

Chapter 2

Art, Contemporaneity, History

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Contemporary thought poses both a challenge and an essential issue. The challenge is that everything suggests that we are living within a system that is permanently outside history. The essential issue is that the theme of the end of history carries all sorts of violence denying hope for those excluded from our contemporary global system.

We can question what is the idea of time within the context of economic and technological globalization, by making a detour into the question of art and aesthetics. Art and artistic or literary creation pose a question of contemporaneity. In many respects they witness our relationship to time and, more specifically, the simultaneous relation between the past and future that define a form of shared contemporaneity. To answer the question “what it is to be an artist or a creative person today?”, one must address several issues which have an anthropological dimension and, in particular, consider the following three questions:

- (1) What is “to be with the times”?
- (2) What is “our times” today?
- (3) Where are the key relationships between our times and the artistic or literary creation?

Michel Leiris in his essay *Le ruban autour du cou d'Olympia* made two contrasting remarks. He noted that, on the one hand, there comes a time in people's lives where they can have a feeling of not completely belonging to the time in which they are still living. This feeling can be especially cruel for the creator, writer or artist who finds that he has nothing to say in his time because it does not mean

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anything to him anymore. But Michel Leiris also notes that it is still difficult to define or identify the specific characteristics of the times in which we live. If one looks to the past, however, we may discover more clearly the elements connected to an artist or a writer in his time. The detail in a painting would be one of those elements that highlight the relevance of an artist in his time and also in his presence or in his survival in the history of art. For here lies the paradox: one must fully belong to his time in order to have a chance of surviving. The details may, therefore, appear in retrospect as a promising sign of historical relevance. The black ribbon around the neck of Olympia, implying luxury in poverty, invokes a passing interest, unprecedented in its time and in the noble art of the portrait, a sentiment which Manet felt for the common people and, more broadly, for the city and the industrial revolution. But Manet was a restless artist, dissatisfied for not being recognised by his contemporaries. It took some time for him to be given recognition in his time. In short, the contemporary artist or author who finds in the works of the past traces of historical relevance and is sensitive to their presence (they still talk speak to him) must find in this experience reasons for hope. Contemporaneity is not the present.

The paradox is that a work is fully contemporary if it is both original and authentic, not merely reproducing what already exists. It is those who innovate and possibly surprise or baffle that, in retrospect, will fully emerge in their time. We need the past and the future to be contemporary.

This also means that art is measured by its ability to build relationships, that is to say what one may call its symbolic capacity. Without an audience or a public, art becomes an act of absolute solitude. It must be social. This symbolic capacity is stated even more when the work is still present in time, although the demand for it is subject to evolve or change. If we disregard the rules of the art market—which, admittedly, is now difficult - one can conclude that in art the law of supply and demand has a reversing trend: the artist's offer takes the form of a questioning (do you understand me?) and public demand takes the form of a request for meaning (have you anything to say?).

In short, the work, today as in the past, is measured by three parameters:

- (a) Its inclusion within a specific history, the “internal” history, albeit revolutionary.
- (b) Its articulation with the times, its existence in relation to the story's “external” context, even though it only manifests itself remotely.

These first two parameters define the relevance of a work, relevance both in relation to its time, more than for the history of art.

- (c) It's symbolic capacity, even if it occurs in a later stage.

This symbolic capability is its ability to link (intellectually, emotionally and socially) with those it encounters. This defines the *presence* of a work.

As for our time, the time in which we have the feeling of living today, it is an accelerated time and this confronts us with three paradoxes in addition to those that we already identified.

The first paradox, already mentioned above is space-time. The measurement of space and time changes. The earth is merely a tiny speck, whose distance to the stars is measured in light-years. However time on earth is such that change is experienced in short periods.

The second paradox is the appearance today of a new space-time that seems to consecrate the continuity of the present, as if the acceleration of time prevents the perception of the movement. Hence the prominence of space in language.

The opposition of the global and the local belong to geography and to strategy. Let us briefly summarise the characteristics of the new space-time in the global economic and political life:

- (a) The global issue is situated in the economic and technological globalisation, but also in environmental awareness and social consciousness of those who are concerned with the widening gap between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. Uniformity and inequality go hand in hand.
- (b) The flow of images and messages around the world and from one place to another is what we call a cosmotechnology (*"cosmotechnologie"*). At the same time, we observe the code spaces extend its influence across the planet.

These spaces of communication, circulation and consumption, these "non-places", to use a term coined in 1992, are reserved for individual users and do not involve the creation of enduring social relationships. They allow the temporary coexistence of individualities, passengers, bystanders.

- (c) In this system, which checks the land, but does not cover it there is a theory of the end of history postulated by Fukuyama, but anticipated, in a sense, by Lyotard when he talked about the end of "grand narratives". The end of history is not the end of an event-driven history. It is the affirmation of an agreed formula that combines market economy and representative democracy. The theme of the grand narrative is in turn applied to the apparent disappearance of particular myths of origin (cosmogonies specific to a group), reflected in the modernity of the eighteenth century, the universal doomsday myths, visions of the future of humanity, the apparition of the post-modern condition which followed the disillusionment of the twentieth century.

The third paradox, which extends the second, is that the current ideology of the present is that of a world that, if we had an abstract moment of apparent evidence disseminated by the political system and technology in place, it appear to us as what it is: a world in its full historical eruption. Science has never advanced so rapidly. In a few years, the idea that we have of the universe, as well as of man, will have been outdated. On the other hand, history never offered the challenges of a common global history in progress. Without doubt we ultimately live under a changing process of global urbanisation, a change comparable, according to the French

demographer Hervé Le Bras, to the transition from nomadic life to agriculture. And this makes it all the more intolerable the idea that all kinds of inequalities deprive the theme of contemporaneity of any real-time content.

If the relationships of artistic creation in the times that we live are so difficult to understand today, it is precisely because time is accelerating and at the same time is slipping away. The recovery of a temporal language by a spatial language alongside with the primacy of the code which prescribes behaviors, over the symbolic, which builds relationships, and have frontal effects on the conditions for creativity. The world around the artist and the times in which he lives do not fail to take mediated forms - images, events, messages - which are themselves effects and reflect the engine of the global system. This system has in itself its own ideology; it works as a *modus operandi* and literally screen the reality that it replaces. The discomfort or malaise of the artists in relation to this situation is also ours own, or rather, they tend to redouble our own and sometimes we wonder not about its relevance in relation to time, but on the nature and the meaning of his presence: what do it tell us?

Hence the sense that we have that the great artists of our time are architects. By embracing their time, they draw pictures and symbols. The most famous of them build singularities in the four corners of the world, creating artworks in a twofold sense: they are singular works, signed, marked with the seal of a personal style, and they are also works that, beyond their local presence, are designed as “planetary curiosities” suitable to attract the global tourist flow. The global colour has replaced local colour.

Meanwhile, world architecture, in its most significant works, seems to allude to a still absent global society. It offers brilliant fragments of a fragmented utopia of a transparent society that does not yet exist for now. It conveys the illusion of present ideology and expresses the triumph of the system of the global network. At the same time, it draws on an utopia pointing to a future which may never happen, but remains in the realm of the possible.

In this sense, the relationship to time expressed by the great contemporary urban architecture reproduces but reversing the relationship with time expressed in the spectacle of ruins. Ruins accumulate too much history to express a story. This is not the history they show us. What we perceive is rather the inability to imagine what they represented to those who did not see them when they were not ruins. They don't tell us history but time, pure time.

When we contemplate the Mayan pyramids in the rainforest of Mexico or Guatemala or the temples of Angkor emerging from the Cambodian forest, we have a unique spectacle which shows no history: the ruins are built on ruins and they return to nature when they are abandoned by man. When we view these ruins, we perceive the inability to grasp the story, concrete, dated and lived. Given that, this impossibility is noticeable. The aesthetic perception of pure time is the perception of an absence and a lack.

The lack of comprehension of loss of time is inherent in the aesthetic apprehension of the original work. That is why copies are acknowledged as being disappointing: they are a lack of a lack. And we know quite well that a painter who today would paint like Rubens or like some other classical painter would be of no

interest to anyone while the works of Rubens and the greatest classical painters are still perceived as current and relevant.

But what is true of the past may be true of the future. Pure time is either past (even if it is not history) or future (even if it is foreign to foresight or planning). The perception of pure time is the perception of a void that structures the present and points towards the past or the future. It is at home in a play at the Acropolis just as it is in the Bilbao museum. The Acropolis and the Bilbao museum have an allusive existence, a strong presence of indefinable pertinence.

Artists and writers today may be condemned to seek the beauty of “non-places”, discovering it while resisting the apparent, actual evidence. By doing so, they find the enigmatic character of objects, things disconnected from any *modus operandi*, by staging and taking the media as an object who would like to take as mediations refusing the simulacrum, and mimesis.

Mallarmé requested that one proceeds with the words “allusive, never direct.” For him the apparent hermetic poem reminds us of Alain Badiou in his *Petit manuel d'inesthétique* (Seuil 1998), due to the momentary obliqueness used to describe an unattainable presence because it is beyond the object. Mallarmé said that the poem is transferable to the current workings of art, with its intent of being irreducible to functional, historicist or ethnological exegesis. When African religions arise and are exposed alongside with religious altars, one perceives in the object what resists as its image and its use. According to Mallarmé the process is one in which objects are made separate from their meaning and their history. The “*Mallarmenised* désobjectivisation”, manifests a “pure” time, to the extent that these objects are expelled from history, they are not reducible to any story that would report.

The hermetic nature of art today takes the objective facts of the context in order to disprove it. It was always been the case, but today art confronts the flood of images with its confusion between reality and fiction, the event defined by its coverage by media, the regime of liberalism, which allows it to become a market product, assigning it to a museum or simply ignoring it. Measuring the relevance and presence of examples from the past and the expectation of the future is thus made more difficult by the acceleration of history.

Contemporary art is always threatened by the recovery of global consumption. The organisation of artistic life through Foundations, Biennials and Forums, draws an art market that has all the appearances of the global free market. This situation highlights the contrary need for distancing art, which resists being absorbed by the dominant culture (Dubuffet, in his pamphlet, *Asphyxiant Culture*, published by Éditions de Minuit, wrote in the early 80s that the first duty of the artist was to escape culture). But it also highlights the difficulty of this desirable “distancing.” Yves Michaud, in *L'art à l'état gazeux*, states that the aesthetic has replaced art, that great art is dead, that contemporary art is a globalist experience like mass tourism, that there is no longer artwork with aura, contemplation, but instead it is fashion. Attitudes have replaced the work: events, meetings, performances and installations are nothing more than a reduplication of context. In other words, the context would constitute the content of art. Art would have thus retained a certain relevance

(compared to the period), but it would have lost all presence, all symbolic capacity, escaping the obvious image as a new form of hermetic.

This interpretation is probably too harsh or too pessimistic; but it has merit in highlighting the fact that, in art as elsewhere, the context was shattered and it is urgent today to rethink the terms of relevance by reviving the link between internal and external history between the history of the subject matter and contextual history. Art has difficulty in mobilizing the attention of a vast public relying on some observations upon which can be continued to base on its existence: the image is not reality; the reality of the image is not the actual thing. History continues, the internal history which connects the art to its past and the contextual history which questions its future. For this is the new challenge posed to contemporary art: resist “phagocytosis” through context. One can assume that social sciences and literature, directly or indirectly, are facing the same challenges and have, like art, the urgent task of taking into account the context itself if they want to escape the alienation that threatens them.

In other words, it is for the artists, but also the observers of society and politicians, to find the sense of time, and in addition a historic consciousness, to build a real contemporaneity. For better and for worse, art, society and history are bound together.

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