ART & COMMERCE. Ecology Beyond Spectatorship

Von Christopher Kulendran Thomas

The particular formation of art that has come to be known as Contemporary Art came about in the television age as a cultural form that was specifically *for* spectatorship. However today's most ubiquitous networked media platforms (like Google or Facebook to site the most obvious examples) take us not simply as their spectators but as their very materials for algorithmically data-processed purposes that remain mostly invisible. These networks can be understood as sites of intersection between human and non-human materiality. They are what the philosopher Timothy Morton might call 'hyper-objects' – so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization and therefore too dispersed to be seen in their entirety (Morton 2007). They are effectively beyond spectatorship.

In order to understand the possibilities of art in the age of media that functions beyond spectatorship, it might be worth looking at where Contemporary Art's particular modality of emancipated spectatorship came from. And this is a history of Contemporary Art which begins over two centuries ago with Immanuel Kant:

"Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition…" (Kant 1781).

Kant concludes that objective knowledge can't be possible outside human experience. If science de-centered humankind in the universe, then Kant compensates for this by deciding that reality could only be correlated to, and accessed from, human experience. In the words of the physicist and philosopher Gabriel Catren (writing recently), Kant's assertion of human autonomy serves only to "preserve the pre-modern landscape and stitch up the cosmological narcissistic wound" of man de-centered through Enlightenment science's Copernican Revolution (Catren 2011). Kant thereby sets the parameters for what philosopher Quentin Meillasoux has called 'correlationism' (Meillassoux 2008). And this two-hundred year trajectory of continental philosophy from Kant's compensating humanist injunction upon thought lays out the path to Contemporary Art and the world that it inhabited, based on a romantic idea of humankind at the center of reality. But to really understand the humanist assumptions upon which Contemporary Art was founded, let's turn to its original 'creative act':

"The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act" (Duchamp 1957).

Duchamp shifted the precise location of art from production to interpretation and with this he enacted into art the Kantian fantasy that reality is produced by human experience. Duchamp's formulation of 'The Creative Act' meant that, in Kantian terms, we could access the artwork only through our subjective relation to it, that art "must be refined as pure sugar from molasses by the spectator". The reality of art was thereby limited to the viewer's experience of it, with art's consequences possible only through interpretation.

Duchamp articulated this formulation of 'The Creative Act' forty years after the original controversy of his *Fountain (1917)* and it is at this time that his ideas were widely adopted through Pop Art's precursors. There are several published accounts (d'Harnoncourt/Hopps 1987; Ades et al. 1999; Cabanne 1971), as well as last year's Duchamp exhibition at London's Barbican, chronicling Duchamp's influence on Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage, who reinvigorated interest in him. And then with Warhol's own 'readymades', Duchamp's 'art coefficient' was adopted as the basic logic of what would eventually become Contemporary Art: rejecting the specialist language of abstraction, Contemporary Art took on the vernacular language of mass media (even as the aesthetics of abstraction eventually became part of that vernacular language). Derailing Clement Greenberg's aspirations to determine art's terms of production, this new configuration of art prioritized the viewer's interpretation of it rather than the specified criteria of any abstract language. This instilled in art, for half a century, the Kantian paradigm that Meillassoux diagnoses more broadly as 'correlationism' – with no reality of art acknowledged outside our interpretation of it. Or to put it another way, art was understood as being completed by our individual interpretation and its consequences limited to our experience of it.

This openness toward interpretive pluralism could be seen as a cultural expression of the globalizing order that was being con-

structed concurrently through economic liberalism, even though Contemporary Art's own discourse nominally opposed these dependences as corrupting influences seeking to instrumentalize its freedoms. Although the term 'contemporary' has been used throughout the second half of the last century to describe the art being made at the time, I would suggest that the term has since come to refer more specifically to the particular ideological formation of art that emerged from the deregulation of financial services in the West in the 1980s and the collapse of Communism as a viable political alternative at the end of that decade. Suhail Malik provides a good analysis of the underlying logic of this art historical paradigm (Malik 2014). For the purpose of this argument though, the crucial thing is to understand Contemporary Art as historically situated in the era of global economic liberalism – the mode of governing whereby the state is dispersed through the individual (Foucault 2008). This was the world that Contemporary Art needed and its global 'ideology of non-ideology' produced a Contemporary Art boom. In Britain for example, the first generation of wealthy young hedge fund managers and bankers (the immediate beneficiaries of the deregulation of financial services under Margaret Thatcher) provided an initial market for YBA in the 1990s (later followed by Russian oligarchs and then the rapidly growing Chinese market). Despite their nominally oppositional politics, these Young British Artists embodied the entrepreneurial spirit of the Thatcher era and wasted no time in forging an immediate relationship with their audience and their market. Taking control of their early trajectories with a proliferation of artist-run spaces, they took on the vernacular language of mass media and played out their careers with an often symbiotic relationship to the mainstream press. Absorbing the model of the hedge fund manager who operates outside the financial district of the City of London's aristocratic rules and institutionalized competences, artist-run spaces and a new generation of peer-group commercial galleries transformed the ecology of the art system.

Whilst the wealth produced by deregulated free markets created the perfect context for Contemporary Art, cultural-economic feedback started to flow in the other direction too as the model of the (now superstar) artist was adopted throughout the new 'cultural industries' and then the wider economy as a prototype for insecure labor. Meanwhile, adapting examples like London's Tate Modern, museums of 'Contemporary Art' (with that term now in widespread circulation) around the world were repositioned as popular entertainment experiences. But art was also becoming useful in multiple ways:

1. on the front-line of urban-rebranding, with public art regenerating town centers all over the world
2. onto the Corporate Social Responsibility programs of most major corporations
3. through the education or community programmes of art institutions, deploying social practice as social work

The point here is that art has always produced its reality *structurally* and not just through its viewers interpretation. However the ways in which art *makes* its world economically, institutionally and infrastructurally are typically disavowed when discussing Contemporary Art in favor of prioritizing what art does for the *viewer* as the only consequences of art worth talking about.

This idea that Contemporary Art's consequences are primarily through our interpretation of it requires a suspension of disbelief much like a Hollywood movie, allowing Contemporary Art to sell 'critique' as a form of easy listening for the defunct legacy of the political Left. The romantic myth worth dispelling here is that art originates in its initial purity, only to be corrupted by its market. One need only look at how innovations in Tuscan banking begat the Italian renaissance to understand how art has always been prefigured by its market. We tend to get the art that new markets need and by the mid-2000s, the turbo-charged global art system that had emerged during the preceding financial boom was generating around $60 billion a year worth of tax-efficient, morally uplifting entertainment experiences constructed around the transfer of social status through artworks.

And it may once have seemed as though Contemporary Art would continue its biennializing expansion forever, as sure as the neoliberal certainty that the era of big government was over. Contemporary Art was seen at the time as a universal, non-specific non-genre, just as it's neoliberal world order was sold as the product of non-ideological, pragmatic economic strategies. But, as the consequences of 2007's US subprime mortgage crisis unfolded into a global recession, the world's strongest new super-economies (and eventually the US itself) grew through massive state intervention as the economic rationale for the neoliberal project faltered. In retrospect it's perhaps easier to see now that both Contemporary Art and the political project of economic liberalism perpetuated a very particular (and similar) type of subjectivity – both interpellating the viewer / consumer / citizen as a liberated, autonomous individual. And it's exactly this Kantian subjectivity that we artists have become experts in producing by addressing our viewers through work that's *for* interpretation, optimized for the viewer to be free to experience art on their own individual terms. Kant's paradigm that reality can only be correlated to our experience of it has underwritten the myth that humankind is ontologically distinct to all that is not human, with our cognition privileged over the interdependencies and contingencies of a world that is not actually dependent on us. This myth is replicated in Contemporary Art's architecture of spectatorship,

organized with us at its center, and requiring us to complete its reality.

So how might we understand our place in the world beyond this fantasy of individual autonomy – the fictional freedom – upon which Contemporary Art's paradigm of emancipated spectatorship is based? The work of Berlin-based artists Katja Novitskova and Timur Si-Qin, for example, channel immediately recognizable media imagery, highly evolved from nature to circulate most efficiently. Tuned into biological responses from potentially beyond the 200,000 years of the human race, this work prompts an expanded art historical timescale. In his recent book *After Art*, David Joselit claims that the Greenbergian modernist prioritization of artistic autonomy was a temporary historical glitch against the proliferation of icons, from the religious icons of the past to the internet memes of today's image explosion (Joselit 2012). In line with this idea, I would like to tentatively indicate an alternative history of modernism that predates its co-option by Clement Greenberg's generation as the practice of individual autonomy. Greenberg's was an understandable American reaction to the threat of European fascism at the time; but earlier stages of the modernist enterprise (before Greenberg's era) were not at all dominated by this individualistic formulation of artistic autonomy. From Soviet Constructivism to the likes of Van Doesburg and Bauhaus, we could trace an alternative trajectory of modernism in which art is understood as always already instrumentalized in producing its contiguous reality as a mundane part of daily life. The legacy of this can perhaps be traced through the work of the Artists' Placement Group (from the late 1960s through to the 70s and the early 80s) and in the 2000s in the proposition made by David Robbins whilst teaching (at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) artists who were developing ideas about art post-Internet. Robbins proposes reversing the logic of Duchamp's readymades. Instead of taking non-art into the frame of art and making it art by calling it art, Robbins proposes taking artistic operations outside the context of art, doing art through non-art processes, where the category of 'art' might not even be relevant (Robbins 2006). The radical horizon of this proposition could be seen as counter to Contemporary Art's Kantian architecture of spectatorship, instead requiring spectatorship as part of the process rather than the purpose.

Reena Spaulings, for example, began her life in the New York art world as the fictional title character in Bernadette Corporation's group-written book, before opening a commercial gallery and then becoming an artist herself who is represented in turn by other galleries. Reena Spaulings now operates as an artist, an ongoing artwork and as a functioning business that in turn represents other artists. The multiple roles occupied by Reena Spaulings could be seen as a solution to Conceptual Art's mis-targeting of the art object through its strategy of dematerialization from the late 1960s and 70s. Because value never lay in the art object anyway; it was in the brand of the artist. So the dis-incarnation of the artist could perhaps be more interesting than the dematerialization of the art object. Reena Spaulings exists either simultaneously or at different times as an artist, an artwork and as commercial platform that, in turn, includes other artists and their artworks, such that the category distinctions between artist, artwork, gallery and viewer become irrelevant or at least highly complicated and entangled. It seams to me that the underlying category distinction that is being dissolved here is the phony binary between subject and object upon which the fantasy of autonomy is based. Beyond that humanist myth, this type of distributed 'hyper object' could be understood as a site of intersection between human and non-human materiality, too dispersed to be seen in its entirety and transcending localized interpretation (Morton 2013). Art then becomes an issue not of either artistic or interpretational autonomy (in either Greenberg's or Rancière's [Rancière 2009] formulations respectively) but rather of negotiating agency within its contiguous ecologies of interdependencies.

Renzo Marten's new *Institute for Human Activity* is a provocative example of this type of 'ecological' (in a broad sense) approach to doing art, albeit polemically so. According to Marten's narration of the project, it is born from a frustration with the normalized hypocrisy of artists who make biennial-friendly work about remote, impoverished parts of the world, only for those artworks to be shown in metropolitan centers primarily for the benefit of museum audiences. In response, Martens prioritizes structural consequences where this work is made. Addressing the limitations of his own seminal film *Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty*, the artist is currently establishing an art space in a particularly remote part of the Congo for the purpose of exploiting the newly founded institution's primary consequence – as a centre of gentrification. Within five years, Martens aims to have initiated sufficient economic growth in the area through art-led hipsterization that it will be possible to buy a cappuccino in that isolated part of the African jungle. Basing his plans on Richard Florida's ideas about art's uses in urban regeneration, Marten's takes as his materials art's actual local effects, rather than those interpretational consequences that are only for the work's distant spectators. His appropriating of Florida's ideas may be ironic but the explicitly infrastructural materiality of his work is deployed directly rather than from any supposed 'critical' distance. This is not a conceptual proposition but an actual inflection in the landscape, taking as its materials the real social processes by which art's institutions shape their environment.

In that sense it might be worth discussing Marten's *Institute for Human Activity* in relation to the understanding of architecture that has come from that profession's adoption of computational analytics. At its most superficial, this type of 'parametric' architecture is seen as a style that fetishes the biomorphic aesthetics made possible by the computerized mathematization of 3D design. But the more profound horizons of parametric design could be understood as an approach to architecture that emerges from its situation, measuring pre-existing natural and social processes (even regardless of a binary distinction between the two) and then inflecting that environment with an architectural 'program' that is mathematically dependent on the measured parameters. Emerging from its landscape and algorithmically processed beyond human perception, such a program need not recognize a categorical distinction between figure and ground or subject and object, but rather could be understood as consistent with an ontological entanglement between these categories. This possibility of computational architecture could involve environmental interventions in the human and non-human processes that shape a landscape, potentially concretizing flows and movements of light, air, desire and capital. Whilst Matthew Poole's research at CalArts is worth noting in relation to the dangers of algorithmically designing social space in accordance with capital flows, perhaps this type of architectural practice could be a useful way of understanding the Institute for Human Activity in that it allows for an understanding of art-institutional consequences as emerging from and inflecting art's environment.

This approach of accounting for the local structural effects of art might also be a useful way of evaluating, in an urban context, the often parallel effects of hipsters on a neighborhood. Whilst few of us admit to being one, the hipster has embodied an anonymous and universally disavowed social movement of massive scale and global reach, remaking cities around the world so as to shape the urban environment with two-tier neighborhoods, eventually displacing often immigrant populations with the new migration of the cultural industries. The structural consequences of the hipster could be understood through the computational paradigm of architecture that emerges from and intervenes in its environment. And it is in this environment that New York-based art groups DIS and K-HOLE both emerge and intervene; but rather than doing so in line with the hipster mainstreaming of connoisseurial counter-culture, both groups chart courses through mainstream culture itself, reversing the trajectory of the hipster by fetishizing sameness rather than differentially elitist individualism. Whilst DIS does this by developing the distribution infrastructure for other artists to operate in the field of mass culture or through commercial processes, K-HOLE intervenes through writing. Their work of lived, appropriated literature is essentially a group writing project by which its authors negotiate their agency in relation to their day jobs, publishing trend reports not as proprietary market research but as freely downloadable PDFs from khole.net. And the power of expanding rather than restricting the proliferation of their information has been demonstrated over the last two weeks as the ideas behind their latest report on 'Youth Mode' has flowed well beyond an immediate art readership and into mainstream circulation.

Their analysis emerges from (and through a sensitivity to) their environment. Informed perhaps by the group's connections to the Berlin art scene, where artists have tended to dress in a far more understated way than in other art capitals, K-HOLE's latest report analyses this self-conscious non-fashion as approaching a mastery of sameness and labels it 'Acting Basic'. However the media take-up of this idea following an article in the New York Magazine has confused it with another of K-HOLE's catchier terms and the idea has proliferated as 'Normcore', the switching of terms in circulation itself demonstrating a de-prioritization of authorship when inflecting a broader ecology. Rather than restricting their practice to Contemporary Art's fantasy space of autonomy, K-HOLE's activity could be understood as more akin to the approach to architecture just discussed that comes from an analysis of the landscape informing the concretizing of a strategic intervention (in this case the theory of Acting Basic behind the term Normcore) to inflect the environment. As Joselit might point out, the buzz of circulation has replaced the aura of the singular artwork. K-HOLE do intuitively through writing what computational approaches to architecture might one day be sufficiently sophisticated to do systematically with data. The horizon of this type of ecological intervention lies in how cities are continually remade and in the potential of de-differentiating two-tier neighborhoods by prioritizing connoisseurship of the mainstream rather than the mainstreaming of elite stratifications.

The artistic strategies sited here seem to me to share more with the legacy of the early, pre-Greenbergian stages of the modernist project than with what Joselit sees as the historical glitch of artistic autonomy. And herein might lie a way past the dead end that of Contemporary Art's logic of critique. Derived from Conceptual Art, which was after all designed to be instantly institutionalized and academicized, 'criticality' is now taught, learned, rehearsed and played out to create value as a crucial aesthetic criteria at the top end of the art market. Institutions of course require critique to maintain their moral authority. And so Contemporary Art is required to play its pretend politics within its institutional pockets of mock opposition. But rather than playing up to the fantasy

of critical distance, the artistic practices sited here work through networked contingencies to produce communities and consequences that institute reality. Spectatorship here becomes only part of the materials of (rather than the purpose of) art's ecology of effects beyond the viewer's interpretation.

So where does political agency lie when it's rooted not in a fantasy of critical distance but in the actuality of ecological entanglement? By inflecting existing infrastructure rather than resisting the technology of the present economic system, could a new political imaginary be invigorated through the directed redeployment of emergent technology? By way of examples, the social media platform *0.* (nulpunt.nu), a project by Jonas Staal and Metahaven, now sets out to exploit new freedom of information laws (in ways unforeseen by legislators) by deploying a technology toward governmental accountability. FORENSIS, the current exhibition at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, presents the work of the Forensic Architecture project at Goldsmiths, University of London. It features aesthetic investigations that are mobilised as evidence on behalf of various legal teams, civil society organizations, activists, human rights groups, and the United Nations, offering new types of evidence to expand the juridical imagination and articulate new claims for justice. But can art, as the ultimate benchmark of connoisseurial consumerism, be mobilized to redirect networked flows of power and capital? Perhaps it's worth asking whether these infrastructural processes are inflected in such a way as to go beyond the preexisting parameters of the platform that is being repurposed. With this criteria in mind, how now might the present economic system be confronted through repurposing the institutions of commerce? Well it seems to me that this is the crucial political challenge for today's artists working through commercial processes. The possible horizon: redirecting patterns of consumption beyond capitalism's internal contradictions.[1]

Anmerkungen

[1]Dieser Text erschien erstmals als: Thomas, Christopher Kulendran (2014): ART & COMMERCE: Ecology Beyond Spectatorship. In: DIS Magazine. Online: http://dismagazine.com/discussion/59883/art-commerce-ecology-beyond-spectatorship/ [16.4.2019]. Wiedererveröffentlichung mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Autors und DIS.

Literatur

Ades, Dawn/Cox,Neil/Hopkins, David (1999): Marcel Duchamp. London: Thames and Hudson.

Cabanne, Pierre (1971): Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp. London: Thames and Hudson.

Catren, Gabriel (2011): Outland Empire. In: Bryant, Levi/ Srnicek, Nick/ G. Harman, Graham (Hrsg.): The Speculative Turn. Melbourne: Re.Press

d'Harnoncourt, Anne and Hopps, Walter (1987): Etant Donnes: 1. La chute d'eau 2. Le gaz d'eclairage. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art / Thames and Hudson.

Duchamp, Marcel (1957): The Creative Act. In: Lebel, Robert (1959): Marcel Duchamp, New York: Grove Press.

Foucault, Michel (2008): The Birth of Biopolitics, lectures at College de France 1978-79. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Joselit, David (2012): After Art. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kant, Immanuel (1781): Preface to Critique of Pure Reason. In: Guyer, Paul/ Wood, Allen (Hrsg.) (1992): The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Malik, Suhail (2014): Lectures: On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art. New York: Artists Space.

Meillassoux, Quentin (2008): Time Without Becoming lecture. London: Middlesex University.

Morton, Timothy (2007): Ecology Without Nature. Havard: Harvard University Press.

Morton, Timothy (2013): Hyperobjects. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Rancière, Jacques (2009): The Emancipated Spectator. London: Verso.

Robbins, David (2006): The Velvet Grind (2006). In: JRP Ringier. Online: http://www.high-entertainment.com/ [16.4.2019]

Tomkins, Calvin (1981): Off The Wall. New York: Picador.