

THEORY OF CONTEMPORARY ART: LINES AND CURVES (Post-History and the Discomforts of Periodisation)

Why does it seem so self-intelligible that the major watershed world historical events are crucial for the periodisation of art? Is this not just a proof of the proposition that art cannot be understood just per se? Anyone who today wishes to preserve the idea of the autonomy of modern art has to come to terms with an intransigent paradox. If art serves no one outside its own purposes, how is it at all possible that through repeated invocations of autonomy in fact reference is made to its necessary intervention in the social setting, in the cultural configurations of power, political projects, economic relations and ethical principles? Let us put the problem more simply as follows. Art in the modern period has liberated itself from external coercion by becoming autonomous. It has become the subject of aesthetics as its own new metaphysical theory. The periodisation of art, as history of styles, is at the foundation of the origin of the autonomous academic discipline of art history, since the 19th century, all the way down to its current transformation into the interdisciplinary complex of the study of art. And from the very beginning it has been seen that the paradox of the independent consideration of art as “subject” of the historical consideration of its adventure rests in the essence of that which art opens through its epochal manner of happening or acting in the world.

Art in all historical epochs has the task of being more than art. It can never be either autonomous or heteronymous. It can never serve just itself or some other purposes. Nor can it be reduced just to the aesthetic truth, experience, incidence. Social revolutions and historical events that change the manner of life of people hence are not superordinate for an insight into the being of artistic practice. In the event of what has for half a century by now been called contemporary art, the problem is radicalised. Unlike modern art, which reposes on the idea of autonomy, contemporary art endeavours to put into practice the essence of the avant-garde art of the first half of the 20th century. It attempts, that is, artistically to revolutionise the social conditions of the self-generation of art.

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Contemporary art, by its very act of radical negation of history as linear progress, is an exceptional adventure in the total modification of the society in which it occurs and acts. Hence it is clear that the paradox of social self-reference determines its incessant striving for innovations, novelty and dynamism. It is impossible then to periodise visual art in such a manner that from some event-in-the-world, like, for example, the Socialist Revolution of 1917, the whole project of the Russian avant-garde is connected with the social and political subjects of change. Malevich and Russian Futurism were an ideational and artistic avant-garde of the actual social revolution, which was to end up in the defeat of Utopia and the installation of totalitarian ideology as the result of the lack of radicalness of the idea of the demolition of tradition. It is also inappropriate to say that we can periodise contemporary art itself, and the theory of it after 1989, and the end of the period of communism in eastern Europe, from the squaring of accounts with the symbolic power of the year of the epoch-making end of a modern ideology. The French Revolution is not the key for the beginning of modern art, just as a world historical event, like the said 1989 and the entry into the period of post-history, is not the superordinate framework for the periodisation of that which constitutes the essence of the story of contemporary art today.

The debate about historical periodising can too often be futile, but is nevertheless incontestably utile. From it we can derive a certain security in our own procedures, even when they are explained by the consequences of the working of the spirit of the times. For many people, the entry into the 21st century

will be marked by the symbolic deed of the terrorist Al Qaeda group on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. The question of periodisation was legitimate all the way to the end of the period of the modern and the postmodern as identical, if diverse, configurations of the ideas and styles present in the arts of the 20th century. This period was brought to a symbolic close in 1989 with the great turn of the liberal democratic revolutions in Europe and the world at large. The globalisation that has been in operation in earnest since that date has led to a radical transformation of the world in general. The end of ideologies as the end of history marked the moment of the real occurrence of post-history. In this event, there is no longer any strict differentiation and separation. Everything is instable and fluid. Styles are individualised. The collective practices of the neo-avant-garde became the aesthetic and political canon. Kitsch has become democratised. Taste qua category is obsolescent. The same thing happened long ago with the categories of the aesthetics of the modern world (beauty, the sublime, moderation, harmony, pleasure and so on). Finally, life itself in the time of bio-genetics and bio-technology has contributed to the space-time environment being understood as the realised space of an artificial surrounding and a life modified by technology. It can be supplanted at any moment whatsoever.¹

It is no longer appropriate to speak of some regional, local or any nationally defined space in which art happens as a contemporary experience of the freedom of surmounting borders. This, on the other hand, in no way marks the triumph of some illusory cosmopolitan culture and art with no grounding in its own space and time. On the contrary, the basic characteristic of this state of permanent transition in the world of art is fluidity and the traumatic search for a new identity. In this article about the state of the theory of contemporary art after 1989 there can only be a discussion of universal tendencies. Particularity is not in any case any marker of serious theory. Just as in the global age national philosophy or science is a *contradictio in adjecto* so contemporary art and the theory of it lie beyond the dynamics of the nation state. If contemporary identities are trans- or

1 Žarko Paić, *Image without the World: The Iconoclasm of contemporary Art*, Litteris, Zagreb, 2006.

post-national, then this has to be reflected in the local Croatian scene too. Social, political and cultural postulates for the effect and incidence of contemporary art in Croatia since 1989 make up only the inevitable context of the changes that have overcome the whole of eastern Europe, particularly with respect to the end of the neo-avant-garde projects of that space.

The cartography of art is not definitive when it comes to the essence of artistic strategies. But it does turn out to be a fundamental problem in the representation of contemporary art. In this the conceptual conflict of West and East can be seen as a primarily ideological conflict concerning the occupation of power in the social representing of culture and art. As the situation with the post-communist image of eastern Europe is becoming standardised, so the ideological construction of the region in which we lie – eastern Europe, the Balkans – appears only any longer as a cultural stereotype. Now that such countries as Bulgaria and Romania have entered the EU, the prevailing discourse of reflexive cultural racism, which has been able to be read off from various reviews and exhibitions of contemporary art from these areas, has had to change. The case of the Harald Szemann exhibition *Blood and Honey* is a paradigmatic example of the working of a conscious or unconscious cartography of culture that reflects the situation of intercultural relations between the West and the East of Europe.²

2 See in this connection the exhibition catalogue and introduction of Harald Szemann: *Blut & Honig: Zukunft ist am Balkan*, Kunst der Gegenwart, Sammlung Essl, Vienna, 16.05.-28.9.2003.

The borders of contemporary art

All this is self-intelligible, but precisely for this reason it is missing in many worthwhile panoramas, reviews and reconstructions of contemporary art.³ But since after 1989 there has been an appreciable rise in interest in thinking about contemporary art, manifestly, in the period of post-history, the main problem for the theory of contemporary art is that it is no longer possible to define the borders of events or actions of the essence of an art that transcends itself and makes social and cultural life its own circle of signification. In various different theories of contemporary art we are constantly coming upon the following question: is it any more possible to speak about contemporary art without making references to the development of the paradigms of contemporary social and humanist and natural sciences and philosophy?⁴ The relation between the contemporary artist and the contemporary scientist or thinker is not the relation of mutual partners about the same job, but more of a matter of a

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3 Heinrich Klotz starts his exceptionally important book about the theory of contemporary art with the incontrovertible apodictic judgement from which follows the mainly accepted periodising of the epochal lines of development of visual art in the 20th century. The judgement is apodictic because it starts off from the premises that the “comprehensive concept for the history of art in the 20th century is the concept of the Moderne [in the sense of *Art moderne* –tr.]. All alternatives to the concept of the Moderne have failed to give results.” Then naming the dictators and totalitarian leaders that endeavoured to turn the direction of history by the revival of classicism in art and architecture (neo-Baroque and the local or regional style), Klotz with justice considers contemporary art in the continuity from modernism to the end of the 20th century. The periodisation of temporally determined trends is the result of the process of modernisation as progress and development, cycle and revival. It is meanwhile clear that after the period of the fatigue of the avant-gardes, always on the agenda is some form of the renovation of the new as the non-obsolescent. Klotz is thus a consistent neo-modernist, who divides the history of art of the 20th century into: (1) the avant-garde (the classical Moderne or international style), (2) the period of the classicising reaction of the dictators (3), the post-war Moderne (fifties); (4) the functionalism of reconstruction and development; (5) the age of post-Moderne and (6) the trends of neo-Moderne or the second Moderne of the end of the 20th century - Heinrich Klotz, *Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert: Moderne, Postmoderne, Zweite Moderne*, C.H. Beck, Munich, 1999. p. 7.

4 Heinrich Klotz, *Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert: Moderne, Postmoderne, Zweite Moderne*, C.H. Beck, München, 1999, Dieter Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura: Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen*, Edition Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M, 2002, Marc Jimenez, *La querelle de l'art contemporaine*, Gallimard, Paris, 2005, Christa Maar/Hubert Burda (eds.), *ICONIC TURN: Die Neue Macht der Bilder*, DuMont, Cologne, 2005.

metaphor of tuned bells on the opposite side of the hill, which Heidegger mentioned when he wanted to give a suitable simile for the essence of hermeneutics.

The real question is no longer how to determine the borders of the given area. It is simply not possible to analyse the contemporary arts in the age of the media without a knowledge of new media theories and practices. Just as mediology itself has been since quite recently one of the new sciences of the image, so the actual art that makes use of media resources is necessarily the art of the new media or the media art.⁵ Instead, then, of the issue of the disciplinary borders of theory (of art) and of contemporary art that in its very beginnings – since the period of the historical avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century – set about the modification of society via overcoming the boundaries between art and life, the turn is in the posing of the question itself. What is it in general that sets the need for the issue of the border? Why do we need to fix a boundary for something that is in its tendency unbounded and unlimited? If the whole history of art from the Moderne to the present days is the development of the disappearance of borders among worlds – or art, society, cultural and life – then the most recent period from, provisionally, 1989 can be appropriately understood only from an insight concerning the permanent transition of the world of art.

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Here it is at once necessary to say that this concept does not refer to events in the so-called post-communist condition. Boris Groys, theoretician of modern art, developed a scientific project concerning this topic, resting on the idea of the re-politicisation of art. The condition of incessant transition between two shores, from one point to another, from one side to another, seems even to be an impossible project for the total mobilisation of art. The only thing that is certain after 1989 and the entry into the period of post-history of globalisation is the fact that all the borders have vanished, and that all the walls between cultures and identities have been pulled down. Art did not become global. The world

5 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, Cambridge-London, 2001, Klaus-Sachs Hombach, *Znanost o slici: discipline, teme, metode*, Izdanja Antibarbarus, Zagreb, 2006, Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale*, Gallimard, Paris, 1991, Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz: Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M, 2005.

is globalised, but the issue of the essential character of such a world is the issue of the meaning of post/trans/meta-national identities as social constructions of cultures. Identity is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed. It is never a final product. It is created in conflict and in dialogue. It is possessed only when one's own life is determinedly run as if it were a style. It is lost with acquiescence in the possibility of choice, by the fact of the choice of the a priori contingent and subsisting. The paradox of the contemporary identity lies in its being able to be constructed through the deconstruction of the modern identity. The same thing holds for the works and events of contemporary art. Every raid on authenticity is condemned at the outset to the ironic treatment of the original. From Duchamp's ready-mades to the paradoxical logic of the simulacrum leads the same road.

It is not hard to remark that many reviews of contemporary art, like Documenta in Kassel in 2002, when the selector was a US-based Nigerian political scientist, Enwezor, in terms of idea, are just a copy of social changes that have taken place caused by the process of the globalisation of a world without borders. In spite of sociologists of globalisation speaking of a nascent global culture, this is in fact a process in which the traditional difference between technology and culture has vanished. Media art in the digital age is a reliable indicator of this assumption. What we are witnessing today is the process of the interfusion of spheres of human assumptions of attitudes that have previously been kept apart. The technologising of culture and art is at the same time a process of culturalising and aestheticising contemporary technology.⁶

In his destructive criticism of contemporary art and spectacle Jean Baudrillard quotes Marshall McLuhan: We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art. At issue here is the wish to aestheticise the world as work of art. In this nihilistic stance about the realisation of art in the world of design and art we encounter the vanishing of

6 Žarko Paić, *Identity Politics: The Culture as new Ideology*, Antibarbarus Editions, Zagreb, 2005.

metaphysical borders.⁷ Contemporary art and its theory in the condition of post-history constantly confirm this awareness of their own fluidness and traumatic search for the point of their own existence in their works and doings. The theory of art in all possible discourse of the crossing of borders (philosophy of art, aesthetics, science about arts, history of art) is not longer just a reflexion about its own subject, but above all else something a great deal more rigorous. In this certain dangers should be seen, and an attempt should be made to obviate them in time. Art theory in the era of post-history has the pretension of direct art itself according to the idea of art as a *Novum Organum* of perception, if it were wished to speak in a more gentle Schellingish tone instead of the cynical postulate of many contemporary artists that today there is a reign of theoretical terror over works of artistic practice.

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The problem of the disappearance of borders among disciplines has though far-reaching negative consequences. The appointment of new concepts for artistic reality and its object has become a way of operating with arbitrary definitions. The language of this kind of theory is a hybrid complex of the articulating of meanings without any materially fixed objects. Semiotics has become from an auxiliary and marginal discipline, today, a kind of ontology of culture for the world of media and visual self-transparency. There is utterly no knowing why every act of intellectual reflection about art has to be called theoretical. What is called collectively theory is the result of the cultural turn that happened in the

⁷ The revolutionary idea of contemporary art was that any object, any detail or fragment of the world could exert the same attraction and raise the same questions as those formerly restricted to a few aristocratic forms called works of art. That was democracy : not just in the access of all people to the enjoyment of art, but in the aesthetic uprising of an object-world where, to quote Warhol's famous formula, each object, without distinction, would have its quarter hour of fame - and particularly those banal objects, images and commodities. All are equivalent, everything is great - universal ready-made. Reciprocally art and the work of art are also transformed into objects - ready-mades without illusion or transcendence - art as a merely conceptual acting-out, a generator of deconstructed objects that deconstruct us in turn. Conceptual objects generated not by art itself, but by the idea of art. No body, no face, no gaze - just organs without a body, flows and networks without substance, fractals and molecules. No more judgment, pleasure or contemplation - one gets connected, absorbed, immersed, just as within force-fields or networks. Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Inteligencija zla ili pakt lucidnosti*, Naklada Ljevak, Zagreb, 2006, p. 100. Translate: Leonardo Kovačević

social and human sciences, sociology, anthropology and ethnology, in the 1980s.⁸ All the sciences in the interdisciplinary endeavour to find a new place became part of the great postmodern complex of the theory of culture and cultural studies. The primacy of culture over society, identity over functions and structures, live styles over social role was also reflected on the status of contemporary art and theory about it.

The legitimacy and performativeness of the cultural turn marks the final incursion of culture as new ideology into the discourse of all the newly founded disciplines. There is only one thing to talk of then – the reign of terror of culture, as theory, over all other sections of the complex totality of reality in a disintegrated world with no borders. This is at the same time the reason why I do not think all contemporary attempts at a theory of art, nor contemporary art itself in the age of post-history, a radical opening up of a new world, but just rather more successful or perhaps better executed projects, strategies, experiments of turning in the same vicious circle that has determined the fate of contemporary art from the time of the first avant-garde onwards. Terrorisation by culture theory is a continuation of reduction of art to society. And the next step, already realised, is the terror of artistic life as a technologised second nature (media art in the A-life digital space) over the authentic life of art in general.

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The postulate, then, is that the universal criticism of post-history in works and events of contemporary art and its theories has not opened up any possibilities for the deconstruction of what for a whole century has crucially determined all the failures and all the utopian projects of contemporary art. This is the dazzling, spellbinding, dogmatic, unreflected power of the new, which is constantly and always again taken over as the watchword of each new generation. The novelty of the new is a regressive and progressive marking time, without any radical possibility of getting over a world in which the object from the surrounding world, like Duchamp's bicycle or urinal occupies the aesthetic position of artistic production or, like the generated object from the live digitalised environment as

8 Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2006.

model of relations between interactive subjects of communication.⁹

Contemporary art does not live up to its name. It is not con-temporary, rather current. Only currency in the form of the temporal ecstasy of presentness determines its temporal character. Contemporary art must in its ontological and temporal attitude towards the world, divine and human, even when this set is called into question or historically demolished, open up a possibility for the encounter of an dialogue between epochal worlds. Time cannot be reduced to the current. It outlives now, for it is guided by what is behind the now. Every ecstasy of the new assumes a hypostasis of the future. While the first historical avant-garde was held an open space of the future qua utopia, the second or neo-avant-garde of the 1960s attempted a return to reality.¹⁰ This was a moment when the media-produced world of art was halted in the triumph of the consumer culture of late capitalism. The current with no past or future closed with the Pop Art of Warhol and Rauschenberg any possible dialogue of the epochal witnesses of diverse times. Now the situation is such that new art no longer deconstructs the old. It no longer has as its objective a project for a society of the future, rather ever new art only produces its own currency in a time that has been totally voided and discharged of the imminent.

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Many artists who do not resist a dialogue with theory, but rather in fact back it up and make it a concept in their events/their works of art practice, like the Croatian conceptualist and transmedia artist Dalibor Martinis¹¹ and Andreja Kulunčić, who, for example, in their most recent works, belong to the metapolitical spaces of artistic intervention in the social space of democracy, tell of the attempt at a reflexive attitude towards issues of time, as the basic issue of contemporary art. A breakthrough beyond the current is as it were considered a

9 Boris Groys, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, 2008, Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London-Cambridge, 2003

10 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, London-Cambridge, 1996.

11 For the artistic oeuvre of Dalibor Martinis see: Nada Beroš, *Dalibor Martinis: Javne tajne / Public Secrets*, MSU-Omnimedia, Zagreb, 2006.

necessary step into a-historicity or anachronism. But this is all that art can offer as some possibility of an alternative to the current world of globalised technology, culture and social fragments of identity. If art cannot have the power to create alternative worlds, then it is reduced to being a product of communication, not a creative mise-en-scene of the happening of the new. All competent theories of contemporary art that have marked the post-historical period since 1989 even in the most profane significance ascribe to art the power of the alternative.

Art as alternative to the current? This never appears as concept since contemporary art is condemned to wandering through the world without a labyrinth. Wherever there is no mystery, the mysterious power of the desert reigns. Every thing is infinitely open, infinitely empty. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* saw in the image of the desert the moment of the creation of history as a transverse striped space of the crossing of perspectives. What do these perspectives look like, what kind of credibility do they have?

Three paradigms

Contemporary art theory since 1989 is determined by the endeavour to deconstruct a single ruling idea from which every possible real art project and its incarnation can be explained. There is no royal road to the centre of the problem. The most important theories of contemporary art are at once paradigms for the explanation of the relations between the world, society, politics, culture and art in the age of post-history. Three paradigms are the most credit-worthy since they correspond in terms of theory to the essence of our time. Under their aegis, and in contemporary Croatian art or the contemporary period it is possible to identify the ability creatively to appropriate the area of an alternative to the world of the neo-imperialist globalitarian order in which art has become a generating plant for the production of cultural spectacle. All three paradigms answer the question about the point of contemporary art in a world after the establishment of an integrated ideological and political, and economic, model of globalisation. Their basic feature is determined by an insight into the necessity of re-evaluating

the inheritance of modern and avant-garde art, traditional aesthetics and post-aesthetics, the history of art, science concerning art and the phenomenology of the image. The first paradigm is the re-politicisation of art; the second is the reaestheticising of the world of life, and the third is the visual or iconic turn. The most important theorist of the first paradigm is Boris Groys, of the second Dieter Mersch, and of the third a group of various different art historians, art philosophers, sociologists of knowledge and visual theoreticians such as Gottfried Boehm, Hans Belting, Peter Sloterdijk, Bruno Latour and W. J. T. Mitchell.

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(1) The understanding of contemporary art of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century seems inseparable from new radically critical attempts of theory (of philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis) at the explanation of the working of the ideology of globalisation and globalism. A turn from the insight that with the end of communism there had come the end of history as the world of liberal democracy and global capitalism occurs actually with the renovation of various neo-Marxian and post-Marxian theories of history. It should be enough to mention the influential works of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Giorgio Agamben and Paolo Virno of the new approach to “humanity” from the horizon of the issue of the limits or boundaries of human rights. From a criticism of global capitalism and its biopolitical production of the person to utopian projects for surmounting the commodity structure of the society of spectacle the analyses and theoreticians of contemporary society. The already mentioned platform of Documenta in Kassel in 2002 confirms the idea that the paradigm of the repoliticisation of art is a kind of new discursive power. The main topics of artistic practice are at one and the same time the main topics of the critical theory of globalisation. These include the liberation of the Other (women, sex and gender minorities, authentic third world peoples), resistance to the spectacle of the power of the consumer society, the rights of animals, art as utopian space of community outside the logic of Western (Eurocentric) universalism.

German philosopher and art theorist Boris Groys has best articulated the essence of this paradigm.¹² By abandoning the categories of beauty and the sublime, contemporary aesthetics and art are becoming communicative practices. Beauty is subordinated to fashion, and fashions are in constant mutual conflict and contradiction. With the transformation of the aestheticised object into the world of life, a turn has occurred. The world of life has subordinated the world of art to its own purposes. The main marker of the art of our time is hyperproduction (of photographs, video art, cyber art, film). Hence the theory of art has changed its standardising function. It no longer dictates the conceptual framework of contemporary art, rather keeps up with it, although the relation between theory and contemporary art is shot through with paradoxes. New aesthetics and theories of art attempt to impose on the big art exhibitions (Venice, Kassel) at least the basic orientations, the concepts, the paradigm, if it is not possible to achieve some canon or typology of styles. In his analyses of the strategies of contemporary art, Groys follows the logic of the contemporary avant-gardes. If everything has become the world of a life that is ruled by politics, then art has been left with the possibility of joining in the critical resistance to the world of global capitalism by the repoliticisation of its subject.

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Groys's position is that of social criticism and ontological politics. Repoliticising art means to work in conformity with the basic ideas of the avant-garde concerning the change of social and living conditions of the reproduction of life itself. In such an extension of the historical avant-gardes with other means, art takes over the role of the activity of life itself. Groys belongs to the circle of neo-Marxist critical thinking. He finds inspiration for his theoretical work in Adorno, Benjamin, Debord. Referring to the theoretical writings of Foucault, Agamben and Hardt/Negri, he connected biopolitics with the necessity for the repoliticisation of art. New biotechnology opens up the possibilities and limits of the genuine relation of the world of life with the issue of humanism. From the autonomy that belongs to modern art, contemporary art has to move into an active, and activist, stance towards the neo-imperial system of global capitalism.

12 Boris Groys, *Topologie der Kunst*, C. Hanser, München, 2003.

The repoliticisation paradigm for art has been derived from the paradigm of the repoliticisation of culture, which was sociologically carried out by Pierre Bourdieu.¹³ It is obvious here that art has an autonomous status vis-à-vis culture, which is itself primarily an ideological tool in the system of global capitalism. Art has not lost its ability to create new worlds by having engaged with the world with social criticism. Where are the borders of such a commitment? If we ask where the need is at all for art to be repoliticised, we will find ourselves up against the challenge of the criticism of a paradigm that derives its programme from a superior social, political and cultural criticism of existing. Like the other two paradigms of the theory of contemporary art, Groys' repoliticisation of art is nothing but a revival of the potentials of the avant-garde in the time of the end of the avant-garde. The prevailing form of artistic intervention into society under the rule of ideologies is the conceptual and performative deed of opening up awareness about the problem of the perversion of human liberty. The deconstruction of the body in the space of the perversion of human liberty, the iconoclastic act of destroying the new visuality that is being put to use by the spectacle of capital, the networking of collective initiatives (community art) comprise a triad of procedures of the social criticism function of art in the time of post-history. The borders of this paradigm lie simply in its responding to the loss of art's autonomy by reducing it to politics. As in the case of the first historical avant-garde, here too we are concerned with a reduction of the original assemblage of art.

When art is reduced to society and politics, the chance for any alternative to the world of the current vanishes. Art becomes only social commentary, political activism and means for a different end. Groys and numerous advocates of this paradigm have never carried out a radically critical deconstruction of the whole of the heritage of the avant-garde for a breakthrough beyond the functional system of the new, of the current and the social participation of art. The repoliticisation of art is a reductive paradigm of the revival of the old for the new age, that of biopolitics. And here life itself is still treated as a social and cultural body instead of, via a criticism of biopolitics, criticism of any need for a new politicisation of art being derived.

13 Žarko Paić, *The Power of Non-Subjugation: Intellectual and Biopolitics*, Antibarbarus Editions, Zagreb, 2006, pp. 126.-139.

(2) The re-aestheticisation of the world of life does not refer so much to the orientation of art practices in the age of post-history as much as to the problem of testing out the possibility of art being thought of out of itself as a new aesthetic event (*Ereignis*). Thus since 1989 there have been relatively many theoretical attempts of the new aesthetics (appearance [in the sense of coming into view] or phenomenon, *mise-en-scene*, performativeness). These have all be responses to the problem observed that contemporary art can no longer be understood from the standpoint of the massive ontology of the beautiful and the sublime. The most interesting representative of this paradigm must be the German philosopher and media theorist Dieter Mersch. He has articulated a new language and conceptual framework for the situation of the post-historical constellation of art as event and aura (Heidegger-Benjamin) in the environment of the performative practice of contemporary art.¹⁴ For Mersch three aesthetics have been drawn into the vortex of the modern age: the aesthetics of tradition, of the work of art and of the avant-garde. Conceptual differences between modern and contemporary art correspond to some kind of epistemological cut. Thus for modern art, the aesthetics of the work is relevant, for contemporary aesthetics, of the event. The objectlessness of abstract painting and the iconoclasm of the avant-garde lead into the space-time of the re-aestheticisation of the world of life because in it the event of the performative relation of man and world unfolds as an event of the gleam of the world. Event-art, happening, the installations and performances since the 60s and the period of the second historical avant-garde in the visual arts no longer show anything.

This is the meta-art of the event. It takes place in the world of life, for the work, in the traditional meaning of the autonomous work of art, has been replaced by the production of life itself as artistic event that has deprived the work of the right to authenticity. Performativeness for Mersch then is the basic category for the artistic event. The historical moment of the origin of the performative event in 20th century art was Dadaism. For contemporary art since the 1960s only

14 Dieter Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura: Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen*, Edition Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M, 2002.

the *act* is important, the action, the moment of intervention in the space, the provocation of the state of society, the overturning of taboos, communication with the environment, interaction and *mise-en-scene*.

Performative projects go on in a time outside vulgar metaphysical temporality (past-present-future). They are virtually incapable of being represented. They occur at a moment. Photograph, video, film, the new media, are hence not just technological and media instruments for the re-aestheticising of the world of life, but through them and with them contemporary art takes place as an effective manner for opening up life itself. The basic categories of the performative aesthetic are: (1) destruction, (2) self-referentiality and (3) paradox. The artist destroys the previous work of the modern epoch with its self-referential body-in-motion and paradoxically once again “creates” it by breaking down its aura. Performativeness is not the aesthetics of either the beautiful or the ugly. Rejecting reduction to politics, society or any of the derivations of the modern creation of man as autonomous subject of history, the paradigm of the re-aestheticising of the world of life considers the performative event the end point of the sublimation of contemporary art. The problem of all attempts to renew the aesthetic in the world without the rule of any superordinate principle, cause or purpose lies in their bringing back the possibility of some faith in the incomplete project of Modernism. Mersch’s aesthetics of the performative, unlike the repoliticisation of art, leaves open the likelihood of overcoming art as mere social criticism. If art cannot be reduced to social, political or cultural power of creating new worlds, still it remains at issue how much the fragility of the event of performativeness is ensured against the pressures of life itself that takes from art its historical being.

(3) The visual or iconic turn is a collective name for various endeavours to revive the power of the visible and the iconic from the rule of logocentrism. In other words, in the new media conditions for the reproduction of the world, an attempt is being made to give the image back its own right to autonomy. The visual construction of culture corresponds to the iconic turn in contemporary art. This does not of course mean that we should simply say that we are witnessing the revival of painting or some other traditional medium for the representation of art in the age of the overwhelming digitalisation of the visual. The projects

created at the beginning of the 21st century in interdisciplinary collaboration among philosophers, art historians, sociologists, mediologists, natural scientists and artists characterise the work of ZKM Karlsruhe and the project Iconic Turn.

Among the many theorists of this paradigm I would pick out W. J. T. Mitchell primarily because for epistemological reasons in his criticisms of the linguistic philosophy of Rorty and the neo-pragmatists he has created the premises for a far-reaching theoretical pictorial/visualistic turn. The image after the long-term domination of text and speech is henceforth to be considered as an autonomous field of meaning. It belongs to the visual construction of the world in the age of the media. It is its own precursor and its own superordinate. This kind of iconocentrism derives from Mitchell's basic premise of the visual construction of reality as revolution in the theory of cultural studies. Instead of a culture that organises reality according to its own codes, in the time of post-history it is visuality that is actually crucial. Images have their own history, surplus meanings and their own visual logic. Our area of autonomous visuality is determined by the semantic and semiotic context. In it images appear as vehicles of meaning and are themselves sign structures of the contemporary world.

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Images are the iconocentric circle of the media culture of visuality. But their power is actually hence illusory. In his analysis of biocybernetics, Mitchell pulls together the story of artificially created life and computer technology. Biocybernetics is not just a information and communication event within which life and art possess completely different characteristics. There is at work a communication community at work that functions according to the model of calculation and proposition. Traditional categories that were still in use in the writings of Roland Barthes in the analysis of photography of the analogue age – memory, fantasy, emotion, experience, similitude – vanish in the digital image. The concept of the new image, unlike that which determined the modern concept of the picture as pictoriality of material, expression and form is very much changed in the new context. The consequences of the biocybernetic revolution with respect to the status of the image are far-reaching for thinking about the iconic turn. The first consequence is the loss of original and copy. Instead of the aura of the artwork (Benjamin) we are partaking in the replacement of the aura by the

spirit of the copy. Digital photography no longer shows, rather generates reality as hyper-real event. Another consequence is the transformation of relations between artist and work via a model that has in itself the properties of tool and apparatus. The cameraman has been replaced by the designer, the real by the simulacrum of events, and the cyber artist today operates with a very different concept of reality than the artist of analogue aesthetics. The third consequence is the impossibility of showing and representing the image of reality. It is a question, on the contrary, of the generation of a media-determined reality (films such as *Matrix*).

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Mitchell puts contemporary art theory in his debt by having founded visual studies. Interdisciplinary science of the collaboration of different disciplines in the consideration of the phenomenon of the image and visibility has contributed to a different understanding of the media in the age of biocybernetic reproduction. In its breaking away from the natural world (of language, symbol, history), the entire world is media-organised. The network of relationships in the visual construction of reality will henceforth determine the world and art as communication structure. A problem with the overall concept of the visual or iconic turn is in the iconocentrism of visual studies. After the liberation of the image from text and speech, the actual image itself is generated in a different manner than traditional text. But the image is not the other side of the text, but from the very beginning of the avant-garde the text has been represented in image terms. Hence the deed of deconstruction of text and philosophy of language is justified only to the extent to which the possibility of a new totality of relations in which visibility precedes every other form of human relationship to the world is not opened up. Contemporary art under the aegis of the paradigm of the visual/iconic turn is just one section of the complex structure of reality that is articulated through media.

If we wished to be radical, it would have to be said that the programme of visual studies as the visual culture for our age of post history necessitates something much more important than the expansion of the area of culture to the world of life. Visual studies and the pictoriality/visibility of the media age are only a mirror of the same discomfort in other means. There is a covert deontology of culture that is liberated from all the sins of the avant-garde by instead of society its placing the culture of the image and biocybernetic life at the top of its cognitive pyramid.

The iconoclasm of the avant-garde finishes, paradoxically, with a luxuriant visualisation of reality generated from idea machines. The world of art in which we live is no longer a world, and art from it has long since disappeared, turning into a mass of figures and forms such as media, virtual and digital art. There is only one constant residue in all these metamorphoses: the event and the work of immaterial and autopoietic creativity that no longer derives from reality, but from pure ideas. Conceptual art is only the visible phenomenon of this process of painful emergence from a world of iconic fascination that enthralls even when it shows nothing.

The outlook?

From all this it can be seen that in the theory of contemporary art the last act of long-since unresolved issues has been played out. How to approach contemporary art without the intention of ascribing to its events and works the remains of the metaphysical aesthetics of beauty, the sublime, illusion? Does philosophy seek in the essence of contemporary art, in the form of its own realisation, just a last straw for the resuscitation of what we are still calling aesthetics? If philosophy in this post-historical assemblage still intends to maintain itself, then its basic question is no longer what is the essence of contemporary art, rather what at all is the point of contemporary art if its “world” has become philosophically produced in the scientific production of objects from pure idea machines?

Contemporary art and its theory is faced with the challenge of a second beginning. Instead of going round and round in a circle and the tautological stance that contemporary art responds to the world the way it is and the way that is necessarily possible here and now, perhaps the time has really ripened for the question to be asked concerning the point of one and the other (contemporary art and contemporary art theory) with the question of their future, which neither utopias nor eschatologies will be projecting any longer, but which will be generated by the mere iconicity of the image without a world of its own. But is there at all such a future, as not to be comprehensible from this total currency of the new that consumes everything?
