

2017-04-01

Contemporary Conditions are Badly Known

Cox, Geoffrey

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/10091>

Acoustic Space

RIXC Center for New Media Culture, Riga and Art Research Lab (MPLab) of Liepaja University

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

Contemporary conditions are badly known

The title is derived from Peter Osborne's phrase "Contemporary Art is badly known", that appears on the opening page of his book *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso 2013, p.1).

In this talk, rather than discuss post-media conditions as such (the post-medium conditions for artistic production), the notion of 'contemporary conditions' is preferred to indicate the characteristic features of the historical present. (I said this in the abstract, but actually I think I can still be said to be addressing the conditions for postmedia art.)

In the context of this event, my contention is that rather than concentrate on futures or whether something is sustainable, new or sufficiently different, the notion of the contemporary poses the question of when the present of a particular work begins and ends. Like Osborne, I am stressing the conditions, and contemporaneity to be a *condition* (to stress its mode of being, its ontological status).

////////

This attention to the notion of the present might already sound familiar to those who have read Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" (written in 1940) for instance – and his attention to 'now-time' -

"History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous empty time [of the ruling class], but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]" (1992: 252-3)

to indicate the dramatic point - time at a standstill - when social transformation is possible once it has been detached from the continuum of history. It retains urgency in order to understand better the conditions for social action and inaction.

////////

But the current discussion of contemporaneity is different from now-time inasmuch as it describes a multiplicity of presents and increasing complexity. Osborne explains this through what he calls the:

"distinctive conceptual grammar of con-temporaneity, a coming together not simply 'in' time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together in time with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different but equally 'present'* temporalities or

‘times’, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*” (p.17).

Thus ‘contemporaneity’ begins to describe the more complex and layered problem of different kinds of time existing simultaneously across different localities – under the current conditions of global capitalism, in other words, in which real-time technologies play an increasingly significant role.

What is contemporary is clearly a contested notion and multiple interpretations abound. The contemporary is generally defined as a ‘living, existing, or occurring together’ in time but then more recently in popular usage has become a differentiation from the ‘modern’ period to describe a more collective historical period of a shared present (Osborne, p. 16).

////////

Another reference for this discussion is Agamben’s “What Is the Contemporary?” from *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (Stanford University Press, 2009) who interprets the contemporary as an experience of profound dissonance:

“Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it.”

Osborne also refers to distance, quoting Benjamin’s artwork essay, and his description of the reflective experience of our encounter with art as a “unique appearance of a distance, however near it might be”. He is interested in how impossible this critical distance seems today and this is especially ironic given the conceptual character of much contemporary art.

////////

It is this conceptual character that leads to misunderstanding according to Osborne, so much so that various strategies of interpretation fall short - including that “contemporary art is somehow exempt from historical judgement in the present, by virtue of its contemporaneity” (p.2). This leads him to concentrate critical attention on the phrase “contemporary art” in order to dispute the notion that this simply refers to the “totality of artworks that are produced within the duration of a particular present (our present)” (p.2). He wishes to render it more “critically intelligible”.

To make a claim for something to be contemporary is to say that it operates in “the actuality of the present” - that is, to engage with a politics of time.

//////////

Importantly this is not to say that it stands outside of historical forces (as might be easily imagined, or conceptualised in Arthur Danto’s notion of ‘post-historical art’) but rather to set a critical challenge to ‘construct’ a better understanding of what constitutes contemporary art and its contingent character.

Osborne takes up this challenge –not doing a history or posthistory of art - in relation to a critical history of art and art criticism rooted in the historical present, with the proposition that “contemporary art is postconceptual art” (p.3). Might we speculate that “contemporary art is postmedia art”? (in recognition of art’s ‘post-medium’ condition where the ontological status of ‘medium’ has been undone.) If so, the idea needs to be put under pressure by insisting on the engagement with a politics of time. To be clear again on my title: *it is this aspect that is badly known*.

Elsewhere (in Postdigital Aesthetics) I have argued that we do not really need new concepts like the post-digital, but, rather, need to rethink the deep structures of temporalization that render our present the way it is. We need to pay attention to the conditions in other words.

I should add a footnote here that in stressing contemporaneity to be a *condition* –Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) also argued that teleological notions of human history were untenable as a consequence of developments in communications technology and computer science.)

//////////

This line of thinking can also be found in Frederic Jameson’s critique of ‘postmodernity’ at the height of its popularity in the early 1990s. He identified the dangers of conceptualizing the present historically in an age that seems to have forgotten about history. It would seem that useful parallels can be drawn between a critique of post-history and other “posts” to understand why new terms arise at particular moments and what they displace in this process. In *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson claims that the historical present has been colonized

by “pastness”, displacing “real” history (1991, 20). The question becomes, in the use of any new term, what is being displaced?

It is not that new kinds of historical knowledge do not emerge with changes in production; this necessarily happens as an integral part of historical processes. Jameson claims that cultural changes are bound to changing modes of production and related periodizations, through which social relations can be identified.

////////

Jameson adopts Mandel’s “periodizing logic” or “long wave theory” of expanding and stagnating economic cycles to explain developmental forces of production, and in turn cultural production. Although the model may seem rather crude and over-determined, these developments are to be taken as uneven and layered, without clean breaks or ruptures. Brian Holmes too, in recent years, has been using long wave theory to understand the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 (in his *Three Crises*), and also, like Jameson, to stress the link between the mode of production and the social relations that arise from this: ‘

“Technology has as much to do with labour repression as it does with wealth and progress. This is our reality today: there is too much production, but it is unaffordable, inaccessible, and useless for those who need it most.” (Holmes 2013, 209)

But rather than speculating on characterizing a further stage of capitalist development related to globalised computation and finding a suitable term to assign to this, the point here is to stress that what we need is more reflection on periodizing logic in itself as a form of historical temporality in order to understand the conceptual logic that underpins the way we identify periods, movements, styles and techniques as forms of time more broadly.

////////

This is what Osborne also outlines in his discussion of the temporalities of ‘avant-garde’, ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ – terms that have been largely taken for granted in the aesthetic field. Osborne calls for more philosophical attention to how such terms are constituted and to avoid simply using references that become fashionable at certain points in time. His argument, itself periodizing of course, reminds us that although art is rarely of direct political significance, it does, however, contribute to a critical reflection on political subjectivation, and does so through forms

of historical temporalization (subjectivation is part of the issue for Guattari of course in his use of postmedia). That politics is necessarily related to a conception of historical time in this way is clearly a contestable position but his point is that the problem of temporality remains an issue regardless. It remains an ongoing problem that simply must be addressed in political discussions.

The lack of discussion over the terms as periodizing concepts can be seen to be part of the problem – even with understanding the temporal dimension of postmedia.

Osborne's contention is that terms like the contemporary are constructed at the level of history as a whole, and so become powerful formulations. Attention to time is Osborne's way to address the problem of conceptualizing historical change, but also to reconcile aspects of totalization – such as in forms of Marxist Hegelianism. His use of the term 'contemporary' can thus be seen to be strategic:

~~“As a historical concept, the contemporary thus involves a projection of unity onto the differential totality of the times of lives that are in principle, or potentially, present to each other in some way, at some particular time—and in particular, ‘now’, since it is the living present that provides the model of contemporaneity. That is to say, the concept of the contemporary projects a single historical time of the present, as a living present—a common, albeit internally disjunctive, historical time of human lives. ‘The contemporary’, in other words, is shorthand for ‘the historical present’. Such a notion is inherently problematic but increasingly irresistible.” (Osborne 2010)~~

His purpose here is to deepen the “*contradictory complication* of temporal forms” in keeping with Benjamin's “On the Concept of History”, to highlight the politics of history. Moreover, the emphasis on deepening contradictory complication is necessary to maintain a political view of the past that is not simply a historical one – to highlight the political temporalization of history. What becomes clear is that neither modern nor postmodern discourses are sufficient to grasp the characteristic features of the historical present. Instead, Osborne would insist that we are increasingly subject to the conditions of “global contemporaneity”. And the term ‘contemporary’ becomes useful inasmuch as it does not simply represent a historical period per se, but, rather, a moment in which shared issues that hold a certain currency are negotiated and expanded.

////////

In saying “Contemporary art is badly known”, Osborne’s point is that the convergence and mutual conditioning of periodisations of art and the social relations of art have their roots in more general economic and socio-technological processes– that makes contemporary art possible, in the sense of an “art of contemporaneity”. Yet despite the sophistication of the approach, the discussion of technology is hardly developed at all. (We might say the same of the nonhuman.)

////////// Ernst

In what remains of this talk I aim to address contemporary conditions in terms of the significant role of computational technologies that further complicate the notion of the historical present and what constitutes contemporary art and the deep structures of temporality that render our present the way it is beyond the reach of a linear narrative of progress or the straightforward accumulation of knowledge.

This is where it becomes important to conceptualize history in ways that are less human-centred (or that rely on a coherent human subject) and where historical materials can be understood in ways that the human sensory apparatus cannot comprehend directly. This presents new ways of understanding and acting in the world, exceeding what is seeable, readable and knowable, that change the way we conceptualize history.

The concept of “microtemporality” developed in the work of Wolfgang Ernst offers a time-critical analysis for understanding this non-human aspect – using methods that are further explained as “epistemological reverse engineering” to the point where “media” (and not just humans) become active archaeologists of knowledge (Ernst 2011, 239).

From this perspective – media archaeology – the cultural lifespan of a technical object is not the same as its operational lifespan (as, for instance, in the way a radio receives an analogue signal), and there is a ‘media-archaeological short circuit between otherwise historically clearly separated times’ (Ernst 2011, 240).

////////// fourier analysis

Ernst’s example is ‘Fourier analysis’, in which the machine performs a better cultural analysis than the human is capable of. For instance, in signal processing (audio, radio waves, light waves, seismic waves, and even images), Fourier analysis can isolate individual components of a

compound waveform, concentrating them for easier detection or removal. To Ernst, “[o]nly by the application of such medial-technological tools can we explain the microtemporal level of such events” (2011, 245).

////////// throbber

Machine time clearly operates at a different register. Although the general argument that time is now also organized technologically seems indisputable, there are some issues that relate to a politics of time that runs the risk of being determining in other directions. Clearly, computational processes execute a very particular view of history, and the operations of memory and storage are key to this. In solving a given problem, the central processor takes symbols from memory, combines or compares them with other symbols, and then restores them to memory. Memory here refers to random-access memory (RAM), whereby programs are created, loaded and run in temporary storage in real time. Whether these are written to hard memory becomes an intriguing analogy for the ways in which memory is loaded into history (and how this process is ideological in terms of what becomes official history) and how data is selected, stored, processed and also deleted in all systems.

//////////

To be clear, Ernst does not simply reject history or human agency, but wishes to develop a different emphasis on microtemporality – one that he considers to be a relative blind spot in media analysis.

But why does this matter? Again I would point to Osborne’s close attention to the ‘structure of temporalization (the *historically* new) which inscribes the spatial logic of social differences into a totalization of historical time’ (1995, 198). It is here that the question of possibility, or should we simply say politics, arises.

Osborne thinks that politics necessarily involves struggles over the experience of time, to both enable and disable various possibilities for change.

So rather than run the risk of overlooking the potential of the macrotemporality of history in favour of the microtemporality, why not deepen the *contradictory complication* of temporal forms in both?

//////////

In Ernst's work, contradiction is addressed to some extent in his emphasis on contingency in stochastic mathematics (in probability theory, a stochastic process is a collection of random values), and also in the recognition that there is an indeterminism between human and non-human knowledge that comes close to the uncertainty principle.

(The uncertainty principle asserts that no thing has a definite position, a definite trajectory, or a definite momentum, and that the more an attempt is made to define an object's precise position, the less precisely can one say what its momentum is, and vice versa.)

Indeed, physics, or quantum physics, provides verification that phenomena like history are knowable and unknowable at the same time, and hence indeterminate.

It is the temporal sense of incompleteness that drives transformative agency, and the ways in which human subjects seek to modify their lived circumstances knowing their experiences to be incomplete. In other words, there is not just a short circuit between otherwise historically clearly separated times, but also feedback loops that describe the way the historical subject opens up possibilities to modify and self-organize. This is in keeping with the claim that machines need to function in order to be 'radically present' – they know their place in history as other 'workers' arguably do (if you follow Marxist logic).

(Mladen Dolar's rereading of von Kempelen's automata in Hegelian terms is relevant here: as a move from a machine in-itself (the speaking machine) to for-itself (the thinking machine) (2006)).

If the tools or programs need to be operative in order to be radically present (as Ernst put it), then this goes for humans too.

////////

The complexity of historical temporality (and constitution of machinic subjectivities) requires further elaboration if one is to hold on to any possibility of transformation. Concentrating efforts on understanding temporality at both micro and macro levels (inc. the molecular in Guattari) begins to unfold more complex and layered problems of different kinds of time existing simultaneously across different geopolitical contexts. The experience of time is necessarily a political struggle and importantly different epistemological registers open up further possibilities for transformation at different scales of operation.

The task is to know this better, or less badly (and that's the aim of the research project *The Contemporary Condition*).