⁶⁵ — may seem not only as a renewal, but as an empirical repetition of the “thought from outside;” a repetition that is much more precise on the question of what this numinous position of exteriority consists of and what it demands. It is also very interesting in this context that Avanesian and Malik suggest a technical repetition of the philosophical discourse of deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence — that overestimates the deconstructive power of technology and the economy, which may destruct, but not yet deconstruct any metaphysics of presence (if they do not rely on it themselves).⁶⁶

Another good example of an artistic repetition of the “pensée du dehors” is Floyer’s artwork mentioned above: *drop* does not describe temporality from a subjective angle, from a “pensée du dedans,” it is not dealing with a subject or mind apprehending or understanding or constructing mental “presence.” It is much simpler. It constructs presence via an object, a drop of water — and thus via a spectator, that is anxiously waiting for the drop to finally drip down. But does this strategy really already reach an “outside” of subjec-

64. Cox and Lund, *The Contemporary Condition*, 18, 20.

65. Avanesian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 48.

66. *Ibid.*, 50.

tive agency? Is the subject not included in the picture via this spectator, that is constructing the tension in the scenario? Is subjective agency not always already there, without which time would be as flat as waterdrops dripping all over the world all the time, without anyone noticing or acknowledging it? Is it not human temporality and thus subjectivity that is displayed by Floyer here?

Of course. But there is also the material aspect of the raindrop, its simply being-there, that inversely has produced the spectator in the first place, that may not have come into the world without a material world of things like raindrops — their shiny and slow plethora, filling with water, the wonder of a bubble growing bigger and bigger, reminding us of our being-in-a bubble that grows bigger and bigger.⁶⁷ Talking about the archaeology or prehistory of the subject in a bubble, we should keep in mind that the bubble can help us “understand the present age from outside of itself,” as Avanesian and Malik have suggested. For this perspective on human subjectivity “from outside of itself” is precisely the perspective of the bubble, that does not only show moments of *before* or *after* the fall of the drop, of *pre* and *post* absolute contemporaneity; it also shows human subjectivity as being in a bubble, in a prehistorical phase of when it originated without having really begun. This deferral between origin and beginning — the embryonic time of us being in a bubble — is exactly the “erosion of the primacy of the present,”⁶⁸ that Avanesian and Malik talk about, for the being-in-the-bubble is not yet present in the world, has not yet presented itself to the world, not having become contemporary yet.

The Discipline of Contemporaneity Having the image of the deferred bubble — with or without a

67. For a philosophical reading of man in the bubble see Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres Vol. 1. Microspherology*

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

68. Avanesian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 8.

contemporary or non-contemporary being in it—in mind and before the eye, one could wonder about a discipline, a temporality or at least a methodology to approach it. If we can never seize the present moment, if we always seem either before or after true contemporaneity, if the contemporary being lives “from ‘not yet’ until ‘not anymore,’”⁶⁹ if we thus either come too early or too late to see the moment of the drop fall down and if the contemporary thus “is a nostalgic remembering of a situation that might or might not have happened”⁷⁰ and “being contemporary means to return to a present we have never been to,”⁷¹ then, if this is the case, which is or would be the proper discipline to approach it? What is the discipline or the institution of contemporaneity (if it is not the institution of contemporary art)? What is the capacity we need to qualify true contemporaneity? And what would be an appropriate methodology or epistemology needed to represent the contemporary moment, for it seems clear to this point that all methodological problems come back to the problem of a fair representation of contemporaneity?⁷² Should contemporary art simply represent or “convey”⁷³ or act as agent of contemporaneity?

These are true, old questions that have not arisen with the newly awakened discourse on contemporaneity. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche already asked them in the nineteenth century—when the sketched technical synchronization of time unfolded—under the sign of “the contemporary disciple” (Kierkegaard) or the more famous “untimely” (Nietzsche). After these authors Agamben summed up his archaeological

69. Maurice Blanchot, “Du ‘ne pas encore’ au ‘ne plus,’” in *Après Coup* (Paris, 1983), 86.

70. Widrich, *Presence*, 31.

71. Obrist, “Manifestos for the Future,” 68.

72. Here I disagree with Cox and Lund in that an archaeology would not be dealing with a representation of

contemporaneity—there is no representation in archaeology—and therefore it would not be “focusing on how contemporaneity is represented,” (Cox and Lund, *The Contemporary Condition*, 33) but with its conditions and codifications.

73. Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 69.

approach in an interview in 2015 with the German weekly *Die Zeit*:

What I call a vital relationship to the past interests me only insofar as just it allows an access to the present [...]. We will never grasp our present, it will always withdraw itself from us. This is why contemporaneity is the most difficult task, because truly contemporary is — as Nietzsche already knew — the untimely [...]. This is why I am convinced that only archaeology allows an access to the present, for it retraces its course and its shadow, which the present casts on the past.⁷⁴

Why is true contemporaneity “the most difficult task,” at least for Nietzsche and Agamben? Do we not currently witness a fruitful intellectual discourse on contemporaneity? Is it not answering the problem of contemporaneity? Looking at this blossoming discourse, one immediately recognizes that it is not answering the problem of a discipline or institution of the contemporary, but that it actually poses it properly. As we read statements by philosophers and art historians as well as by theoreticians of art of all kinds, one might ask if it is a philosophical or a historical discourse? Who is the carrier or institution of the discourse on the contemporary? And who is to institute the present moment? Who seizes the contemporary moment of the bubble about to fall (or of its endless deferral)?

Two disciplines, which are generally held to be the institutions of any judgment of contemporaneity, immediately come up, namely history and philosophy; and consequently, the discourse on contemporaneity is mostly dominated by philosophers and (art) historians that are held responsible for the question of instituting the contemporary. And interestingly

74. My translation from: Giorgio Agamben, “Europa muss kollabieren,” in *Die Zeit*, August 27 (2015).

<http://www.zeit.de/2015/35/giorgio-agamben-philosoph-europa-oekonomie-kapitalismus-ausstieg>.

enough, it is with these two disciplines, history and philosophy, that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Agamben — along with Benjamin and Foucault — struggled most. We will not get into the details of their complex methodologies at this point, but just note for the moment that these are the thinkers that (probably) most intensively asked themselves about contemporaneity, that struggled most with developing a position that could be accounted for as being truly contemporary — and that are consequently the positions mostly cited when it comes to developing “contemporary” philosophical, aesthetical, or art theoretical attitudes. For the moment being, we just note that they all had a problem both with philosophy *and* with history. What were they? What would be the problems of both history and philosophy when it comes to thinking or instituting the contemporary?

Let’s begin with philosophy, for the discourse on contemporaneity seems to be dominated by this discipline. What is the problem with the philosophical discourse on contemporaneity — besides the fear that with this substantialization of naming the present moment “contemporary” and initiating an entire discourse after it, one would be always already trapped in a philosophical discourse that could only but solidify and stabilize entities that are unsolid and unstable by nature. Without even trying to summarize the great tradition of modern suspicion towards philosophy that runs at least from Nietzsche to Foucault and from Benjamin to Blanchot, one can simply say that philosophy almost always idealizes what it talks about. Philosophy, in most cases, is not in contact with what it talks about — not even in its language, not even literally. By its simple means of discourse production: its phrasing and naming, it generates an object which may not be one. When talking about contemporaneity, it develops grand concepts and many arguments for this or that — but it does not really *touch* temporality at any time. For example, one of the key protagonists of the philosophical debate on contemporaneity, Peter Osborne,

idealizes greatly when he substantializes contemporaneity as “present’s disjunctive unity”⁷⁵—a problematic philosophical (or dialectical) tendency, which might allow certain questions. Is contemporaneity—to stay in Osborne’s Kantian discourse—a transcendental *a priori* or is it a judgment *a posteriori*? What unity are we talking about and why is a globally decomposed presence a “unity” at all?⁷⁶ Isn’t it a classical dialectical movement, to first state the temporal and spatial dispersion of contemporaneity in globality, but to finally recollect it with the establishment of a forceful concept of contemporaneity? Doesn’t this concept in its problematic “unity” (even though thought as fictitious) violate the fundamental heterochronous and disseminated nature of anything contemporary on a global scale? And does contemporary art, that intensifies this dissemination, really produce this fictive unity?

For the Kantian tradition, the case seems clear, as for Kant the contemporary can never be a judgment, for it is something transcendental that precedes any judgment. But how are we to deal then with Sehgal’s “This is so contemporary!,” which joyfully plays with the contemporary being an empirical judgment (and ironically ironizes the impossibility of being truly contemporary)? And would it not be funny to imagine Kant exclaiming himself: “This is so contemporary?” It seems to be Osborne’s commitment to develop the contemporary as a transcendental concept and regulative idea—even though he has tried to develop the contemporary as a fiction, like any unity,⁷⁷ which I think it is not—the contemporary is neither fictitious nor a unity. As a transcendental idea, the contemporary (and with it, its references to the modern and

75. See Osborne, “Temporalization as Transcendental Aesthetics: Avant-Garde, Modern, Contemporary,” in *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 44–45 (2012–13): 28–49; Osborne, “The Fiction of The Contemporary: Speculative Collectivity and Transnationality in the Atlas Group,” in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*,

ed. Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 101–124.

76. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 22.

77. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 23f; “The Fiction of The Contemporary,” 10.

the avantgarde) is emptied out of all its historical and material references.

The critical tradition from Nietzsche to Foucault to Agamben criticized exactly this tendency in philosophy to neglect the historical and to empty out what it is talking about in its transcendental discourse, to transform the contemporary into a purely metaphysical question, to have a plain metaphysics of contemporaneity. But how can one touch temporality in language, as a philosopher or an author? Nietzsche literally *touched time* in his atheological ecstasy of Silvasplana, developing the grand idea of Eternal Recurrence,⁷⁸ so did Proust, obviously, and many many others. And every archaeologist does,—if archaeology is the discipline born out of the desire to touch time,—to touch temporality. Of course, one can tear the present moment apart and deconstruct its unity by showing the cracks of the “untimely” and the treasures of the archaeological. It is archaeology’s task to dig out and unveil these ruptures and discontinuities and atemporalities that are conventionally hidden by historical time. It is also a political task to dig out the hidden, the covered, lost and un-lived moments in history, the untimely and atemporal moments that can shed new light on our present moment—which for Agamben, at the moment of the European crisis, were the practices of the monks that were stepping outside.⁷⁹

But the most important point remains, that there simply is no metaphysical “now” in archaeology, or as the object of archaeology, as the present is constitutively excluded from this discipline, which is by definition always searching for the remnants of past times and not of the contemporary presence—for which one doesn’t need any archaeology, which begins only where human evidence and documents end. Presence in archaeology is only the time of searching, digging and

78. Groys, “*Comrades of Time*,” 31.

79. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans.

Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

excavating, the time of “lowering the plumb,” as Foucault’s genealogist famously said. It consists of an alternative temporality that has become increasingly important in postprocessual archaeology as well,⁸⁰ whose most important object of excavation has become the excavator, the long process of excavation itself, the digging subjects with their ups and downs, doubts and faults—which is why this archaeology without objects may be solidary with the discourse on contemporaneity, which is as ungraspable as such an archaeology without archaeological objects.

The History of Contemporaneity

Before we will treat the question whether there are other possible and thinkable concepts of the contemporary within philosophy, we will ask more about another discipline dealing with it, history. For history, within the “crisis of historical agency,”⁸¹ also has difficulty in dealing with contemporaneity for two simple methodological reasons that are linked to each other. At first sight, any presence seems to be the opposite of the historical; it is still too close to be grasped and seized by history, which always comes later, afterwards, when the day of contemporaneity has ended and Hegel’s owl Minerva starts its flight. History cannot see the present day, it cannot see contemporaneity, it can only see the negative, the night, the written document. The medium of history being the document, which is, according to Foucault’s definition, transparent, will only grasp what once has been written about past presences and historical contemporaneities. There is nothing written historically on the present moment yet, it looks right through it. As presence is transparent, the contemporary moment remains, according to Agamben, dark.⁸²

80. See Ian Hodder, ed., *Archaeological Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

81. Cox and Lund, *The Contemporary Condition*, 14.

82. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 44ff.

Moreover what does history hold for the contemporary, what does news media tell us about our time, which is restored and renewed every second today, and that helps to create conditions of perfect contemporaneity to finally catch the contemporary moment: mostly blurry, an ideal image, an idealization of a time, that never even touches anything (for documents, digital or analog, dematerialize what they treat). So if we really want to find out what is or what was contemporary at a certain time, we urgently need to switch from historical and transcendental models of causal time to alternative methodologies and material models of temporality.

But this raises an immediate objection. Are we not constantly writing on the present moment, today more than ever? Never has there been so much published on the present moment than in the digital age of social networks, such as in the case of “tweeting” and instant messaging. The digital is obsessed with the present moment, its subjects telling everyone constantly where they are, and what happens to them right now. One could argue, that with the digital revolution, the gap between presence and history has become smaller, for everything is published instantly, simultaneously, which is also why many people fear the neverending presence and simultaneity of the internet. True. But is it contemporary? Is, or was, true contemporaneity not the very opposite of this collective hysteria? Or has Foucault’s “history of the present moment” finally become reality?

Obviously not. On the contrary, it seems as if the digital revolution has created a crisis of contemporaneity, or a contemporaneity that is in a constant phase of crisis, because the internet has taken the interval away, in which history was working in the first place, the deferral in which historical consciousness was established at all. One can easily guess that most of what is published in or on the present moment today in most cases will never enter the realm of history. Simply because history is, like writing, about a fundamental deferral,

in which historical consciousness chooses which story it tells us and which remains untold; because history will always only present us a selection, a little fraction of what once was contemporary — a selection without criteria that is far from a faithful representation of the contemporaneity or any past present moment. So even though history (and art history especially) is claiming to have an access — the only access — to past contemporaneities and to represent past presences, it cannot and never could. History has always only interpreted the past, but it is more important to literally touch and grasp it.⁸³

The absence of any material access to the past is also the reason why philosophical aesthetics, along with (art) history, will always misunderstand the contemporary and develop a misleading transcendental discourse that loses touch with its very objects — if it identifies them at all. The trouble — that Agamben touches later with his conception of “origin” — is the problem of history itself, in that it always already has to have recognized what it wants to write its history about in order to do so. Yet the contemporaneity of the contemporary on the contrary lies in phenomena, which have not yet been recognized as such. This is why history, by its very definition, is blind to any contemporary phenomenon, if it is truly contemporary. In other words, history has a hard time identifying new objects, new beginnings, and new origins, that have not yet identified themselves as belonging to this or that sphere. It will always misunderstand (or simply not see) phenomena that change their DNA radically as if they belonged to another species; which was the case with DIS-magazine, which was only publicly discovered as belonging to the sphere of contemporary art when the collective were named curators of the 9th Berlin Biennale.

83. See Knut Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 1*.

This exhibition was in itself able to make the dilemma of art history (together with philosophical aesthetics) quite clear. If contemporary art is only truly contemporary when it tries not to be “art” or “artistic” anymore—which was obviously the case with this Biennial that in most venues looked more like a pop-up store than an art institution—it will not be recognized, nor even seen by art history and philosophical aesthetics (confirmed by the very controversial reviews). In other words, the entire discourse of philosophical aesthetics on the contemporary, dealing only with objects which have previously been identified and which are therefore not contemporary anymore, is not able to see the contemporary and risks to completely self-absorb itself. If one reads the imaginary history of contemporary art in this way simply as a substitution or prolongation of modern art or of the notorious “critical project of modernity,” one ends up with random periodizations and a random history of random objects⁸⁴—that culminates in the problematic claim to establish a normative system of contemporary art as if one were Hegel himself.⁸⁵ The very problem of this conception lies not only, as Nietzsche saw already, in its self-confident assumption of a historical consciousness, of a subject of history, that drags itself more and more painstakingly to first post-modern,⁸⁶ then posthistorical, now contemporaneous interpretations of itself—the self-image of a historical consciousness that got replaced today by Facebook’s *timeline*. It lies also in the establishment of a normative system of contemporaneity, that allows the use of the “contemporary-claim” as normative proposition, resulting in an art critique that can use it as denunciation, by simply saying: *This is not contemporary!*

84. See Raqs Media Collective on the relativity of periodization of the contemporary, in “Now and Elsewhere,” in *What is Contemporary Art?*, edited by Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 46.

85. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 17; Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, 23.

86. See Osborne on the “fortunate” end of postmodernity, in *Anywhere or Not at All*, 17.

The Theology of Contemporaneity

If contemporaneity can be found in the chaotic moment of the unchosen, the uncensored and the anarchic multitude of presence more than in written documents, it might only be grasped by a god—and not by the almighty internet. Talking about the gods, there is a third discipline of contemporaneity, which is theology. For again, the first contemporary was God, which is only why we can be contemporaries of Jesus—and which is also why Agamben can write that the “contemporaneity par excellence is messianic time, the being-contemporary with the Messiah, which he calls precisely the ‘time of the now.’”⁸⁷ Contemporaneity in the first place was the contemporaneity of God with Jesus; just because God created a contemporary creature (that was Jesus), it was thus possible for the believers to become contemporary to Jesus also. This is the strange ambiguity of contemporaneity in Kierkegaard’s thinking, who struggled like no other with this very paradox at the heart of Christian theology. Kierkegaard, who also according to Groys first “famously asked what it would mean to be contemporary of Christ,”⁸⁸ thus was the most prominent of those believers desiring and struggling to become contemporary with Jesus, and maybe he was the first modern thinker of the contemporary, whose struggle for contemporaneity is impressive, if not comical or even hysterical.

But we also have to be very aware of the fact that we are here dealing neither only with the problem of a singular, maybe hysterical philosopher, nor just with theological problems as such. We are also touching the ambivalent process of the secularization of the subject and its temporality, which is why we also have to be aware of the fact that the philosophical and theological foundations for thinking the contemporary were laid in the same epoch in which the technical synchronization of time happened—when “time” as such was invented

87. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 52.

88. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 26.

in the first place. Defining contemporaneity was in idealist nineteenth-century thinking equal to the construction of a secular, bureaucratized subject — Kittler’s “subject as public servant”⁸⁹ — with a standardized time that somehow marked at the same time the disappearance of God. For when different places were all synchronized by the same standard time, there was no more need for the total synchronization named God. If we once invented a monotheistic God for a lack of contemporaneity and synchronicity, we no longer need this figure anymore for everything has been synchronized and is seemingly contemporary on the internet.

Still, for post-idealist Kierkegaard, as for much of the nineteenth century, the problem of contemporaneity was not yet the problem of the technical synchronization of time, as told by Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey*, which nevertheless deals with the same epoch.⁹⁰ It was still identical with the theological problem of the man-born God. This question for Kierkegaard arises — as for an entire theology — as the “question of a historical point of departure,” as the paradox to establish an “historical point of departure for an eternal consciousness.”⁹¹

This paradox lies in the idea that an unbosomed figure cannot be man-born. If God became historical in the figure of Jesus, he cannot remain divine at the same time. Is Jesus human and historical or is he divine and godly? Is he physical or metaphysical? Could Jesus ever be a historical figure if he was a divine revelation? And if he was a historical figure, have there ever been contemporaries of his that could witness his being of flesh and bones? Were his disciples Jesus’s contemporaries or not? These are the framing questions for

89. Friedrich Kittler, “Das Subjekt als Beamter,” in *Die Frage nach dem Subjekt*, ed. Manfred Frank, Gérard Raulet, and Willem van Reijen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 401–428.

90. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*.

91. Søren Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* — *Bind 4, og K4* (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1998), 213.

Kierkegaard's 1844 text "The Case of the Contemporary Disciple" in his *Philosophical Fragments*, which deconstructs literally any possibility of historical eyewitnessing. The contemporary here is the contemporary disciple—who should know his divine quality better than anybody else. But the closer the contemporary gets to the mystery of the unbosomed man, the more the possibility of eyewitnessing dissolves before his eyes:

It is easy enough for the contemporary learner to acquire detailed historical information. But let us not forget that in regard to the birth of the god (Christ) he will be in the very same situation as the follower at second hand, and if we insist upon absolutely exact historical knowledge, only one human being would be completely informed, namely, the woman by whom he let himself be born. Consequently, it's easy for the contemporary learner to become a historical eyewitness, but the trouble is that knowing a historical fact—indeed knowing all the historical facts with the trustworthiness of an eyewitness—by no means makes the witness a follower, which is understandable, because such knowledge means nothing more to him than the historical. It is at once apparent here that the historical in the more concrete sense is inconsequential; we can let ignorance step in here, let ignorance, so to speak, destroy one fact after the other, let it historically demolish the historical.⁹²

In other words, Kierkegaard arranges a test that consists in a comparison of Jesus's contemporaries with his later believers. But this test has not the expected result of historical reason, which would tell us that the contemporary has an

92. Søren Kierkegaard, "The Case of the Contemporary Disciple," in *Philosophical Fragments: Kierkegaard's Writings Vol. 7*

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 59.

advantage over the later ones. No matter how close one gets to Jesus, no matter how contemporary one is or was to Christ, one will never know more than the succeeding men. Contemporaneity does not tell us anything about the contemporary moment; there is no eyewitness that could help us solve the paradox of the contemporary disciple.

As such questions for Kierkegaard always tend to turn into an existential endeavor, he draws rather radical consequences out of this failure of historical contemporaneity. He develops the project of “historically demolishing the historical,”⁹³ that sets the scenery for asking the question of contemporaneity in the twentieth century. What is the value of contemporaneity, if the contemporary does not provide more substantial information than later sources? If he is not any wiser than the successors? But if the contemporary has no more intimate knowledge than the non-contemporaries, is Kierkegaard’s project of “historically demolishing the historical” not deconstructing our belief in the value of contemporaneity as such? How does this deconstruction relate to the deconstruction of the discourse on post-contemporaneity? And do they have anything to do with the suspicion of the built-in-theology of contemporary art?

One can easily argue that knowledge about the divine revelation would be something else than knowledge about contemporary art or contemporary politics. On the other hand, one could argue that any judgment on contemporary art would be as mystifying as any judgment of the contemporary disciple — simply because our relation to contemporary art is not founded in judgments but in beliefs as metaphysical as the belief in the divine revelation.⁹⁴ Is our relation to contemporary art not as mysterious, numinous and unexplainable as the structure of the exclamation: *this is so contemporary?* Are we not all

93. Kierkegaard, “The Case of the Contemporary Disciple,” 59.

94. See Jones’s remark, in Berthold, Ursprung, Widrich, eds., *Presence*, 108.

believers in the system of contemporary art? Who can say to what extent the belief plays a role in this system? In Kierkegaard's case, the doubt is abyssal. Most impressive, yet monumental are his prayers, in which he calls upon Jesus to lead him and his fellow men into contemporaneity:

What is past has no reality: to me; only the contemporary is reality to me. What you live contemporary with, is reality: to you. And any human being can thus only become contemporary: with the time in which he lives—and then with another, with the life of christ on earth, the holy history stand alone for itself, outside of history.⁹⁵

For Kierkegaard, there cannot be any true contemporaneity—if there can be any at all—other than in the act of believing, believing in the paradox that Jesus is human and divine at the same time. And even though we act today as if we somehow know better and how ridiculous Kierkegaard's struggle was, we should be very aware of the theological remnants of our enlightened concepts, of the parallels between thinking the divine revelation and the ontological concepts of origin and event that will come into play in a moment—for the divine revelation is also something that can potentially come any time into the world to change it forever, like an event or like love or like a codification.

The Archaeology of Contemporaneity

But what does the “event” of the divine revelation have to do with the arrival of a new love or a new codification? And what do these have to do with the fact that Kierkegaard, in his prayers, was also writing about contemporaneity as

95. Søren Kierkegaard, *Indøvelse i Christendom* [Training in Christianity], in *Samlede Værker*, vol. 16 (Copenhagen:

Gyldendal, 1962), 70f. Quote translated by Jacob Lund.

“outside of history”? It seems as if in all cases, we are not dealing with historical temporalities, but with “outsides” or “exteriorities of history,” which demand another temporality than the conventional historical one; they all form “origins” for which we still are in need of a proper discipline. Avanesian and Malik talk about an “erosion of the primacy of the present”⁹⁶—an erosion that can be taken literally and understood materialistically, in terms of a discipline that works with erosions, with the effects of erosion, which is obviously geological in the first place, but also archaeological. This is why this “erosion of the primacy of the present” specifically, but also the discourse on post-contemporaneity in general, seems solidarity with the discipline of archaeology, with all possible archaeologies, that preoccupy themselves not only with the search for origins, but also with this “erosion of the primacy of the present,” simply because *there is no presence in archaeology, there is no possible contemporaneity in archaeology*—only, maybe, a possible archaeology of the contemporary. The discipline of archaeology is completely post-contemporary, as it always, and per definition, comes after any presence and after any contemporary moment. Archaeology, by definition, works with the remnants and leftovers of people that are not present anymore to tell us about them—there are only deferrals and displacements, traces, and ruins in archaeology, in all archaeologies: effects of past contemporaneities.

But if there is no contemporaneity in archaeology—why then, should archaeology, any archaeology, be the proper discipline for the search for contemporaneity? Why should archaeology be the proper discipline of the untimely as well as of its materiality? And how can this materiality of time, this materiality of the contemporary become visible? We can of course avoid these questions and take a step backwards

96. Avanesian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 8. See footnote 51.

and take up historical references and methodologies. We know that Foucault was referring to his discourse analyses as “archaeologies;” so did Freud and Benjamin, and so does Agamben today when he comments on the present age by diving deep down into historical situations and comments upon the present age through them.⁹⁷

We have yet to understand that Agamben’s entire agenda is quite archaeological; all his main authors (such as Benjamin and Foucault) have experimented with archaeological epistemologies that had objects like the soul (Freud), modernity (Benjamin), or knowledge (Foucault)—and even media in the case of Kittler (whom Agamben does not cite). Moreover Agamben himself publishes one archaeology after another, in which he visits historical situations to explain our contemporary situation.⁹⁸ But the question remains: Why and how can the contemporary be an object of an archaeology? Is the contemporary not the self-evident opposite of anything archaeological? How can there be an archaeology of the contemporary? And why do we need, why does the contemporary need, just that? Why is the contemporary only reachable through archaeological means?

The contemporary is an extremely fragile object—if it is an object at all. It is hard to say if there is any substance to the contemporary or substantive contemporaneity,⁹⁹ for hardly any object seems as fluid and ungraspable as this one. We cannot see our own time, we are practically blind to our immediate surroundings, and we do not recognize anything going on *now*. Only belatedly, the present can turn into light, into knowledge. This is the way Foucault’s objects of knowledge are constituted only afterwards, many years later. Presence is darkness,¹⁰⁰

97. See Agamben, “Europa muss kollabieren.”

98. See Agamben’s archaeological methodology in “Philosophical Archaeology,” in *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

99. Dieter Mersch relates presence to substance, in *Presence*, 75.

100. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 44.

as Agamben says, we don't know anything about our immediate present. It has no access to truth or insight or enlightenment, which is why presence is constituted by constant doubt and delatoriness.¹⁰¹ Presence is, as Groys writes, indecision, delatoriness, waste, and *non-savoir*.¹⁰² Recognition occurs, as history knows, always afterwards, when the day of facts is over and Minerva begins to fly. The present moment seems to be always already over, a purely negative¹⁰³ concept that is always only reconstructed belatedly, a reconstruction of something that never existed, "a nostalgic remembering of a situation that might or might not have happened?"¹⁰⁴ The present is always already over, we get access to the present only retrospectively by reconstructing past presences. It has always already slipped through our hands, ungraspable like sand that runs through our fingers.

This belated nature of the "living present" that is also, according to Derrida, a "dividing self-presence" and that "springs forth on the basis of its non self-identity"¹⁰⁵ is also why any presence, any contemporary moment constitutes itself by first looking into the past. We do not need to cite philosophical examples to find out that most traditional authors thought that any immediacy and contemporaneity of the mind would institute itself by looking into the mirror of the past.¹⁰⁶ The critique of the present moment is as old as philosophy itself. There is an entire tradition being sceptical about the immediate recognition of the moment as they state: The contemporary is not present.

101. Joseph Vogl, *Über das Zaudern* (Zürich: diaphanes, 2007).

102. Groys, "Comrades of Time," 31.

103. Mersch, in *Presence*, 32.

104. Widrich, in *Presence*, 31. See also Schwarte, "Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst," 76.

105. Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 85. For a contemporary-oriented

discussion of Derrida, see Avanesian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 45.

106. "Being, if it must be thought of as different from beings (in order to avoid the error of metaphysics, which was to identify Being with beings), cannot be grasped as present [...] Thought is not or is no longer the illusion of grasping Being as presence." Gianni Vattimo, "Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy," *SubStance* 16, no. 2, issue 53 (1987): 13.

But even though contemporaneity can only be retrieved by looking into the past, the past itself cannot only be historical, it should not only consist of documents, that can be interpreted in many ways, but also of monuments, to put it in Foucault's words, also of materialities with their own epistemic value. This difference of epistemic value can be illustrated most easily by the difference of working materials of history and archaeology: of document and monument, the symbolic and the material, the readable and the visible. The basic tool and basic material for the historian to find out about past contemporaneities is the document, the written word that he has to evaluate and interpret. The archaeologist, on the contrary, does not reconstruct past contemporaneities by written words but by material findings and leftovers. Unlike the historian, he does not choose out of an abundance of historical sources that he has to evaluate, but is happy with anything that is handed down to him and which he does not have to censor to let past contemporaneities disappear like the historian.

One can easily illustrate the difference between monument and document, the material and symbolic worlds of representing the past, by taking up another example by Floyer that was shown in the same exhibition mentioned earlier. Besides the aforementioned *drop*, there was a second piece called *1-25* (2003) on display, which approached the matter of contemporaneity not materially or visually, but symbolically: On a screen the numbers one to twenty-one appear in an irregular rhythm—written not as digits, but as words. Only after a while, the spectator notices that the seemingly irregular rhythm of appearance of the numbers is identical to their measurement in time (for example, the word “three” is visible for three seconds, the word “twenty-one” for twenty-one seconds, and so on). Whereas both pieces seem to display the physical being of time, the materiality of *1-25*—the duration of visibility of the written numbers—stems not from the materiality of time itself, like in *drop*, but from its symbolic codification in the form of digits.

The Space of Contemporaneity

The two examples of artworks by Floyer illustrate the obvious fact that there are different approaches towards the past. As time-based works, they both question Osborne's sketched transition from a "craft-based ontology of mediums to a postconceptual, transcategorical ontology of materializations."¹⁰⁷ But there are many more — and many more material or materialized — examples to illustrate the difference between a material and a symbolical approach to temporality, between Foucault's monument and document (which is an opposition for which there were underlying artistic examples, I believe). Of course, this epistemic difference can also be illustrated by different artworks than Floyer's, I will name another, very recent (contemporary) one. At documenta 14 in Athens, Lois Weinberger presented *Debris field: Erkundungen im Abgelebten* (2010–2016), the results of an archaeological excavation executed in his own house — or better, in the house of his parents and grandparents, as the farm of his Austrian family dates back to the seventeenth century. He found old garments, animal corpses, puppet clothes, bones, garbage, crucifixes, ropes and shoes, many many shoes. So why does he show us all this debris? Why does he excavate his family history?

Because obviously he does not want to narrate his family history, he *excavates* it instead of *narrating* it. Narrating uncovers a specific temporality, of chronology, linearity and continuity, one always starts to narrate at the beginning. When you excavate something, it's the other way around, you find the youngest findings at first, and things may be as mixed up as the dirt in the ground. Also the debris tells another story in itself, not the ideal version of wishful thinking, but the Real that is covered by it.

But one does not have to refer to examples from the material world of fine arts to illustrate this epistemic difference,

107. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 28.

it can much easier be illustrated by everyday examples—the afterlife of a dinner party at a table, for example. One can either abide to its historical account and let its story be told to you, or you can consult the remnants and leftovers in themselves: the debris field of the dinner. There is naturally a fundamental epistemic difference between *seeing* the leftovers themselves, or *reading* a document about them, or hearing a narration about them. Whereas the historical account, whether oral or written, transforms everything into language, symbols and digits, the archaeological report first consults the remnants themselves to decipher them, at the beginning not knowing in which language or logic to read them, to reconstruct any past contemporaneity.

As we see, history and archaeology sequence and order their knowledge about past contemporaneities in a totally different way. Taking up the simple example of the party, that is less complex than a family history, the historian would start with its beginnings: who had the idea for the party, how did it come about, who organized it and what was the course of events? The historian proceeds not via synchronicity and simultaneity, but by the diachronic and successive course of events, narrating who brought what to the party at what time—which can be decisive for the course of any party, as we know—following models of linearity and causality, telling us what happened as a result of which historical circumstances. An archaeologist coming the next morning (or a thousand years later) to examine the debris field of remnants, having dug out the decomposed leftovers of the party, would sequence the events the other way around, beginning with the visible effects, the remains and leftovers and would have to figure out the earlier events by way of them. Ignorant of any documents as well as of the linear and causal knowledge of the historian, their knowledge of the contemporary is completely material; the archaeologist has to reconstruct everything by simply looking at what he sees and to figure out the course of events, starting

from debris. Their archaeology of the very same party (or of a farmhouse) would simply consult the table of leftovers, and would see the whole mess of a past contemporaneity simultaneously and not sequenced by a semantic corset. That is the archaeological image, in which everything is visible simultaneously, no matter if it happened sooner or later — “image [...] wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.”¹⁰⁸

Eventually, we have two totally different epistemic models of contemporaneity: the historical model with its time bar, chronology, causality and linearity; and the archaeological simultaneous image of many past contemporary moments. We indeed know this opposition between chronology and simultaneity, narration and image, time and space quite well from the history of aesthetics. In his 1766 classic *Laocoon*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing made the sharp and classic distinction between the temporal arts (poetry, literature, music, today also film and video) and the spatial arts (painting and sculpture) that would unfold in space — the temporal arts succeeding one another in time, whereas the spatial arts sequencing them through forms and colours in space next to each other.¹⁰⁹

Very different temporalities indeed: whereas history relies on the construction of historical *time*, archaeological *space* is constituted by material findings; history aligns events in chronological order, it ends up with a linear time bar of important moments, but there is no time bar in archaeology's spaces, which form a three-dimensional medium that is very different from the symbolic medium of writing. Archaeology *shows* us in

108. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462.

109. “Painting and poetry alike make use of various symbols: the symbols of painting are figures and colours in space, the symbols of poetry — sounds articulated in time. The symbols of painting are natural, the symbols of poetry arbitrary. Painting can represent objects existing next to

one another in space, and poetry objects succeeding each other in time.” Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay on Aesthetics* (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 1980), 63. See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962).

a spatial dimension what once was, instead of *narrating* something in time; it shows us all there was, in reverse chronology, without any personal judgment, and not what subjects or disciplines or media chose to let remain from the past.

So what will remain in archaeology—or in archives that try to guarantee this anonymity—will do so for very different reasons than what remains in history. Things (like the leftovers of a party) remain or they do not; they are dug out or remain forever unseen. But they are not totally dependant on what people decided to pass on and deliver, but are handed down materially (maybe because worms didn't decompose it yet or because terrorists didn't blow it up yet).

In other words, spatial arts, as archaeology, show different things next to each other at the same time, establishing these different times and phenomena as being contemporary to one another.¹¹⁰ This phenomenon, that has been much referenced as Ernst Bloch's famous "non-contemporaneous contemporaneities" and which has been located historically in the methodology of the montage within the historical avantgardes, seems to be simply a phenomenon of anything visual—an effect of a gaze, that sees many things at the same time, being always interstratified with different contemporaneities of different ages. But before we release a phenomenology or archaeology of the gaze,¹¹¹ we can come back to the question of why we need an archaeology to find out about the contemporary? Why of all the mentioned disciplines should archeology be able to tell us what is or once was contemporary?

What is the Contemporary?

In Agamben's "What is the Contemporary?" of 2008, a short but yet beautiful Benjaminian text, there is a passage on that strange connection between contemporaneity and

110. Lessing, *Laocoon*.

111. See Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," 44.

archaeology—a concept used by Agamben to refer to his “historical” case studies.¹¹² But even though Agamben elaborates a philosophical concept of contemporaneity, he doesn’t make the transcendental manoeuvre. Instead, he departs from notions of the contemporary and “untimely” by Nietzsche and Osip Mandelstam. He defines the contemporary as a quality of temporal difference, of discontinuity and rupture: the person is untimely, one who is distant and different from his own age, who introduces a temporal difference into it. But how does the untimely transform into the contemporary? What does the untimely have to do with the contemporary? Are they not simply opposites?

It seems as if the fundamental deferral between the contemporary and the untimely is needed to produce historical recognition or a recognition of the temporal. “But precisely of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.”¹¹³ It is this fundamental difference within temporality, this distortion that renders possible any kind of historical recognition in the first place. But what is this quality of temporal difference, this “anachronism,” that Georges Didi-Huberman taught us so much about,¹¹⁴ this distortion in the first place? Here, Agamben gives a paradoxical answer saying that contemporariness is “a relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.”¹¹⁵

The untimely is thus a special kind of contemporary: s/he is the contemporary who is close and distant from her/his own time at the same time, who “adheres” to it while being “disjuncted” from it. But how can we think this disjuncted adherence, this adhering disjunctedness? One

112. See Agamben, “Philosophical Archaeology,” 81–112.

113. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?” 40.

114. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000).

115. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?” 41.

good image of thought (*Denkbild*) to illustrate the entanglement of the contemporary and the untimely is the German notion *Verwindung*, meaning twist or distortion. The untimely is the distorted contemporary, the contemporary that somehow got twisted. It was Gianni Vattimo who reminded us that this notion was brought up by the very tradition sketched here, not only by Heidegger, but foremost by Nietzsche, to illustrate his famous idea of the untimely.¹¹⁶ Naturally, at first everyone thinks about *Verwindung* as the Heideggerian concept of a surpassing and overcoming of metaphysics without *Aufhebung*, but applying this concept to the untimely, the untimely is the distorted contemporary: the one who adheres to one's contemporary epoch but gets distorted somehow — or that gets distorted but somehow survives this distortion.

The order, in which the concepts of adherence and distortion appear, is somehow crucial. For Vattimo reminded us that the second German signification of *Verwindung* lies in the verb *verwinden*, which does not only mean to get distorted, but to cure, to heal and to recover from an illness. So if we try to think less about metaphysics, as Heidegger did, and more about the temporality of the contemporary under the concept of *Verwindung*, we end up with the notion of a difference that stays true to its origin — with an untimely that can only be so because one is somehow true to one's time — that can overcome one's time because one didn't leave it altogether. The untimely *verwindet* one's time, he recuperates his epoch, because something has stayed with him: "It is something one retains in oneself, like the traces of an illness or a sorrow to which one is resigned."¹¹⁷ Should we not think the contemporary in the temporality of an illness, meaning not from the optimistic perspective of the self-evident subject, but out of the perspective of the convalescent who looks at his scars? This means not so much the perspective of the author of

116. See Vattimo, "Verwindung."

117. *Ibid.*, 12.

A la recherche du temps perdu with his desire to reconstruct, in the end, the famous “time lost” (who also wrote and reconstructed the time lost out of the perspective of the reconvalescent), but more to look at the contemporary out of the perspective of someone who simply looks back, recognizing that one is at another point than before, recuperating the distortion. This would be the third signification of *Verwindung*, a radical change of perspective, a radical rethinking and looking back at the history from a different, distorted perspective.

Put simply, one can say that there are two ways of thinking the *Verwindung* needed to become truly contemporary: one can think *Verwindung* with the means of a temporal twist or with a material distortion, it can be thought temporally or materially. First, Agamben, not mentioning any *Verwindung*, seems to think his paradoxical term of contemporariness only temporally, meaning through notions of time. The contemporary who for him adheres to their time while being in disjunction with it, is the one who is close and distant to the origin at the same time. So contemporaneity for Agamben finally amounts to being close to the origin, to comprise the origin. The closeness to the origin is the distortion one needs to be contemporary: “Contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic. Only he who perceives the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary.”¹¹⁸

The Ruins of the Contemporary

But what is this strange notion of the archaic and what does it have to do with the contemporary? The one who is contemporary somehow has to squint into time, to be cross-eyed. While seeing one’s contemporary epoch, one also has to see its archaic nature at the same time—the gaze upon one’s age will only be contemporary if it also sees the archaic. Agamben provides a very tangible example of this squinted gaze, which is

118. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 50.

the sight of Manhattan when arriving from the sea: “Whoever has seen the skyscrapers of New York for the first time arriving from the ocean at dawn has immediately perceived this archaic *facies* of the present, this contiguousness with the ruin that the atemporal images of September 11 [2001] have made evident to us all.”¹¹⁹

Of course, we know the aesthetics of the ruin since Romanticism and earlier, but Agamben’s “contiguousness with the ruin” indicates something else: the ability not only to see the present or contemporary moment, to drown in presence, but also to be able to see the contemporary moment within its dimension, its historical extent and embeddedness. The untimely has not only to see the glamour of presence (and the glamour of the present), but its age, its becoming, its being-a-ruin, as in the case of Manhattan. Or as in the case of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, in which he brought up a million examples of the simultaneity of contemporary Paris with the ruin, to show not contemporary New York’s, but modern Paris’s “contiguousness with the ruin.”

But Agamben’s example is not the eternal image of New York, like Heidegger’s is the eternal view of the greek temple and Benjamin’s are the eternal ruins of contemporary Athens — it is the image of the skyscrapers of Manhattan in a specific moment in time. And for him, it is not the metahistorical Greek temple above of all times that serves as example of atemporality, but the “atemporal images of September 11th.” The image of 9/11 for Agamben is as atemporal as Victor Hugo’s Paris, often cited by Benjamin, because it has uncovered not an ontological origin as in Heidegger, but a historical origin as in Foucault, ripped open the smooth surface of the image of New York and unveiled something, which was hidden within this image. 9/11 was not only the beginning of a global media public of contemporaries that watched this image simultaneously, that was broadcasted or streamed *live* into all parts

119. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 50f.

of the world, it was a true origin for something archaic. The image of the ruin, was unveiled or dug out under the shockingly new, an event which we unfortunately still feel contemporary to, as if there was a “natural” iconic connection from the ruins of the World Trade Center to the ruins of Palmyra.

The Visibility of Contemporaneity

One can easily refuse to accept Agamben’s example of the image of Manhattan in different methodologies. The gaze of the untimely can be declined temporally as well as spatially, visually as well as ontologically. It might be refused temporally as *deep time*, when we say that the squinted eye sees several things at the same time in a form of double exposure.¹²⁰ But it can be also deciphered spatially, when we talk about a *deep image* of New York that is hidden in its conventional one, when we say that the contemporary has to see “right through” the present to see its foundation, its ruin at the bottom. This is why the contemporary has to squint: to not only see the present, but also to not let oneself be blinded by the present and its shine and gleam, and instead to perceive its foundation, its skeleton, its “facies” as Agamben says. But to get to the “facies,” one has not to ignore something to see something behind it (this would be interpretation), but to see something within something, to see the “facies” within an appearance—to see the being in that which has being, which amounts to the classic retreat from *Sein* to *Seiendes*.

But if we reach being only by that which has being, it must be in the world, appear and emerge in it; thus it must have or contain a certain look. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes: “Appearing also means: as something that is already standing there, to proffer a foreground, a surface, a look as an offering to be looked at.”¹²¹ Heidegger’s prime

120. See Ebeling, *Moskauer Tagebuch: Doppelbelichtung* (Vienna: Passagen, 2001).

121. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction*

to *Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 139.

example of the extraordinary visibility of being is, as we know, not New York at dawn, but the Greek temple: “The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves.”¹²²

There is being in the look, in the outer appearance, *being* contains a *look*—and who would disagree with the statement that the contemporary also operates via looks, that the contemporary always has a look, gives itself to a look, seems maybe most graspable by a look? This is why the archaeology of contemporaneity is inclined towards visibility — one can easily state that contemporaneity through itself is inclined towards visibility; what is contemporary is visible and what is visible is contemporary — we just need to learn to see it. In this primary visibility also lies in the political importance of the contemporary: contemporaneity is about visibility; what is said to be contemporary is or gets visible; it is selected by a mass of events to get visible. But if contemporaneity is connected to a regime of visibility, if only the contemporary gets visible, visibility has a highly political character. What (political) events are we contemporary to? What gets visible and what does not? It is important not to confuse the aforementioned convergence of contemporaneity and visibility with the position of philosophical aesthetics — with its “emphatic insistence on the presentness of action, aesthetics or experience,”¹²³ and with its unconditioned defense of the historical,¹²⁴ that also defends contemporaneity as the locus of any political action,¹²⁵ but without yet considering the problematic (in)visibility of any truly contemporary phenomenon. Even though it claims to consider contemporary phenomena in its emancipatory political actions, it deprives itself of the very means to see them in the first place, which is also why one first needs an epistemology of

122. Martin Heidegger, “On the Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 143–212.

123. Avanesian and Malik, *The Time Complex*, 34.

124. See Rebenitsch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, 19.

125. *Ibid.*

the contemporary phenomenon before one can begin to speak about it.

In this convergence between contemporaneity and visibility lies also, and again, its closeness to being, or emergence — for what is, emerges, before our eyes. Therefore, there is not only the look of the contemporary, but also the contemporary look, maybe the contemporary in the end *is* a look, is nothing but a look? In other words, the reason why the contemporary is giving itself so easily to the look, why it seems to be most graspable by the gaze is not because contemporaneous phenomena are there, at hand, but more so because there is a closeness of contemporaneity to being, which operates via its look.

But in this convergence of visibility and being one might see much more than the obvious reason for the “ontological” fascination of fashion, that both Benjamin and Agamben cite as their first example of contemporaneity,¹²⁶ — the “being” at the bottom of the surfaces — that is the very rationale for the nexus of contemporaneity and contemporary art. It is in the look and in the outlook of things that we find the structure of being — not just their surface but the very essence of their temporal structure and of the temporality of contemporaneity. Put simply, the alliance of art with contemporaneity lies in the simple fact that the contemporary first gets visible, not thinkable, or sayable. It gets visible before it gets thinkable, this is why the visual disciplines of art (and fashion) are much closer to the contemporary than history or theology — which is also why archaeology as the discipline of the visible is the most likely to grasp it.

But contemporary’s visibility consists not only in hiding or unveiling a discrete structure of being, but also, according to Foucault’s “historical a priori,” a discrete structure of

126. See Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 47; Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 65; as well

as Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

becoming. It becomes most obvious if we turn to another, geological signification of the term “facies,” that brings it much closer not only to Benjamin’s examination of the geology of the city of Paris, but also to his method of embedding contemporary Paris in its historical and geological formation history: “facies” defines also all properties of stones that result from their formation history. Therefore, in Agamben’s use of the “facies,” the aforementioned temporal and the spatial model of contemporaneity are overlapping: contemporary is the one who is capable of perceiving and deciphering any present and “contemporary” image as archaic as a rock. This is to be understood less metaphorically but literally, meaning not only that one has to be capable to solidify and freeze the image of the present for it to become eternal, but inversely that one has to be able to liquify and fluidify the eternal image of a rock (or the skyscrapers) to also see all archaic traces of their formation history.

The Contemporary Origin

Eventually, the contemporary image is, or has to be deciphered as, archaic as a rock. But why is the archaic so central to Agamben, what is unveiled by the archaic? “‘Archaic’ means close to the *arché*, that is to say, the origin, but the origin is not only situated in a chronological past: it is contemporary with historical becoming and does not cease to operate in it,” which is why he defines contemporariness as “proximity to the origin that nowhere pulses with more force than in the present.”¹²⁷

This stunning passage seems to explain the mysterious nexus of archaeology and contemporaneity. For this definition crosses the concepts of the archaic with the origin, summarizes and yet concentrates Agamben’s temporal and spatial definitions of the contemporary. But why does he talk about the origin all the time in the first place—a term that he (together with occidental culture in general) seems to be quite obsessed

127. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 50.

with? And why (and this may seem even more weird) does he place the origin in the present, when he writes that “both this distancing and nearness, which define contemporariness, have their foundation in this proximity to the origin that nowhere pulses with more force than in the present”?

In Agamben’s example of New York, “the origin pulses in the present” as the image of the ruins is wrapped in its conventional image or like the formation history of any stone is wrapped in its look, its “facies.” Agamben provides even more lively examples: the contemporary “does not cease to operate in it [historical becoming], just as the embryo continues to be active in the tissues of the mature organism, and the child in the psychic life of the adult.”¹²⁸ And in his “Philosophical Archaeology,” he brings up an “operative force within history” that is active in the same way as “the child of psychoanalysis exerting an active force in the psychic life of the adult.”¹²⁹ These very strong examples indicate the “contiguosness” of the origins that Agamben is talking about: he is not talking about a *beginning* as “chronological past,” meaning a historical origin that *loses* its strength and activity once it is instituted, but rather about a beginning that *keeps* its force and presence instead of losing it — an origin that keeps on being contemporary with what was once originated.¹³⁰

This difference between the beginning as historical and chronological past and the origin as ongoing temporal presence is best expressed by a dark but yet lucid differentiation that Benjamin once used in his famous *Preface to The Origin of German Tragic Drama* of 1928:

Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis

128. *Ibid.*

129. Agamben, “Philosophical Archaeology,” 110.

130. See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existant came into being [kein Werden des Entsprungenen], but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance [dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes]. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.¹³¹

In this enigmatic text, at least in its original German version, Benjamin differentiates between constituting time and constituted time, between the *originating* (Entspringendes) and the *originated* (Entsprungenes). This difference is not rendered sufficiently by the English version that reads the *Entsprungene* as “the process by which the existant came into being” and the *Entspringendes* as “that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance” — a difference which designates, beyond the temporal difference of the verb, a difference of activity: the *originating* is still active and operating whereas the *originated* is already past and cut off from any presence. The active and ongoing quality of the origin is secured by the concept of contemporaneity; an origin is the place that welcomes the past into the present, an opening of the present to the past and of the present to the future, that is not past at all, but “the place of an operation that actualizes its efficiency.”¹³²

Agamben is very clear on this point, when he defines as origin only that which is still effective. To constitute an origin, something does not necessarily have to be old, but can lie also in the present — which is why “for this reason, archaeology

131. The German version reads: “Ursprung, wiewohl durchaus historische Kategorie, hat mit Entstehung dennoch nichts gemein. Im Ursprung wird kein Werden des Entsprungenen, vielmehr dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes gemeint. Der Ursprung steht im Fluß des Werdens als Strudel und reißt in seine Rhythmik

das Entstehungsmaterial hinein.” Walter Benjamin, “Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels,” in *Gesammelte Schriften Band IV*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1991), 226.

132. Agamben, “Philosophical Archaeology,” 47.

constitutes the only path of access to the present.”¹³³ But why in the world should “archaeology” open “the only path of access to the present,” just because this discipline is the old origin seeker, specialized in finding, interpreting and exploiting origins? Is not archaeology even further away from contemporaneity than history? Yes and no: yes, as most of the time it deals with ages of which there is no historical record yet; no, as lately archaeologies of historical ages have also been developed, like industrial archaeology for example or garbage archaeology, which provide historical times with a different, material image of itself—or that give a material image of temporalities which in themselves are not, or not yet, historical. This paradox lies at the heart of Agamben’s thought: the paradoxical closeness of contemporaneity and archaeology of presence and origin. We learn from him that surprisingly, the mirror of the contemporary is not “the past,” but “the origin,” that origin and contemporaneity belong paradoxically together. The paradox lies in the fact that the contemporary, in this definition, integrates the past into the present (the untimely)—but a past that is still active, still alive and somehow “present” and not yet outdated. The origin thus is, and I repeat this very messianic and very Benjaminian definition, “the place of an operation that has yet to obtain its effects.”

This is Agamben’s dialectics of origin. One’s origin is not over and outdated, but up-to-date and active—as the contemporary is not only active in the present, but also welcomes the past. But we do not just need the past to get access to the present, every present moment constructs its own past—which gets nowhere as visible as in the field of the artworld, where all of a sudden dozens of 1970s artists emerged out of nothing, as if they had just been invented.¹³⁴ As every contemporaneity constructs its own past, its own origins, the origins remain active in any contemporary moment. But if origins are

133. Agamben, *ibid.*, 103.

134. Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, 18.

still active in the present and if the contemporary is not the opposite of the origin, if any true contemporaneity needs and relies on its origins, then we are also shifting and distorting the understanding of archaeology—of an archaeology, that is not looking for the old anymore, but for that which is still effective today. Conventionally, we would expect that one examines a present moment as an effect of a cause, which lies per definition in the past. The trick of Agamben's and Benjamin's archaeologist of the contemporary is that he searches—not for the *originated*, but for the emerging and *originating*—for the effective past, or, more general, for all effective operations that lie in the past as well as in the present.

Agamben's contemporaneity is surely solidary with the search for the *originating* instead of the *originated*, as he looks for the gold dust of the arising past, for the active and effective past, for the acts of constituting time instead of working within an already constituted time—a solidary in opposition to the one between archaeology (working with the process of constitution of time) and history (operating within a constituted time). History deals with the *Entsprungenes*, the originated, which is why history and archaeology differ by reason of the qualitative difference of their temporalities: the archaeologist working within Benjamin's *Strudel* of originating time, whereas the historian is working within the calmer realm of the documented past. In contrast to the historian, the archaeologist searches not for dates within an existing temporality, but for temporalities all new, for the emergence of temporalities whose origin will stay as long with them as they exist. This is why the relation between archaeology and history is identical to the relation of constituted time and constituting time as “the place of an operation that has yet to obtain its effects.”

But what is an “effective operation,” other than being, which this clever wording visibly avoids? I would say that an operation is effective, if it is not yet finished, if it has not yet become history, but if it is still historical enough not to fall

into the timeless abyss of being: *almost historical, but not yet ontological; too ontological to be historical and too historical to be transcendental*—a historical repetition of the transcendental. This is the temporality (or layer) of the phenomena, Agamben searches for together with Benjamin. In other words, their origin designates events that happened in the past—but in an unpast past that still influences us and that is still active; inversely, directly emanating from this concept of origin, is a contemporaneity that reaches back into the past—but into a past that is still active enough not to yet become history. This *original contemporaneity* thus designates a time zone in between the historical and the ontological: it is ontological enough not to be on the farside but on the nearside of history, but it is at the same time historical enough not to become ontological. Anyone who is searching for codifications that are still active today is looking for originating temporalities, which lie closer—but not closer on the time bar—to the present than historical temporalities. Because objects are the constituting and instituting forces of the present moment, no matter how long they are past, one can say that the archaeologist is working closer to the present: because s/he is looking for the codification of the present. The archaeologist does not take temporalities for granted. This is why Agamben describes the work of the archaeologist as “going back in time.”¹³⁵ The archaeologist explores the access or the grounds of the present moment—and this ground, one could add, does not have to be the oldest one. It rarely is.

The Birth of the New

This present-ness makes archaeology for Agamben the discipline of advents and beginnings of the contemporary: “The moment of arising, the *arché* of archaeology, is what will take place, what will become accessible and present, only

135. Agamben, “Philosophical Archaeology,” 104.

when archaeological inquiry has completed its operation.”¹³⁶ So if the “archaeological inquiry” looks for these “moments of arising,” that have not ended yet, no matter if they lie in the present or in the past, and if these “moments of arising” bear the seal of true contemporaneity, then it is archaeology, and only archaeology, that is always already looking for the contemporary: “The point of archaeology is to gain access to the present for the first time.”¹³⁷ If the contemporary is about beginnings, something that has begun, that is *in dawn* and has not ended yet, it is the job of the archaeologist to find them: “With a singular gesture, the archaeologist pursuing such an apriori retreats toward the present.”¹³⁸ But how do we know if something is really present and active and if it has not ended yet? How do we know if something is still contemporary or not? How do we know whether a love is still contemporary or if it has already long ended, if there is still the official commitment, or if there is still grief and mourning for the other, even when there is no longer any official commitment, or even in dreams and thoughts? The scene is already a *cliché* in which two lovers cannot agree on a common history, on common beginnings and ends (one saying, “it had begun long before that for me”—the other one answering, “but it had already ended, then, for me”).

It seems almost to be a definition of the contemporary, that it is hardly possible to assign a date to it; what we call “contemporary” denotes the fragility and instability of temporality itself—its burning subjectivity, but also its shaky historicity, that changes any time we call upon it (which is also the case with love’s temporality, that alters any time you refer to it, and which might have best been expressed by Bertrand Russell’s famous quote: “I didn’t know I loved you until I heard myself saying so”). Another, more “serious” example of the

136. *Ibid.*, 105.

137. *Ibid.*, 106.

138. *Ibid.*, 95.

fragility of contemporaneity and the shakenness of its historicity is at the same time *the* example of contemporaneity itself: nothing more shaky, fluctuating and unsteady as the concept of “contemporary art”! Are there any two similar definitions of any piece of contemporary art? Does anybody agree on the contemporaneity of contemporary art? To some people, Matisse is still contemporary, to others last season’s artists are not contemporary anymore. To many students, the entirety of the twentieth century has already become historical, whereas the 2000s seem “contemporary.” When is an artistic *œuvre* still contemporary, for we know that many people still feel contemporary to Cézanne or Duchamp, as does Didi-Huberman, who compares the *ready mades* with prehistoric burial objects.¹³⁹ If one states that Duchamp is still our contemporary — and it is always Duchamp that is taken as model for this being “still our contemporary”¹⁴⁰ — it means that his art still has effects upon us, that it has not yet become history. And true, maybe not the worst definition of the contemporary would be that we feel something is contemporary, if its newness has not ceased, if it is still alive, still going on — like a piece of art that still affects us, no matter how long it is past.

On the other hand, we have to be very aware of the fact that contemporary art is also operating at the other end of the time scale of contemporaneity, that is to say in its staging of new beginnings. The historical avantgardes (that are generally taken by many as *the* model for contemporary art) have always worked heavily on their acts of birth and their visible demarcation from the past.¹⁴¹ The avantgardes have invested heavily in disruptions and new codifications of time, which is

139. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung. Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks* (Köln: Dumont, 1999), 22.

140. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 18; Raqs Media Collective, “Now and Elsewhere,” 46.

141. According to Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 65, the avantgardes in the fine arts have always related to “the archaic, original and unlied.”

why every piece of true contemporary art tries to achieve the very same thing — a caesura, a revelation: a new origin. This is also why calling a piece of art “contemporary” does not only imply a judgment on its quality, but on its temporality. Artists, no matter how modest they are, do not only want to hear that we like their work, but that it initiates a new epoch, a new beginning, that sets it apart from all history before.

The Wilderness of the Internet

This seems to be the case with post-internet art, which represents (or presents itself as) a new, paradoxical origin, that negates art history completely.¹⁴² In the already famous 9th Berlin Biennale, there were hardly any references to art history displayed, but even more creation myths full of water, mythical scenes and phantastic narration, digital offsprings and mythical disruptions, new origins full of strange digital creatures, creeping out of primordial ooze. All of a sudden, with this “generic, future” art, to use Schwarte’s title “Notations for Future Art,”¹⁴³ we find ourselves within a “new aesthetics,” simply because the digital is a new coding, a new *arché*. Moreover *arché* means, following Derrida,¹⁴⁴ a new law *and*, at the same time, the site of execution of this new law: which is in this case the new code, the digital code. Digital code breaks everything up and makes everything new, transposing everything else into its universal code.¹⁴⁵

This is also why so many “contemporary” artists are nowadays working with errors in transposing processes, with errors in coding practices, errors in between different codes or in between the analog and the digital — producing what is now

142. Post-internet art would thus act contrarily to contemporary art that, according to Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 75, consists of “nothing but applied art history.”

143. Schwarte, *Notate für eine künftige Kunst* (Berlin: Merve), 75.

144. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

145. For an aesthetic concept of transposition, see Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 2*.

called glitch, mash, meme, or moshing art. This is also why we see so many ruptures and discontinuities in post-internet art, because discontinuity is not only an attribute or a characteristic of digital code. It is its way of being itself, discontinuity is digital's ontological order, its *arché*, which is why we see so many ruptures and cuts. For example in the videos of Ryan Trecartin, discontinuities not just of the image, but also of their sound, which breaks up, is cut off, before anybody has ended speaking. Here, we are not dealing with a human rhythm and temporality anymore, but with a technical and posthuman one. There is a new wilderness of the image as an effect of its new coding, a new, maybe monstrous version of Baudelaire's *paradis artificiels*, totally immersed inside the internet reality, which results in a certain sense of desolatedness and devastatedness. After a new coding, things have not yet settled, even though the digital code is relatively stable, its appearance is not. We are dealing with a fundamental instability of a new order, instability of everything: instability of the aesthetic, but also of the epistemic, the epistemology of the image, instability of the persons we see, their gender, their role, their agency. There is also an instability of the relation between people and things, which have lost their hierarchy with the new coding: which results in this carnival-esque situations, with people wearing wigs and pupil-less, acorea contact lenses which we are visually harrassed by in Trecartin's videos.

His show in Berlin's Kunst-Werke in 2014 expanded the sense of wilderness into the institutional space, that felt more like a multiplex-cinema stuffed with technology than an art institution — a wilderness of hidden technology scattered around within a camping scene of scattered tents and sleeping bags and outdoor seats and beds in front of several screens, one of which showed an old freemason's church out of service. While technology was doing many things that one did not see anymore, in this anti-minimalist, anti-modernist gesture, there was a total loss of all medium-specificity into a state which

Rosalind Krauss has called the “post-medium condition” in all its hysterical theatricality.

What Benjamin once said about film, that “brings to light entirely new structures of matter,”¹⁴⁶ also applies to these digital images that have somehow changed their matter. This is why we see so many artists, even if not video artists, working with materiality and matter in virtual times, with new matters, which was also the theme of the now famous Kassel Fridericianum show “Speculations on Anonymous Materials”:¹⁴⁷ a digital materiality, a materiality after, post-internet. This new materiality, in its very arepresentational and “anonymous” regime, not only illustrates very well Foucault’s concept of the arepresentational “monument,” it is itself illustrated by the following Schwarte passage on the ontological change of works of (post-internet) art:

Future works of art are not characterized anymore through a certain materiality, not anymore through medial operations, not even through the formation of relations [...] These works of art form a reality on their own, beyond and autonomous of the spectator’s conscience. They form scenes of change, of reorientation, descriptions of the negation of continuous, chronological time.¹⁴⁸

Speculations on anonymous materials also linked the theme of post-internet to the philosophical discourse on speculative realism, which also deals with anonymous, non-subjective or posthuman accesses to the world. Even though it seems as if the connection between post-internet art to speculative realism was a clever marketing tool, there seems to be

146. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. IV: 1938–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006) 266.

147. See “Speculations on Anonymous Materials,” exhibition at Fridericianum Kassel, Sept 29, 2013–February 23, 2014.

<http://www.fridericianum.org/exhibitions/speculations-on-anonymous-materials> (accessed April 27, 2017).

148. Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 75.

a connection between a philosophical position that — beginning with Quentin Meillassoux’s poststructuralist logics — postulates the withdrawal of the Kantian idea of the world’s very constructedness.¹⁴⁹ It tried to accept this broken world as such with a post-internet art that claimed that its artworks would not refer to individual artist-subjects (and their constructions of the world), but to the machines, media, and networks through which they were sent and which had built them in the first place — and thus the claim of referencelessness, detachedness and isolatedness of the materials and things of the world linked the artworks to “their” philosophy.

One often gets the impression that this famous “second nature” of the medium is becoming for many digital natives their first nature, that they receive their strongest and most vital impressions via the internet and not via the real world (whatever that was).¹⁵⁰ So the “post” of post-internet art might mean: after they had been on the internet, after they had been affected or infected by it. Everything from now on carries its virus, its genes, its digital code. Nothing remains unaffected by it. Nobody escapes the digital anymore.

After having seen too much post-internet art, I once dreamt of stages or stagelike sites where nobody ever rehearsed, all the time somebody was taking you onto a stage where things were recorded. Everything was being recorded and shown at the same time, which led to the impression that any spatial separation of stage and spectator was absent or destroyed, and you were constantly looking at something but at the same time being looked at. There was no invisibility in the scenery and all the time there was something happening, one just never knew what, and there was always somebody approaching you and talking to you and doing something to you or to someone else without beginning or end.

149. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Finitude* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

150. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Finitude* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

The Recurrence of the Old

Even if we all know how important and fragile beginnings are, it somehow seems as if ends are even more so. In these situations of impure beginnings and endings, when nobody knows if (official) history has begun or ended, it is the archaeologist who goes deeper. Within the concealed temporalities of art and love, the archaeologist searches for caulky traces of beginnings, travels back to a region before time and before history, to a point of dawn, when time is not constituted yet and a new temporality is born. Because the contemporary is not only that which has not ended yet, it is also, and more importantly maybe, that which has just begun. In order not to end, something has to have begun.

But if the contemporary is about what has begun and if archaeology is about beginnings, what is a beginning? And who is to say “when the present begins?”¹⁵¹ A beginning is a slight caesura, a rupture in time, a discontinuity. Any time we call something “contemporary,” we feel something new, that is setting a distance to the past. We perceive a slight rupture in time, a nearly imperceptible discontinuity: that is Agamben’s imperceptible origin, as imperceptible as a new codification of a computer programme that changes the very nature of what it shows. This is the contemporary: a temporal difference that is coding something new, that opens up a new quality, as the religious revelation Kierkegaard talks about or as with a new love that changes everything in our lives. For it is one of love’s *clichéd* ideals that it acts as a new creation and revival, that leads the other to true contemporaneity. It is just through the eyes of the other that recognizes me, that I am seen in my essence, that I am beginning a new life, and that I am coded anew.

One misunderstands the idea of the discontinuity (or one does not reach into its depths), if one only applies it to historical periodizations (for example, of the “birth” of

151. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 25.

contemporary art, that may be randomly dated as 1945, 1965, 1989)¹⁵² — historical periodizations, which remain astonishingly stable, also that misunderstand Agamben's idea of original caesuras. Moreover the current critique of contemporary art not producing any true origins anymore, to just superficially be *originell* (in German) instead of *original*, misses the depth of the idea of discontinuity that does not play within a historical register in the first place.¹⁵³ The caesura of an origin runs much deeper than (art) historical periodizations, as it has to touch the real, the matter, that unfolds new temporalities that underlie any historicity, which is also why it cannot be debated like historical periodization — not because the data are “right” or “wrong,” but because they do not touch what they are talking about sufficiently: historical consciousness talking only to itself in a purely self-referential discourse, driven by the idea of historical “progress.”¹⁵⁴ But artistic (and personal) origins are much wilder than any normative “system,” as they do not represent anything — so contemporary art has not the mission to convey or represent contemporaneity, it is not a “cultural carrier of contemporaneity”¹⁵⁵ — no historical evolution and no contemporary conscience. It sources its strength out of an origin hard to find and impossible to date. The problem in these approaches is that their modernized philosophy of history is hovering above artistic practices, not giving them any real epistemological agency that could touch the theory; today, philosophy does not have the job of saying what mute art cannot say (or “carry”), but to translate

152. See Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, 14ff.; Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 18; John Rajchman, “The Contemporary: A New Idea?” in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 137ff.; Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 66.

153. See Boris Groys, *Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie* (Munich: Hanser, 1992), 38ff.; Rebentisch, *Theorien*

der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung, 10; Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 67.

154. Christoph Menke and Juliane Rebentisch, eds., *Kunst — Fortschritt — Geschichte*, (Berlin: Kadmos, 2006).

155. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 27. See also Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 69; and Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, 13.

epistemologically, what it is. “The question then becomes not one of ‘periodizing’ contemporaneity, or of erecting a neat white picket fence around it; rather, it becomes one of finding shortcuts, trapdoors, antechambers, and secret passages between now and elsewhere.”¹⁵⁶

This possibility of a new beginning on secular grounds might also be an overlooked theme in Benjamin, in spite of his “profane illumination.” But there are also many *art nouveau*-formulations in Benjamin that claim to “renew the old world,” or the “renewal of existence” or talk about “procedures of renewal.”¹⁵⁷ So any time we have the project of “Die alte Welt erneuern,” this leads to the “Quell,” the source. Any time we indicate a contemporaneity, we indicate a contiguousness to the origins, we are doing an archaeology; without digging out origins (meaning ruptures and discontinuities), there would be no contemporaneity. Any time we feel contemporary to something, we dig out origins, we are doing and digging archaeology.

When we deal with the “birth” of the contemporary moment—defining the contemporary as that which has begun but has not ended yet—we have to remind ourselves of the debate on the concept of beginnings.¹⁵⁸ What are we talking about? Beginnings, origins, or births? About emergences or formations, and what is this “history of the contemporary” other than genealogy, Foucault’s Nietzschean “history of the present moment”? Is Foucault’s genealogy not declinating the archaeological theme oriented toward the contemporary, giving “rise to questions concerning our native lands”?¹⁵⁹

156. Raqs Media Collective, “Now and Elsewhere,” 47.

157. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften: Band IV* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 390.

158. See Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”; John Pizer, “The Use and Abuse of ‘Ursprung’: On Foucault’s Reading of Nietzsche,” in: *Nietzsche-Studien*. Vol. 19, no. 1 (December 1990): 462–478.

159. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 162.

Foucault first differentiated between origins (*Ursprung*) and sources (*Herkunft*), asking why Nietzsche challenges the pursuit of the origin.¹⁶⁰ He diagnosed two uses of the concept of origin in Nietzsche, one metaphysical, one anti-metaphysical, stating that the project of genealogical Nietzsche would have been a search for the anti-metaphysical beginnings and not for its metaphysical antithesis.¹⁶¹ Even if Foucault might have confused the conceptions of origin and beginning, and had forgotten Nietzsche's theme of forgetting,¹⁶² one might wonder how these conceptions align with Benjamin's and Agamben's differentiation of a historical and an anti-historical beginning, of the differentiation between originating and the originated. At first sight, it seems as if we are dealing with Nietzsche's two uses of origin, one metaphysical and one anti-metaphysical; that the anti-metaphysical use of origin would be synonymous with the originated, whereas the metaphysical use of origin would thus be synonymous with the originating; and that Foucault and Agamben would thus vote for two different versions of the origin. But does not Agamben's and Benjamin's advocacy for the originating end up in exactly the metaphysical conception of origin Foucault was attacking with his genealogical method? Is Agamben able to give the conception of origin a contemporary twist, because his origin is as metaphysical as the entire discourse on the contemporary? And what does this suspicion have to do with the neighbouring suspicion of the metaphysical roots of the discourse on the contemporary?

The Presence of Ontology

But what does it mean to accuse Agamben (and maybe even Benjamin along with him) of a "metaphysical," yet "ontological" discourse? And what does it mean to align the

160. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 140f. See Pizer, "The Use and Abuse of 'Ursprung,'" 464, 475f.

161. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 140f.

162. See Pizer, "The Use and Abuse of 'Ursprung,'" 476f.

contemporary with this suspicion — which paradoxically turns the leading signs before a discourse into its opposite, which seemed so anti-metaphysical at first and turns out to be quite ontological? But does “anti-historical” always imply metaphysical or ontological? These are fundamental, and very severe questions. Of course, the archaeological discourse on contemporaneity means to do just that: to develop an anti-historical discourse on the contemporary that is neither metaphysical nor ontological.

At this moment, we can put the different parts of the archaeological agenda together. An archaeology of contemporaneity searches for the beginnings of active and effective moments — often concealed situations that are defined by the fact that they have not ended yet, as we find them in traumas or dreams as their constituting *a priori*. But we should not think this *a priori* as a transcendental, yet historical category, which gives us something like Foucault’s “historical a priori,” which is a paradoxical yet important figure for the contemporary. Even if one thinks Agamben’s historical case studies as relying on this “historical a priori” — as the search of something which has once begun in historical time and is still defining our contemporaneity — one can fear that in his transcendental archaeology, all materiality gets lost, under the aggressive and maybe avantgardistic commitment to what I have called the tradition of *Wild Archaeologies*.¹⁶³ Even writing in the name of archaeology, Agamben misses any primary materiality: there are no conflicts between paper and stone, reading and seeing, texts and techniques. One could fear that archaeology, in his transcendental manoeuvre, gets completely absorbed by philosophy.

Or is the manoeuvre that we are talking about here, not a transcendental but an ontological one? For there is a second

163. Knut Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien* 1 & 2, Knut Ebeling, “The Art of Searching:

On ‘Wild Archaeologies’ from Kant to Kittler.”

quality of the contemporary that Agamben brings up. His origin “is contemporary” with something else. So the contemporary *is*, quite simply. It is, as we said before, it is active and effective, which is why we should wonder what differentiates the activity and effectiveness Agamben talks about from plain ontological being? Also, the undefinable contemporary art seems less a quality of an object, but a temporal state, a being, that sets it apart from anything else. That is why one could call it an ecstasy: an ecstasy *is* (why Heidegger obviously also liked the term);¹⁶⁴ it is ongoing, it is in operation, active, it consumes you. Anytime we think, “This is so contemporary!” (which might not happen so often), we are activated by something contagious, we are transgressing all judgment and experiencing a little ecstasy. The active ingredient of the contemporary in art is neither in the subject nor in the object; it indicates all but in a flat simultaneity, the presence of something still active, happening in the moment, that we cannot escape, and are within.

The Spatiality of Contemporaneity

But if the contemporary in art happens to be neither in the subject nor in the object, then where is it? Maybe in its materiality. An often heard accusation tells us that materiality—which might be held as carrier for the contemporary—is a code word for ontology: for the material must be activated by something to convey something. What here sounds quite vague is exactly “what meaning cannot convey,” which is the subtitle of Gumbrecht’s book on the *Production of Presence*—and which was summarized by architect Peter Zumthor by bringing up “this presence thing of not meaning but being.”¹⁶⁵ Gumbrecht operates a simple reversal: his “spatial concept of presence”¹⁶⁶ proposes to access the primary materiality of

164. See Osborne, “Temporalization as Transcendental Aesthetics,” 31.

165. Peter Zumthor, in *Presence*, ed. Berthold, Ursprung, Widrich, 17.

166. Jürg Berthold, in *Presence*, 35.

any contemporaneity by simply understanding presence not temporally, but spatially:

The word 'presence' does not refer to a temporal but to a spatial relationship to the world and its objects. Something that is 'present' is supposed to be tangible for human hands.¹⁶⁷

First and above all, he [the author] wanted to understand the word 'presence' in this context as a spatial reference. What is 'present' to us, is in reach, in front of us, tangible for our bodies.¹⁶⁸

Put more clearly, Gumbrecht's definition of presence follows several shifts that this text has already undertaken with reference to various authors. To summarize, it *first* shifts the definition of the contemporary away from its novelty to its origin; *secondly*, it defines the origin not as old, but as potentially current; *thirdly*, it shifts the definition of the contemporary from the subject/object dichotomy to a more material understanding of presence; *fourthly*, it decentralizes the understanding of contemporaneity from the mental / *I think* to the more material *there is contemporaneity*; and finally, *fifthly*, it shifts the definition of presence from a mental to a spatial paradigm.

Understanding presence more spatially, we see that the materiality of contemporaneity simply lies in that which is present to us — not mentally present, but materially, "in front of us, tangible for our bodies." Even though this shift from the mental to the material seems to be the easiest and most evident, it is nevertheless great, fundamental, epochal. For one has to keep in mind that presence for most people immediately implies the *mental* presence of other people, minds, brains,

167. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, XIII.

168. *Ibid.*, 17.

and not, or not at first, the material presence of things, objects, nature. We all too quickly forget about the material presence of the world, and we forget the primary or archaic nature of the “world” while talking about it.

But there seems to be also a primary materiality of that which is contemporary, as things and objects are not simply there, they are there in presence, in a contemporary moment, they are contemporaries with us—and not only we with them! It is almost as if the contemporary was the “medium” needed to convey that things are actually there, which we all too quickly forget, because they stay and remain in most cases present to us, meaning contemporary. Therefore the “medium” and the “mediality” of the contemporary are that which tell us, that things are, in the present moment—which is also why the “mediality” of the contemporary seems quite transparent and invisible to us. We look right through it. We see things that are contemporary to us, but—as if their contemporaneity was built into them—we do not see their presence, their contemporaneity. Contemporaneity is the *sine qua non* for the perception of any object, for if they were not contemporary to us, if they were not present to us, if they were not our contemporaries, we would not perceive them at all.

But are we not talking here quite obviously about *being*? Does not the contemporary simply rely on the very simple fact that things, that humans, that we all *are*? Moreover is the impression of the transparency of contemporaneity not identical with the famous withdrawal of being from that which has being? Is the concealedness of the contemporary—the simple fact that we cannot see it as such—not the famous secrecy of being? Do we not, when we experience things in front of us, simply forget that they *are* there, together with us, contemporarily? And is the famous “double movement of unconcealing and hiding”¹⁶⁹ not what we encounter when

169. *Ibid.*, 67.

we try to talk about the contemporary: that it is everywhere (revealed) and nowhere (unrevealed) at the same time? One could end up with the impression that the entire discourse on contemporaneity is not only heavily impregnated, but maybe almost identical with a new ontological thinking, that we see also in other domains.

No matter how one answers this suspicion, it does not seem to be a matter of yes or no, or of the acceptance or refusal of a given hypothesis. Much more important than any suspicion is the fact that we can use ontological thinking to shift attention away from the question of mental contemporaneity to a more spatial, corporal, and material dimension:

Being, as it is being unconcealed, for example, in a work of art, is not something spiritual or something conceptual. Being is not a meaning, being belongs to the dimension of things. This is why Heidegger can say about the happening of truth in works of art: 'Artworks universally display a thingly character, albeit in a wholly distinct way.'¹⁷⁰

If the "thingly character" is best displayed by artworks, and if artworks define presence and contemporaneity not only mentally and temporally, but also materially and spatially, it is Heidegger's temple that is, paradoxically, the contemporary artwork par excellence — because it is not contemporary for its novelty, but for its material and spatial presence. Ironically, one of the best descriptions of contemporaneity is the most untimely one — Heidegger's description of the Greek temple. What is described in his famous descriptions of the Greek temple is nothing else but the contemporary moment of perception, the now of its thingly presence. The temple is as present as we are able to perceive it in the present moment, it is present *now*, in front of our eyes. As we are touched by artworks always

170. *Ibid.*, 67.

in a specific moment in time, in a certain presence, one might as well flip the coin around and say: True contemporaneity consists in the momentary perception of an artwork, no matter the epoch to which it belongs. The most contemporary work of art would thus be the temple, because it imposes its untimely presence upon us, no matter how uncontemporary and old it actually is.¹⁷¹ Eventually one could go on with this “presentification,”¹⁷² saying that the material or thingly presence of one’s own body is “in sync with the things of the world.”¹⁷³ There are very simple material and maybe corporal and even medial conditions for the mental production of contemporaneity and even for the discourse on contemporaneity: conditions that inform our minds and our discourses, but that got lost in their own unfolding; conditions that *are* or *were* present at a time, that followed the structure of being, for they hid and concealed themselves in the process of their own unfolding.

Saving Contemporaneity

In addition, Agamben, who does not cite Heidegger, finds his “original approach to the present,” in suspension before all cultural oppositions and decisions in ontological and psychoanalytical terms. It is not surprising that in his archaeological methodology — which is also a methodology of the contemporary — he does not make reference to the genealogical Foucault, fighting all origins, but to the phenomenological one, in particular to Foucault’s preface to the 1930 psycho-ontological *Dream and Existence* by Ludwig Binswanger.¹⁷⁴ This is the very text in which Foucault, according to Agamben,

171. *Ibid.*, 72.

172. *Ibid.*, 123; See also Christine Ross, *The Past is the Present; It’s the Future, Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 13; Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 73.

173. Gumbrecht, *ibid.*, 117.

174. Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream and Existence* (London: Humanities Press, 1993).

“precisely described — or foresaw — the strategies and gestures of archaeology.”¹⁷⁵ It is in this text that Agamben finds an archaeology — of contemporaneity — that is “capable of going back, regressively, to the source of the split between conscious and unconscious,”¹⁷⁶ “beyond memory and forgetting, or, rather, at the threshold of their indifference.”¹⁷⁷ We thus see how crucial the definition of the contemporary is for Agamben. He needs the contemporary for it indicates the presence of origins that could not be called present without this atemporal, asynchronic, and anachronic definition of the contemporary. If his contemporaneity was not constructed as heterogenous and hybrid, if the “facies” did not include all of the formation history of a stone, he could not integrate the past into the present as he does.

But how are we to reach this — not necessarily — long past age of constituting time, when the contemporary moment was constituted, as the contemporary always already operates in a constituted time? How are we to remember the times when we did not know what time (and thus the contemporary) originally was? How can we see the “facies” of the Greek temple without looking right through it? To get back to the dawn of constituting time and to the constitution of contemporaneity, Agamben proposes “a kind of archaeological *epoché*,”¹⁷⁸ that cites Husserl’s famous concept of phenomenological *epoché* — that also tried to reveal in the world its conditioning structures that are normally concealed. But as Husserl’s phenomenological *epoché* tried to save the original phenomenon from logic, Agamben’s archaeological *epoché* saves the contemporary phenomenon from its burial in history. Agamben — like Kant and Benjamin before him — wants to save the transcendental quality of the contemporary, its transgression of the vulgar understanding

175. Agamben, “Philosophical Archaeology,” 103.

176. *Ibid.*, 98.

177. *Ibid.*, 106.

178. *Ibid.* 101.

of the present moment. This is why he describes archaeology as the “immanent a priori of historiography.”¹⁷⁹ Archaeology saves the singularity¹⁸⁰ of any true contemporaneity from its burial by historical time, from its drowning in time. Only archaeology can do that, only archaeology “is capable to give the historical phenomenon its intelligibility.” Moreover that is why Agamben can finally in a very solemn statement tell us that, “the gesture of the archaeologist constitutes the paradigm of any true human action.”¹⁸¹

This (also very Benjaminian) attempt to link the contemporary moment to its origins and to save the contemporaneity of the origin are evidently Agamben’s most vital examples, already cited as the embryonic tissue living on in the “mature organism” as well as “the child living on in the psychic life of the adult.”¹⁸² An origin, for Agamben, is present, because it keeps on being contemporary with the historical becoming of any being, whether it is the being of an embryo or the being of a codification that also stays with anything coded as long as it operates.¹⁸³ But one could also give the — even more simple — example of everyone’s birthday, which makes this chiasm between origin and contemporaneity clear. Is a birthday something original, celebrating the origin, or is it contemporary, celebrating the ongoing contemporaneity of the origin? It is of course both, it is celebrating the becoming of the origin — of an origin, that never runs out of effectiveness.

These most vital examples make clear that it is this active, driving force behind the newness that Agamben calls origin: an origin is coding time anew. This is why it does not have to only lie in the past but can also lie in the present. An origin can break into our time at any time, it can happen any minute, like a religious revelation or like a new love. Here lies the closeness

179. *Ibid.*, 108.

180. See Mersch on the singularity of the work of art, in *Presence*, ed. Berthold, Ursprung, Widrich, 151.

181. Agamben, *ibid.*, 108.

182. Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 50.

183. See Cox and Lund, *The Contemporary Condition*, 33, 52.

of this idea of an altered temporality, of an *other* temporality, to messianic thinking, that also departs from the idea that something “totally new” can happen at any time and is able to break up our temporality completely.

But the impression that something “totally new” is beginning, can be also brought about by more “secular” events like the arrival of a child (which is, as a matter of fact, the fact of Christianity’s temporality), a memory (Proust) or simply with the arrival of a new love. If you ever wondered how strange it is, that, while you fall in love, everything for you changes while everything around you stays the same—how it is possible that you live in a totally new temporality while the time around you simply does not recognize it—then you need (and might have understood) Agamben’s origin, which designates something as “deep time.”¹⁸⁴

Becoming Contemporary

Nevertheless Agamben’s origin as “deep presence” is not the only one. It inscribes itself into a long discursive history of alternative temporal concepts that experimented well before Agamben with layered temporalities and “deep times.” For instance, the ongoing activity of an origin can be induced by dreams (Freud) or by new readings of history (Benjamin), by discourses (Foucault) or by new technical codifications (Kittler). These are all examples of paradoxical origins, paradoxical temporalities, because they indicate something like unpast pasts, pasts that do not pass away, pasts that simply refuse to fade into inactivity. On the contrary, an origin keeps on being present, being contemporary, it keeps on operating in the present and connects it to the past—and the contemporary is only truly contemporary if it welcomes and truly integrates the past. This is why the contemporary can be

184. See Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media. Towards an Archaeology*

of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

defined as an “active force” that “continues to send towards us its fossil radiation.”¹⁸⁵

But how does one truly integrate and welcome the past in its unfinishedness—especially if it is a painful one? The best example of such an unpast past, that is paradoxically contemporary to its origin, is the example of trauma.¹⁸⁶ The paradoxical temporality of contemporaneity is best exemplified by the example of trauma: past, but always recurring; always recurring and present, but never really graspable; present by its absence and absent by its forceful activity. Trauma is a paradoxical temporality, which is *always* contemporary for someone, *always* exercises effects on someone’s psyche, no matter how long ago it has passed which can be quite confusing. When talking to a traumatized person, they talk about something so contemporary for them and their psyche even when referring to an event a long time ago. It is a temporality where there is no “ago,” no past, but a present, contemporary moment that just will not go away, a wound that does not heal—contrary to the popular saying that tells us that time heals all wounds. The contemporaneity of trauma has nothing to do with the question of how long it is past; something can indeed be very long ago and be very contemporary at the same time. No matter how long ago an experience has passed, it is always present in the traumatized person. So here we have this paradoxical temporality in its purest form: to be old *and* contemporary at the same time; to be past but always present;” to be very far and very close at the same time.

One famous example of an unpast past and the contemporaneity of trauma is Alain Resnais’ 1959 “documentary” movie *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, whose main character is a traumatized woman who lives in the past and in the present at the same time—or rather who does not live the present

185. Agamben, “Philosophical Archaeology,” 110.

186. See Mark Jarzombek, in *Presence*, 81 on the presence of trauma.

for her past trauma is still too contemporary and painful to her to arrive in and actually accept the present. The film, best deciphered by Kaja Silverman,¹⁸⁷ illustrates not only the birth, the origin of a new era, of a postwar global situation, defined by the consciousness of a possible auto-destruction.¹⁸⁸ It also illustrates the ambivalent temporality of a woman who displays this paradoxical contemporaneity through a montage of past situations and *flashbacks* into the present moment in which the movie plays. Maybe the movie *is* that hybrid contemporaneity, for its montage represents a perfect saturation between past and present, the concealed origins and the phantasmal contemporaneity. Constantly, the film flashes back to the origins of her trauma that make her numb to any present, thus displaying what Freud depicted as *Urszene*: an effective present that just does not go away, like a ban that is always active and just does not fade. As she just does not get over this episode of her life, the past does not go away from her, because of her un-lived tragedy with a German soldier that keeps on living within her, not losing its contemporaneity no matter how long this story is past. What does this strange coalition between past trauma and contemporary absence signify? “They imply above all that not only memory, as in Bergson, but also forgetfulness, are contemporaneous with perception and the present. [...] Every presence thus contains a part of non-lived experience.”¹⁸⁹

What are we doing with the forgotten and non-lived parts of our lives that have not become biography and reality? That have not become contemporary? How long will this poor woman — and we of course all are this poor obsessed woman — be trapped in her own past? As we know, it is

187. See Kaja Silverman, “The Cure by Love,” *Public 32: Urban Interventions*, ed. Saara Liinamas, Janine Marchessault, and Karyn Sandlos (2005): 32–47; as well as my interpretation in Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 2*, 529–542.

188. See Raqs Media Collective, “Now and Elsewhere,” 46.

189. Agamben, “Philosophical Archaeology,” 101.

only through the intermediate and caring force of her Japanese lover that she gets access to any present. “Only at this point,”¹⁹⁰ Agamben writes (and we can take his text to decipher the film), “is the un-lived past revealed for what it was: contemporary with the present. It thus becomes accessible for the first time, exhibiting itself as a ‘source.’”¹⁹¹ This is why through this film, we are witnessing a miracle: someone accesses her own presence “for the first time,” someone is *becoming contemporary* with herself by breaking the boundaries of a traumatic past. “For this reason, contemporaneity, co-presence to one’s own present is rare and difficult; for this reason, archaeology, going back to this side of memory and forgetting, constitutes the only path of access to the present.”¹⁹²

The Materiality of Contemporaneity

Maybe, one should not ask *What is the Contemporary?* but rather how one *becomes* contemporary — thinking of that brave woman struggling for contemporaneity, the Joan of Arc of memory culture. But how does one struggle, how is the past, un-past or not, integrated into the present, into contemporaneity? How do we *become contemporary* to ourselves and to our own present? Of, course, one can state along with Schwarte, that it is the “function of contemporary art, to claim the unfinishedness of the past and the insurmountability of the contemporary.”¹⁹³ Resnais’s film does just that: it not only “claims the unfinishedness of the past and the insurmountability of the contemporary,” it *shows* it, *materializes* and *manifests* it, which is much better. It has a very different way of displaying paradoxical temporalities than just developing new concepts of origin as Benjamin and Agamben have done. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* proceeds by montage, and it mounts

190. *Ibid.*, 103.

191. *Ibid.*

192. *Ibid.*

193. Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 73.

different temporalities next to each other. So did Lessing's *Laokoon*, that also suggested to have a spatial understanding of the contemporaneity of an artwork in his notion of spatial arts—and so did Gumbrecht, when he simply shifted the understanding of the notion of presence from a temporal to a mere spatial register. Thus what is contemporary can also be what is spatially present, in reach, at hand, and—to have a more integrative and “deep” understanding of the “flat” contemporary—we can integrate the past into the present by providing *space* for it: in graveyards, museums and collections (for many people, I realize, museums are graveyards).

Derrida, who also worked, like Agamben, on the notion of *arché*, has reminded us that the term *arché* comprises a temporal as well as a spatial definition.¹⁹⁴ It not only designates the *commandment*, but also the *commencement*—*there, where* things begin. The *arché* symbolizes not only an order, but also the place where this order is instituted and installed. It thus integrates a place and a site, with all its materiality (beautifully displayed in Derrida's maybe most material book on the archive).¹⁹⁵ If the origin, the *arché*, designates not only a temporal order but also the place, site and materiality of this order, also the order of the contemporary, being part of the origin, comprehends place, site and materiality. So what could be a more material conception of contemporaneity?

We are touching, literally, on a second paradox of the concept of contemporaneity (the first one being the simultaneity of origin and contemporaneity, of the old and the new). Contemporaneity, which seems to be a temporal term, cannot be seized in time itself, it needs a space to become tangible. Contemporaneity cannot only be experienced mentally, it can be touched materially. There is not only a temporality of contemporality, but there is also a materiality of contemporaneity. So if we really want to find out what is or was

194. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 9ff.

195. *Ibid.*

contemporary at a certain time, we urgently need to switch from the transcendental model of historical time, that Osborne is putting forward, to the layers or strata of time — to the methodologies and epistemologies developed by Freud, Benjamin and Foucault, who all developed models of material time, of strata and fields.¹⁹⁶

Layers of Time

Indeed, the conception of the layer is a good example for a more material conception of contemporaneity — for things or items lying in the same layer are (more or less) contemporary to one another, they are material comrades of time. Every geologist knows that one and the same layer can contain a multitude of temporalities; we here find the famous heterogeneity of contemporaneity, the coming together of different times in a single unity, in the layer — which is not a unity. Therefore, the materiality of the layer is deconstructing Osborne's root idea of the contemporary [...]: "a coming together of different but equally 'present' times, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times."¹⁹⁷ The materiality of the layer claims first that "present's disjunctive unity" is not in time, but in space. The debris of the dinner party extends on the space of a table as well as the debris of a farmhouse excavation unfolds in layers of earth.

Secondly, the extension of the layer shows us that contemporaneity is not only fictional as in Osborne,¹⁹⁸ but also material. The layer shows empirically, that there actually have been past contemporaneities. Therefore, archaeology does not work with time as such, not with transcendental time, neither does it develop immaterial concepts of time. Time in the layer is not just in our minds, but right here, manifest in

196. See Martin Kusch, *Foucault's Strata and Fields: An Investigation into Archaeological and Genealogical Science Studies* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991.)

197. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 18.

198. Osborne, *Ibid.*, 23f; Osborne, "The Fiction of The Contemporary," 10.

our hands, time gets tangible, materialized in sites or deposits, remnants, debris, and remains. Weinberger holds his family history—which is not a *history* anymore—in his hands and shows it (in a quite spectacular way) to the spectators. In any case, farmhouse or dinner table, *there are*, ontologically, spaces and sites of time, which is something we first have to understand, in a quite Heideggerian way, before we start to think and synthesize time in the first place.

Therefore, the layer (or strata or deposit or couche) is an alternative concept of time, of contemporary time—a material contemporaneity or a contemporaneity of materiality. Also, looking at strata is the oldest and simplest technique of telling what was contemporary to what: geologists in the eighteenth century began to know about synchronicities by analysing strata. If God was not the ever contemporary anymore and was not responsible for objects' ages, it was the analysis of the earth and its layers. If something was found in the same layer as something else, these things were contemporary. Layers are spaces of contemporaneity, sites of co-presence, maybe even an archive of contemporaneity. This is also why the temporality of the layer is defined by a certain immanence and contingency—one might also say, by a certain *within-ness*. When we defined contemporaneity's temporality above as that which has begun, but not ended yet, one might also say that contemporaneity is defined as that which is within. We are *within* a certain temporality, we operate *within* a certain computer codification or *within* a religious belief or we are acting *within* an active love. This *within-ness* of the contemporary, this immanence and contingency—that obviously avoids calling it simply *being*—can be addressed materially by a conception of the layer. The conception of the layer as a material alternative to the concept of being indicates also that there are not only sites and institutions of the contemporary, but that they have a certain extent and dimensionality existing in space, that there is also a materiality of the contemporary.

But not only geologists, also archaeologists use the layer to state what was contemporary of what; they spend considerable time trying to measure (by all sorts of fancy techniques) to discern what was how old and what was contemporary with what. Using the model of the strata rather than, say, the time bar, one does not only assemble what once was co-present at a certain time, con-temporary (*gleich-zeitig*) — which is always an idealization or temporalisation, as Osborne would say — one also gets something more material. Archaeologists simply reconstruct societies through their remnants and leftovers, like today's garbage archaeology reconstructs contemporary societies through their leftovers. Like the archaeological leftover searcher after the party, the archaeologist of the contemporary gets an entirely different image of the past than any historical account would give him. The garbage and leftovers show what really happened and what the chroniclers of it maybe already forgot or wanted to forget or repress — a differentiation between wishful thinking versus the real.

The key difference lies in the fact that archaeology works with deposits, findings and records rather than with sources. An archaeological record (in a layer, for example) *shows* instead of telling or narrating something; it shows simply, not symbolically encoded, a layer of (maybe) equally unimportant facts about which people might not even want to be informed. This record appears in a three dimensional medium that is very different from the symbolic medium of writing and scripture, in which historical documents exist. It shows something *visible* about contemporaneity instead of something *readable*, and thereby executes a totally different regime of practices and knowledge with it.

In the archaeological regime of visibility, there are only traces that you can preserve — traces of last night's party, for example — traces that we simply have to see. The archaeologist of the contemporary must not look away from the ugly dirt and the rubble and immediately listen to the conveniently

clean history of the party. Instead one has to open one's eyes, starting out from the dirt and avoiding cleaning the table — to forensically understand that the ugly dirt is all that remains from the past, all the evidence one possesses. The archaeologist has to secure all traces of everything on that table, taking it as a layer to reconstruct the events of a maybe unforgettable and yet forgotten evening. This dirty action of securing time past is opposed to history's clean selection of what people thought to be important, contemporary and visible.

This material concept of the layer was adopted in the Humanities, as we know, from Freud's layers of the unconscious to Foucault's episteme and from Benjamin to Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux*. Their concept of "stratigraphic time" was recently brought up by John Rajchman relating to the discourse on contemporaneity,¹⁹⁹ who reminded us of its closeness to artistic techniques such as montage, which also worked with the collision of heterogenous temporalities. Rajchman also develops a model of different strata in the history of contemporary art, which would be named by the layers 1945, 1968, 1989, the latter being the moment of "world history" or "global history," which is the history of contemporary art, setting itself apart from modernist and avant-gardeistic art — a concept that still sounds too historical to me. Less historical is of course Didi-Huberman, when he called Duchamp's *readymades* contemporary with prehistorical burial objects, because there would also be "curiosity" paired with "magic"²⁰⁰ — which is equivalent to stating that the *readymade* and the prehistorical burial object reside within the same temporal layer.

But if there is a materiality of the contemporary in the layer, there must also be concrete sites of the contemporary within history and within historical time. Even though we all too quickly utter the answer — institutions for contemporary

199. Rajchman, "The Contemporary: A New Idea?," 125–144.

200. Didi-Huberman, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung*, 22.

art as sites of the contemporary—we should also include museums, collections and even graveyards as institutions of the contemporary for they negotiate incessantly claims of the present with claims of the past (when, for example, parts of graveyards are cleared of old graves to create space for new ones and contemporary dead corpses). In addition, parliaments or courts negotiate past laws and orders in the light of the contemporary and should therefore be understood as institutions of the contemporary.²⁰¹

A third prominent example of the material temporality of the layer, after leftovers and art history (after Duchamp), is the temporality of fashion—an example also taken up by Agamben (after Benjamin), probably for the simple reason that it demonstrates quite well the advantage of conceptualizing temporality as a material layer over thinking it as chronological history.²⁰² The biggest mystery of fashion stems from the impression that you cannot explain where it comes from, that you cannot deduce new trends from a causal model. You never know where the “new” comes from, whether it is born on the street or in the studios, whether it is in the past or in present—and one can never reduce it to one of these factors. All you know is that it is all of these factors at the same time. Everything is reacting to everything—a model that has more to do with quantum physics than with causal thinking—or with the model of the layer, because all you can say is that all these factors once co-existed in the same contemporary layer of time, and they all reacted on one another without causality or linearity. True, the layer or strata as a material model of contemporaneity can tell us about reactions without linearity and contacts without causalities—contacts which happen “on the street” all the time. These contacts without causalities demonstrate that fashion is not happening in history books,

201. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 85.

202. See Agamben, “What is the

Contemporary?,” 47; Schwarte, “Kritik der zeitgenössischen Kunst,” 65; and Lehmann, *Tigersprung*.

but in three-dimensional space, in a space or site of contemporaneity — and maybe this is an archive of contemporaneity that one can work with differently than with linear history.

The Traces of Contemporaneity

The traces of the contemporary (be it as simple as leftovers) can only be secured through visual, material, or archaeological operations, not through historical ones — and I think that herein lies the great attraction for visual artists to work with material and visual remnants of the present.²⁰³ The traces they work with do not only reflect the present or the past, they materialize the contemporary and temporalize the material inversely (which is why this project of temporalizing the artistic material is complementary to the archaeological task of materializing the historical). As archaeology is operating in space instead of time, it is able to grasp the time past (like Proust tried to), to literally *touch time*; and through touching *le temps perdu*, it renders our own situation of contemporaneity tangible.

The arts can do the very same thing, which is what we need contemporary art for or the *contemporary* in art: to render our time and contemporaneity sensible for us — a presence in time that only the visual arts can *show* us by securing its traces. The material world is most akin to Boris Groys' "comrades of time," its traces are the true comrades of time. It is not the subjects, not the human agents and witnesses, not even Groys' time-based art "that can help time, to collaborate, become a comrade of time,"²⁰⁴ but the material witnesses and agencies, that are most truthful to past contemporaneities: that is the contemporaneity of the past. The contemporary can only be touched materially, not historically, or mentally. This is why we need material witnesses of time past and this is why we need art, contemporary or not. For in the end, the material witness can surprise us, it can unearth unexpected

203. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 107f.

204. Groys, "Comrades of Time."

material—which is why we must not only with Nietzsche love the “ignorance of the future,”²⁰⁵ but which is also why we can say with Raqs Media Collective that “a contemporaneity that is not curious about how it might be surprised is not worth our time.”²⁰⁶

205. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs Book IV* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 287, 162.

206. Raqs Media Collective, “Now and Elsewhere,” 47.

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PEN=0,1,1,0, WEIGHT=100, SLANT=0, SUPERNESS = 0.6

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, 28/08/17, 20:36 PM