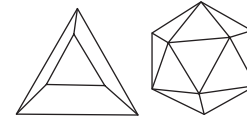


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An Interview with Peter Osborne

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## Art historians may make aesthetic appreciations, I want to make critical judgements

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An Interview with Peter Osborne

Time and temporalities permeate art historical writings on contemporary art as well as recent artistic practices. Katharina Brandl met Peter Osborne, one of the most renowned writers on contemporary art, on the occasion of the conference *Aesthetics of Standstill* (January 28 – 31, 2015) in Düsseldorf to talk about the academic interest in temporalities, the concept of contemporary art and the dethronement of the October group.

Katharina Brandl

For a few years now, there seems to be a strong interest in temporalities both practically and theoretically in the art world. Similarly, exhibitions, conferences and writings on the contemporary as a concept and our conception about the future seem to pop up everywhere. Why do you think that happens at this specific point in time?

Peter Osborne

I think it's a variety of factors. There has been a more general, political interest in temporalities ever since 1989. I think the political interest derives from a certain crisis of the future, think of the writings of Franco "Bifo" Berardi, for example, which are very popular in the art world. There is a kind of leakage of these ideas into the art world. The art-immanent starting point was probably art activism, because there was so much activity and optimism – and

then nothing. It led to a lot of reflection about time and process at the level of social practices rather than the artwork itself. In the art world itself the growing interest in time and temporality has been articulated by the recent interest in the concept of the contemporary and the questions whether it is a critical concept, whether it can be useful, and by various people declaring themselves as post-contemporary. Where it does not seem to come from at the moment is internally to artistic practices. It comes from discursive frames, not immanently from the materialities of people's practices.

KB You said that the concept of the contemporary leaked into the art world, that it is not an art immanent category. The discussion in art history around the notion of contemporary art seems to stem from the idea that we have to break with modernity, especially with the concepts of modernism and avant-garde. The explanatory power of these concepts is not sufficient to understand contemporary art practices, mainly since the 1960s.

PO Firstly, the 1960s begun to be historicized ten to fifteen years ago – the discourse in art history about contemporary art is bound to the invention of the history of contemporary art as a field. To have the history of contemporary art taught in art history departments is quite a new phenomenon. 20 years ago a lot of art history departments in the UK, and I am sure in most other places, never got beyond 1945 in their teaching. So, history of contemporary art historicized the 1960s, but because the 1960s is such a foundational moment for practices that still continue, it placed that work into the present in a quite surprising way. You can't write about the 1960s without also thinking about the present. So art historians got into an odd space, which often is not so much of an historical space as a critical space.

Secondly, the movement against modernism in the 1960s is really a movement against formalism. What's interesting is that the category in the late 1960s that marked the break was post-formalism.

It was only in the 1980s that post-formalism got recoded as post-modernism, but by then it means something completely different to what post-formalism meant. It is complicated. During that period, in the 1980s especially and the early 1990s, there was this really strong sense that categories of modernism and avant-garde were gone, that all their discourses were redundant. But I think that in the last ten years, there has been a reversal. The sense of the continuities between the practices of the 1960s and now is much stronger. I think that there is an emerging sense that this break did not really happen, this break was an imaginary break, it was more a desire for a break – a classically modernist desire, in fact.

KB Art historical writings on contemporary art and/or the contemporary are infused by a certain fear of periodization. This fear derives from the hazard of reintroducing historicist concepts by catering to an idea of linear, homogeneous time if contemporary art is framed as the sequel of modernism or avant-garde. Nevertheless, although hardly any authors want to be guilty of the sin of periodization, the contemporary is implicitly mainly identified with the caesura of 1989. On the contrary, your concept of the contemporary neither denounces the concept of periodization, nor subjects itself to the historicist accusation.

PO You can't not periodize. Periodizations are constantly being revised and renewed – they are flexible categories. If all history is genealogical, it is a constant process of reinterpretation. If a periodization works and then ceases to work, that does not mean that the initial periodization was wrong. Historically, art history as a discipline has dealt with much larger and older periods than the one of contemporary art, with categories like Renaissance or Baroque et cetera, that have some distance from the present. There is a tendency to think that once these categories become culturally fixed, they are objectively correct and that the periodizations closer to the present should look like that. Philosophically speaking, art-historical

periodizations like Renaissance or Baroque are no more stable than the ones closer to the present. They have just been subject to incredible institutional regimes of reproduction that have made them look natural.

KB So, what is your approach to the notion of the contemporary?

PO I am trying to construct the contemporary as a critical category, which means a selective and exclusive/excluding category. So it is not a category that is designed to embrace the greatest number of works that people call contemporary. It is meant to function as a critical category, to judge; it is a category of judgement regarding which works are contemporary in the sense of actively relating to the historical present and so it excludes huge amounts of works that fall under the descriptive label “contemporary art”. I think that has not been fully understood, the idea of critical categories is not very strongly received at the moment.

KB Although you clearly publish in the field of philosophy, your last book *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* has been strongly received in art history. What difficulties arise from being received interdisciplinarily?

PO I didn’t think of my book as an intervention into art history as such, so I was slightly surprised by the antagonistic reception it appears to have received within art history. Although, of course, it has some presuppositions about what it would mean to write art history critically, the sort of categorical dismantling you would have to do. Academically, I was educated in a period where there were a lot of theoretical and political transformations of the discipline of art history. When I was doing my PhD work in the mid 1980s, it was the period when the “new” art histories in England – feminist art history, class-based art history, post-colonial art history, et cetera – emerged. There was a transformation of the field. It was

politically based but it led to a much more theoretical relation to the concept of history. Institutionally, there has recently been a move back to traditional forms of the discipline, and I misjudged that. Art history has become very conservative again. I would have addressed that much more explicitly, had I been thinking about that. When I wrote the book I was more concerned to offer an alternative to the October approach. For thirty years, the October school was the one interesting critical programme, they were the ones who were occupying the critical space, the same kind of problem. So I was concerned to articulate a difference from them around the fact that however critical and theoretical they are, they remain within certain traditional forms of art history. In particular, their version of history of contemporary art is still effectively very historicist: it is still based on reconstructing the view of the people of the time, but then adding externally motivated theoretical material, which can be completely different for different artists, without any overarching theoretical standpoint. October as a journal never really managed to engage with contemporary art, apart from some of the writings of Hal Foster. He was, if you like, designated to look after the art of the 1980s by trying to create a category of critical post-modernism. The Pictures Generation were the last artists contemporaneous to them with whom the October group really engaged. The next generation that followed the founding October group, the first generation to become historians of contemporary art through the academy, made their careers by writing about the 1960s – Pamela Lee, and Alexander Alberro, for example. Their work has not been about the generation of artists contemporary to themselves, as it was for the first generation.

KB Compared to the work of art historians, what difference do you see in the way you approach actual art works, the material?

PO Part of the self-image of art history remains standing back from various forms of critical judgement. The critical judgements

are all made in advance in relation to art history, because the canon has already been selected. If an artist makes it into your discursive space, they must have been important enough for the historian to write about them, so the judgement is already made. Art historians don't want to make judgements about the works, they don't think that's their function. They might make aesthetic appreciations, but they don't want to make critical judgements, whereas I do want to make critical judgements. I want to revive a much more critical climate of discourse – which of course artists don't really want, because these days artists just want to be loved. Art schools in Germany are more receptive towards this approach than in the UK, by including chairs of philosophy or sociology (here at Düsseldorf), for example. There is a tradition going back to Romanticism. Think of Friedrich Schelling, for example, who worked at the Academy in Munich.

KB Art Schools may be more receptive towards including philosophy and sociology chairs, but they usually have their own struggles with the cleavage between art and research, for example around the umbrella term “artistic research”.

PO Artistic research began in the Anglo-American context in the form of “practice as research”. The institutionalization of the concept has been a nightmare, because it was never intellectually thought through. It was the transposition of an institutional funding model from the humanities into the art schools without any attempt to think about the specificity of artistic practices. But as soon as it gets going, everyone wants to get on the bandwagon. Art schools are indeed conflicted themselves: the space of art practice is still disputed between the heritage of practices and conceptions from the 1960s and the organization of study programs according to traditional media like painting or sculpture.

Peter Osborne (\*1958) is Professor of Modern European Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University, London and an editor of the British journal “Radical Philosophy”. He is the author of numerous articles and books, most recently of the monograph “Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art” (Verso Books, London).

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