

# The postconceptual condition

## Or, the cultural logic of high capitalism today

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Those with long enough memories will no doubt recognize the crossed syntax of my title.\* It mimics, first, that of a text which, while in historical terms still recent, is nonetheless already antiquated, even if not yet sufficiently so to have acquired the 'revolutionary energies' that André Breton and, after him, Walter Benjamin sought in such objects: Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. It is thirty-five years now since the first publication of that 'seemingly neutral review of a vast body of material on contemporary science and problems of knowledge or information', which proved to be (in Fredric Jameson's phrase) 'a kind of crossroads'.<sup>1</sup> Yet those, like Jameson, who took the road called postmodernism have long since had to retrace their steps or accustom themselves to life in a historical and intellectual cul-de-sac. The postmodern episode, as we might call it, an episode in the history of criticism, enlivened theoretical debates for little more than twenty years (1979–1999) and, retrospectively, its fate as a periodizing category had already been sealed by the fall of state communism in Eastern Europe ten years previously ('1989') and the rise of theories of globalization that followed – before Jameson's 1991 magnum opus, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (source of my second borrowing) had even appeared.<sup>2</sup>

How very late, it now seems, still to have been periodizing capitalism as 'late' in 1991, at the very moment of its most powerful renewal. In using the term 'late capitalism', Jameson was in part alluding to Adorno's use of it, best known from his 1968 address to the Congress of German Sociology, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?' (*Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft?*), where the emphasis falls more heavily on the retention of the concept of capitalism

than on its internal periodization. In the meantime, Ernest Mandel's 1972 *Late Capitalism* had provoked a broader revival of the term, originally coined by Werner Sombart back in 1902 in his *Modern Capitalism*. It is important to remember that capitalism was first declared 'late' quite so long ago – although it was the 1916 edition of Sombart's book that was more influential in this respect, taking the onset of the First World War as its periodizing break: from 'high capitalism' (*Hochkapitalismus*) to 'late'. Mandel would subsequently move that break forward again, to the end of the Second World War.<sup>3</sup>

Jameson had called his book on Adorno from the previous year *Late Marxism*, with perhaps more irony than he was aware. But even as liberal a Marxist as Jürgen Habermas used the term 'late capitalism' in the 1970s, in the title of *Legitimationprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (1973), for example – a usage that was effaced by its translation into English three years later,<sup>4</sup> in a manoeuvre presumably designed to avoid frightening the sociological horses, with which Habermas's work was at that time being corralled. Today, Sombart's periodizing scheme continues to circulate mainly through the title of a collection of Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire (*A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*), reinforcing the association of the 'high' with European capitalism in its mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois form.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Baudelaire's writings resonate as much with life in Hong Kong and Shanghai today as they do with the Paris of the 1850s. In fact, there are good reasons for reviving the term 'high capitalism' as a description of the present, in which capitalism appears far from entering a phase that could usefully be described as 'late' (let alone turning into a form of communism all of its own – the so-called

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‘communism of capital’ – as some currently dream). The term has the added virtue of conveying a certain hubris and hence the imminence of a fall (‘financial crisis’), albeit only a cyclical one, while ‘late capitalism’ struggles to rid itself of the progressivist illusion of an approaching natural death, along with the ennobling aesthetic connotation of ‘late style’ (*Spätstil*) – its source as a historical term, dating back to Winckelmann.<sup>6</sup> Jameson drew on these associations in his book on Adorno, trading on the latter’s interpretation of Beethoven, but he neglected their implications for his periodization of capitalism itself as having its ‘late’ period.

The naturalistic connotations of late capitalism allowed the prefix of Jameson’s ‘postmodernism’ surreptitiously to anticipate a post-capitalism (that was not to come), at the same time as it functioned as the cultural marker of the end of the social-democratic welfare state and the purported rise of ‘a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world’. This intimation of an end to come was ultimately its redeeming, utopian feature (that little bit of utopia tucked away in the superstructure of the dystopian capitalism of ‘blood, torture, death and horror’). Jameson would use it to exit postmodernism, back to a relatively orthodox form of Utopia Studies.<sup>7</sup>

A revival, deepening, multiplication and complication of discourses of the modern – with ‘multiple’, ‘alternative’ and ‘postcolonial’ modernities at the fore – accompanied and followed the decline of the category of the postmodern.<sup>8</sup> Yet, revitalizing and illuminating as this process has been in various respects, effectively replacing the concept of postmodernity with that of a singular, complexly internally differentiated global modernity,<sup>9</sup> the renewal of discourses of the modern has not been sufficient, alone, to grasp the most distinctive cultural features (that is, the lived novelty) of the/our historical present. The equivocation here is crucial: *the/our*, two terms whose referents are seemingly the same, but whose meanings are most definitely not. Indeed, it is here, in the movement of the difference between these two terms (the ‘the’ and the ‘our’) – the objective and the subjective sides of the concept of history – that the *problem* of history as a category of modernity resides. ‘History’, one might say, simply *is* the movement of this difference.<sup>10</sup>

How best, then, after the dissipation of the post-modern illusion, to characterize the cultural form of this condition, the/our historical present, or the cultural logic of high capitalism today?

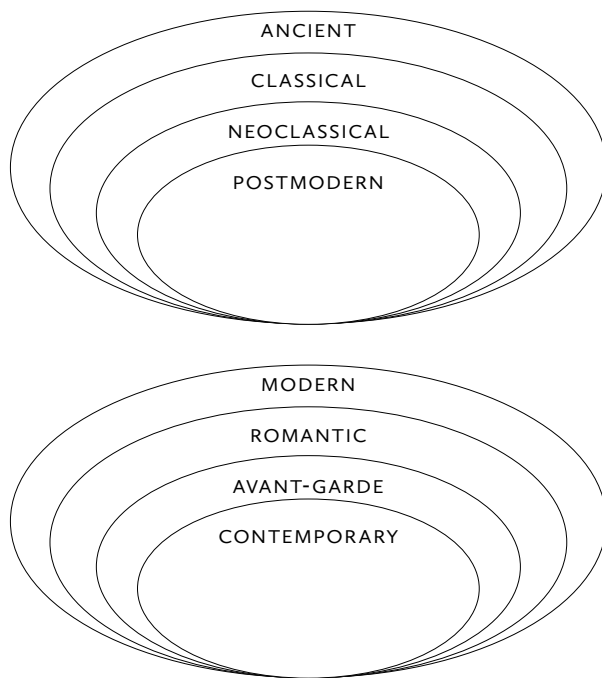
## From knowledge to art

Here, I propose a double displacement of Lyotard’s standpoint: from the ‘postmodern’ to the ‘contemporary’ and from ‘knowledge’ to ‘art’ – taken together, from postmodern knowledge to contemporary art – to accompany the displacement of Jameson’s periodizing perspective from a ‘late’ back to a ‘high’ capitalism in which we are perhaps only just beginning to understand the depth of the mutations of social being that capitalism as a social form involves. This shift of focus from knowledge to art does not involve any general claim regarding the relative cultural significance of art and knowledge, or the transformations in their relations and practices – although the so-called ‘knowledge economy’ undoubtedly involves such changes, rendering the transcendental constitution of ‘art’ and ‘knowledge’ as separate value-spheres, epitomized in Habermas’s Weberian sociologization of Kantianism, increasingly phantasmatic. Nonetheless, there is a greater historical and conceptual intimacy between ‘art’, in its modern European (post-eighteenth-century) philosophical and institutional sense, and the problems of historical temporality, historical periodization and historical diagnosis – ultimately all ‘cultural’ problems, in so far as they involve temporal structures of subjectivity – than there is between the latter and ‘knowledge’ in its main institutionalized, scientific and pedagogical forms. It is an intimacy derived from art’s place within the historical culture of Enlightenment, its historico-philosophical association with the affective structure of subjectivity (‘aesthetic’) and the reflective experience of pure temporal form (‘modernity’, in its Baudelairean construal).

It has always been a function of literary and art-historical periodization, upon which the intelligibility of works of art depends, to provide models – *ancient* and *modern*, *classical* and *romantic* (naive and sentimental), *neo-classical* and *avant-garde* – for the theorization of broader historical processes of spirit (*Geist*) or subject-formation, of which art itself is only a small yet emblematic part. In being generalized in this way, such periodizing categories are transformed, reflecting back upon their more narrowly art-historical meanings and changing them in turn. In this respect, *postmodern* and *contemporary* have similar critical origins and could, hypothetically, be similarly opposed :

ANCIENT	MODERN
CLASSICAL	ROMANTIC
NEOCLASSICAL	AVANT-GARDE
POSTMODERN	CONTEMPORARY

One has only to align the categories like this (in a crude and tendentious manner) for the political meanings of their temporal roles in the philosophy of history to jump out as 'conservative' and 'progressive', respectively. This does not mean that these pairs of terms are not dialectically imbricated in any particular instance; or that the historical relations between the core critical-temporal meanings of each term are not considerably more complicated than this serial presentation suggests, reading downwards from the past towards the present. In historical terms, the lineages might perhaps be better represented as below.



As the semantic range of these terms indicates, the connections between art as historico-cultural form and historical temporalizations of the present more generally are neither historically nor conceptually arbitrary; and nor is the proposed critical displacement of the postmodern by the contemporary, as at once a periodizing category and, more fundamentally, a form of historical time. For what 'contemporaneity' signifies most deeply is a new form of historical time. A 'report on art' (to continue the Lyotardian conceit) may thus have more to tell us about the changing structure of historical experience than might be supposed.

The displacement of the postmodern by the contemporary as the fundamental category of the historical present follows not merely from the discrediting of the postmodern as a temporal and critical concept – and the need to fill the conceptual space it vacated – but, more importantly, from the globalization of the resurgent concept of modernity, in response to the

actual historical process that underlay postmodernism's critical demise: namely, world capitalism after 1989. In a nutshell, if modernity is the temporal culture of capital (as Jameson discerned), within its current form, contemporaneity is the temporal structure that articulates the unity of global modernity.<sup>11</sup> Here, I shall expound this speculative idea in the compressed form of a series of summaries of: (1) globalization as the movement of the difference between globe and world; (2) contemporaneity as the historical temporality of the worlding of the global; (3) postconceptuality as the (culturally symptomatic) condition of contemporary art.

### Globe and world

What is called 'globalization' is primarily the effect of the relative global deregulation of capital markets, or, more specifically, the relative denationalization of the regulation of markets in finance capital (more important, at this moment, it would seem, than the mobility of variable capital – migration – that drove postwar accumulation), after the passing of historical communism. This process has been grounded on the destruction of the geopolitical conditions that underpinned previous notions of the world-historical present (those of the Cold War) and the notion of 'globalization' has come to articulate debates about the meaning of the historical present in their place. The term 'globalization' thus occupies a conceptual space for which there is no available *social* occupant, in so far as the subject position that unifies the process of globalization (that of a globally mobile capital) is not that of a possible socially actual agent, or subject of action.<sup>12</sup> Hence the sober negativity of Gayatri Spivak's recent judgement: 'Globalization takes place only in capital and data. Everything else is damage control.'<sup>13</sup>

There are numerous extremely rich accounts of globalization focused upon and making competing claims about various different aspects of the process: economic, technological, cultural, political, legal, geographical, and so on. Yet, as Giacomo Marramao among others has argued, the term 'globalization' does not yet stand for anything like an adequately theorized *concept*, capable of unifying the objects of the various discourses in which the term is found.<sup>14</sup> A more fundamental theorization is required. And it is on the terrain of the concept of the historical present (in the singular) as an aspect of the concept of 'history' (in the collective singular), which emerged in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century, that the concept

of globalization functions in both its broadest and its deepest diagnostic sense. As such, globalization represents a new spatialization of historical temporality: a mapping of planetary wholeness as 'globe' onto the irreducibly phenomenological concept of 'world' that emerged in the course of European colonialism to provide the geographical space of the concept of history.<sup>15</sup> This conception of world finds its founding philosophical expression in Kant and its existential-ontological exposition in Heidegger, in the famous bad poetry of the formulation 'the world worlds' (*die Welt weltet*).<sup>16</sup>

The conceptual independence of the notion of the planet as a globe, registered in the separate semantic histories of *mundus* and *globus*, to which Marramao alerts us, indicates that 'globalization' is in no way a mere spatial extension of a once-colonially-restricted geographical conception of the world to its planetary limit – as is often thought – but is rather to be understood as a projected 'worlding' of the globe. Hence Jean-Luc Nancy's preference for the French *mondialisation* over 'globalization', to register this conceptual point terminologically.<sup>17</sup> There are subtle issues to do with finitude and infinity inherited from the philosophical history of these terms. *Mundus*/world is associated with finitude and mortality – as opposed to the other-worldly divine – while *globus*/globe carries the geometrical associations of infinity and perfection.<sup>18</sup> My point here, however, is that it is the difference between globe and world that grounds globalization as the process of the 'worlding' of the planet as a globe. This process is extensionally based on a multidimensional 'global' expansion of forms of social dependence and interdependence, often enforced but also in some forms freely embraced; but it is not reducible to it, since it depends upon multiple, intensive, communicational constructions of these forms as 'world'; that is, upon a multiplicity of claims on a common subject position. This is the 'our' of 'our historical present'.<sup>19</sup>

There is thus a fundamental, constitutive ambiguity within the concept of globalization between its 'objective' planetary aspect (the integration of particular geographically localized social sites into global networks of various sorts) and what we might call its (collectively) 'subjective' worldly aspect, through which these practices and processes of 'integration' are lived as part of a transformation of 'the world'; and manifest existentially in a necessary plurality of interconnecting 'worlds', each of which speaks as though on behalf of all. What appears as 'ambiguity' in the semantics of 'globalization' manifests itself

socially as tension and antagonism, and logically as immanent or dialectical contradiction, between its two main aspects: functional social process and its worldly appropriation. This contradiction is expressed spatially as a contradiction between the abstractly ideal and literally uninhabitable 'absolute' or infinite subject position of the globe (which is a kind of Romantic absolute) and the necessarily 'located' multiple subject positions of its worldings. The main way in which it appears within the structure of the artworld – note the phenomenological connotation of that term in this context – is as a structural contradiction between its cultural-economic (or 'cultural-industrial') global aspects and its individualizing cultural-artistic functions. Within the artwork itself, this structural spatial contradiction appears as a new, global artistic form of what the US artist Robert Smithson called the Site–Nonsite dialectic.<sup>20</sup>

Today, forty years after Smithson's death, his Site–Nonsite dialectics appears as an art-institutional specification of a more general dialectics of places and non-places that has become global in its logic and extent.<sup>21</sup> Number 9 in Smithson's list of paired elements of the Site–Nonsite dialectic in his 'Spiral Jetty' essay reads: 'Some Place (physical) – No Place (abstract)'.<sup>22</sup> Smithson's initial use of 'non-site' to refer to the location of physical material displaced from a site to a place at which that site is represented (an art institution), here becomes transformed, via the mechanism of representation, to denote the function of representation itself. Hence the subsequent derivation of the concept of the 'functional site' from the spatial generality of the non-site,<sup>23</sup> giving Smithson's dialectic a further axial turn. This socio-spatial dialectic, immanent within the artwork under the economic and communicational conditions of globalization, derives its temporality from the novel historical temporality of 'contemporaneity'.

### **Contemporaneity as historical time**

In so far as globalization involves a fundamental transformation in the spatio-temporal matrix of *possible* experience, these changes do not simply happen 'within' historical time, in the famous 'homogenous empty' sense of time diagnosed by Heidegger, Benjamin and Althusser alike as 'historicism'. Rather, they represent a new form of historical temporalization, opening up the possibility of new temporalizations (new temporal structures) of 'history'. This new form of temporality produced by the globalization

of the social processes grounding the temporality of modernity is best grasped not simply as the spatial extension of the temporality of modernity (the logic of the new), the aforementioned 'global modernity', but by the term 'contemporaneity': that is, as a new, internally disjunctive global historical-temporal form, a totalizing (but not thereby 'total', since it is open to no more than a *distributive* unification), radically disjunctive, contemporaneity. There is a fracturing of the identity between the *the* and the *our* by the multiplication of *wes that are not-I* and that *I can not become* – to use the terminology of Hegel's famous 'I that is we and we that is I' (*Ich, das Wir, und Wir, das Ich ist*), which remains the speculative political horizon posited by all phenomenology. The consequence is that (as Adorno always insisted) universal history must be both 'constructed and denied (*leugnen*)'.<sup>24</sup> What is new here, since Adorno's day, is that this process of construction and denial is no longer a purely speculative, intellectual task (the task of the philosopher – Kant's personification of the 'world concept' of philosophy),<sup>25</sup> but the increasingly manifest form, or rhythm, of the historical process of capital accumulation itself.

In short, historically construed, contemporaneity is the temporality of globalization: a new kind of totalizing but immanently fractured constellation of temporal relations. This new historical temporality interacts with the temporality of modernity – the differential temporality of the new – in fiendishly complicated ways. There is no replacement of the one with the other, no replacement of the logic of the modern by the contemporary – that is the mistake of the kind of stagist, historicist periodization we find in mainstream history and art history alike. Rather, as a historical temporality, global contemporaneity is an accompaniment to the more abstract temporality of modernity, and a consequence of its spatial expansion. A clue to its structure – conjunctively disjunctive – can be found in the modern philosophical conception of

temporality, as the process of temporal production through which time is lived as a self-differentiating set of relations of unification.

The English and French vernacular terms 'contemporary' and *contemporain* (derived from the medieval Latin *contemporarius* and the late Latin *contemporalis*) emerged around the middle of the seventeenth century, but a philosophical thinking of contemporaneity that exploits the etymological resource of the togetherness signified in the prefix (lacking in



Wald Raad, Appendix XVII: A History of a Title [Contemporary Art Practices in Postwar Lebanon], 2009. Courtesy: Paula Cooper Gallery. Photo: PO, Frieze Art Fair, 2009.

its German-language equivalents)<sup>26</sup> is a distinctively post-Hegelian phenomenon. It is associated, in the first instance, with the thinking of 'sametimeness' (*samtidighed*, in the Danish) in Kierkegaard's existential theology of the 1840s. However, it emerges as a critical, social and historical concept only in the course of the 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

The structure of contemporaneity as the product of an *act* of conjunction emerges in Kierkegaard's use of 'sametimeness' in his *Philosophical Fragments* in opposition to the everyday historicist meaning

of contemporary as 'living, existing, or occurring together' in the same chronological time. It is used there to denote the *act of conjoining times* to produce an immediate (paradoxically de-temporalized) temporal unity. As Gadamer put it:

Sametimeness for Kierkegaard does not mean existing at the same time. ... [It is] not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a *task* for consciousness and an *achievement* that is required of it.

More specifically, for Kierkegaard, sametimeness is

a formulation of the believer's task of so totally *combining* one's own presence and the redeeming act of Christ, that the latter is experienced as something present (not as something in the past).

It thus consists in 'holding on to the object in such a way that ... all mediation is dissolved in total presentness [*Gegenwärtigkeit*]'. This appears, superficially, to be similar to the simultaneity of aesthetic consciousness. But, as Gadamer argues, 'aesthetic consciousness depends on the *concealment* of the task that sametimeness sets', while Kierkegaardian sametimeness, despite its existential immediacy, is nonetheless to be understood philosophically as an achievement and not as given – hence, a Hegelian would say, precisely as mediation.<sup>28</sup>

This philosophical notion of sametimeness as a task and achievement of temporal combination (of a particular past and present, within the present itself) remained confined to religious existentialism until, first, being taken up into Benjamin's conception of now-time (*Jetztzeit*) – where it retains its otherworldly immediacy – and, more recently, becoming associated with the semantics of the contemporary. The term 'contemporary' first acquired a historical meaning in the aftermath of the Second World War, in the context of art and (especially) design, through its use to denote a new periodization in contrast to 'the modern'. (The phrase *l'art contemporain* was in use in Paris at the time of the First World War, but without conceptual intent.) In fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, it still acted mainly as a qualification of (rather than a decisive immanent counter to) a more extended sense of the modern: the contemporary was the most recent modern, but a modern with a moderated, less ruptural futurity than that associated with the avant-garde.

In this respect, 'contemporary' was still not enough of a critical concept in its own right by the 1970s to be included in Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), for example.<sup>29</sup>

As I have said, it is only with the decisive discrediting of postmodernism as a coherent critical concept, at the end of the 1990s, that 'contemporary' began to emerge into the critical daylight from beneath its commonplace function as a label denoting what is current or up to date, by which time it had definitively separated itself out from the modern in art-historical periodization, with the invention of a new subdisciplinary specialism: history of contemporary art. At the same time, the structure of contemporaneity itself was changing. In fact, the very idea of contemporaneity as a *condition* is historically new.

The coming together of different but equally 'present' temporalities in temporarily totalized but disjunctive unities, which characterize historical contemporaneity today, are not the individual combinations of existential presents with particular pasts (religious or otherwise) characteristic of Kierkegaard's concept of sametimeness, or even Benjamin's now-time, although the purported collectivity of the subject of experience always remained a central issue for Benjamin, however unresolved. Rather, these conjunctions involve geopolitically diffuse multiplicities of temporalities (each carrying its own history) combined within social structures that produce geopolitically totalized presents that are constitutively problematic: unified only in *images* of ideal, speculative or fictional 'subjects' purporting to occupy the same kind of historical space as the alienated ideality of the value-form of capital, in its seemingly self-determining movement.<sup>30</sup>

Globalization *subjects us* to these new contemporaneities, in all of the multiple and contradictory senses that phrase has acquired in French philosophy since Foucault. These problematically disjunctive conjunctions are covered over by the everyday historicist use of 'contemporary' as a periodizing term, derived from mainstream art history, with its simple opposition to modern art. However, within this discourse, as a repressed register of the historical turbulence of the present, we nonetheless find several competing periodizations of contemporary art, overlapping genealogies or historical strata, differently extended senses of the present, within the wider time span of a Western conception of modern art. Each is constructed from the standpoint of the rupture of a particular historical event and each privileges a particular geopolitical terrain.<sup>31</sup> The competition between these conceptions registers their politically as well as their epistemologically constructive character, contributing to the discursive production of 'the present' as a cultural form.

### The postconceptual condition of contemporary art

A critically philosophical art-historical periodization makes a claim upon, or operates at the level of, the historical ontology of the artwork, along with what we might call (in an odd phrase) the *temporal ontology* of the fundamental social and cultural forms that condition it: here, the intertwining of modernity and contemporaneity as temporal forms. Today, 'contemporary art', critically understood, is a postconceptual art. What this claim means is that if we try to construct a critical concept of contemporary art from the dual standpoint of a historico-philosophical conception of contemporaneity and a rereading of the history of twentieth-century art – in its established sense as that art that is produced, circulated, exchanged, consumed and preserved within the art institutions of the global network of capitalist societies – the idea of postconceptual art appears as the most intelligible and coherent way of critically unifying this field, historically, within the present.

Three clarifications are required. First, the term 'postconceptual' is not to be understood in either a merely chronological or even an exclusively temporal sense, although its referents can be chronologically charted. (In this respect, its semantics are different from the term 'postmodern'. Since 'modern' is itself a temporal term that conceptually incorporates the temporality of the 'post', the paradoxical self-referentiality of that relation is immediately at issue, in a way that does not arise with *post*'s qualification of *conceptual*.) In this construction, postconceptual art is not a traditional art-historical or art-critical concept at the level of medium, aesthetic form, style or movement. It denotes an art premised on the complex historical experience and critical legacy of conceptual art, broadly construed in such a way as to register the fundamental mutation of the ontology of the artwork carried by that legacy. As a historical ontology, such an artistic ontology is thus not a purely philosophical one, in any disciplinary sense of 'philosophy'. It is a transdisciplinary ontology constructed in such a way as to cross the multiplicity of disciplinary and institutional discourses and practices necessary to the adequate constitution of the concept of art. 'Art' is a transdisciplinary concept, and it is from this that the profound difficulties and paradoxes of the thinking of art's autonomy derive.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the term 'postconceptual' is used here to refer to the *condition* of such art in the dual sense inherent in the ordinary usage of the term 'condition' which allows it to refer both to that which conditions

something – and hence may be viewed as standing outside of it, logically, at least – and to the internal state of being of the thing that is conditioned. This ambiguity refers us, dialectically, to the internality of the conditioning to the conditioned (or the 'internalization' of the one by the other), such that to speak of the 'condition of art' is to speak *at once* of the state of being of art and of the totality of conditions that determine it as 'art'. Hence: the idea of a postconceptual condition is double-coded. It is determined at once as an artistic situation and that which conditions it – primarily, that interplay of communications technologies and new forms of spatial relations that constitute the cultural and political medium of economic processes of globalization, the experience of which (when successful) it artistically condenses, reflects and expresses. Such a condition is historical, but it functions transcendently from the standpoint of interpretation, as a condition of certain (unpredictable) possibilities that are embedded within, and come constructively to express, a particular historical actuality.

The unity of such a concept of art is the necessarily retrospective product of its construction within the present. That is, it is genealogical. This is a unity that is therefore 'not abstract', but as Adorno put it, 'presupposes concrete analyses, not as proofs and examples but as its own condition.' The idea of art is given through each work, but no individual work is adequate to this idea, however 'preponderant' that idea becomes. This ongoing retrospective and reflective totalization is necessarily open, fractured, incomplete and therefore inherently speculative:

The definition of art is at every point indicated by what art once was, but it is legitimated only by what art became with regard to what it wants to be, and perhaps can, become. ... Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. ... *Art can be understood only by its laws of movement*, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not ... Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; *its law of movement is its law of form*.<sup>33</sup>

It is for this reason that the proposition 'contemporary art is postconceptual art' is a speculative one, in Hegel's technical sense of that term.<sup>34</sup> Its artistic meaning is ultimately determined by the reflective totality of its applications to the interpretation of individual works. This is the specific, post-Hegelian mediation of nominalism and realism that we find in Adorno's work.<sup>35</sup>

Third, in this respect, postconceptual art stands to conceptual art not as postmodern art was thought to stand to modern art, but rather as poststructuralism may be taken to stand to structuralism: namely, as its philosophical comprehension and the elaboration of its consequences. In Hegelian terms, postconceptual art is the 'truth' of conceptual art. I have summarized the critical legacy of conceptual art, upon which postconceptual art rests, elsewhere, in terms of a combination of six features, which thus appear here as elements or aspects of its postconceptual condition.<sup>36</sup> The second three of these six features,

- that art's fundamental conceptuality expands to infinity its possible material means;
- the radically *distributive* – that is, irreducibly relational – unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time;
- the open and historically malleable borders of this unity,

indicate the manner in which the ontology of postconceptual works is *transcategorical*. More specifically, it is a transcategorical ontology of (*transmedial*) *mediations*. So understood, the successful postconceptual work traverses (crosses, back and forth) the internal temporal disjunctions that constitute the contemporary, constructing them in such a way as to express them, at the level of the immanent duality – conceptual and aesthetic – of its form. Each a condensed fragment of a worlding of the globe.

## Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, 'Foreword', in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979], trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. vii.
2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London 1991. The eponymous article, from which the argument of the book derives, appeared in *NLR* in the same year as the English translation of Lyotard's book: 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146, July–August 1984, pp. 53–92. It had its origins in a lecture at the Whitney Museum, New York, in autumn 1982; published as 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Bay Press, Port Townsend WA, 1983, pp. 111–25. Whilst in no way inaugurating Jameson's contribution, the book was nonetheless a high point in the literature, in part because of its sheer size.  
Subsequently, Jameson tried to appropriate the literature on globalization to his concept of the postmodern, suggesting that the 'more interesting' of its various formulations is that which 'posits some new or third, multinational stage of capitalism, of which globalization is an intrinsic feature and we now largely tend, whether we like it or not, to associate with that thing called post-modernity'. Fredric Jameson, 'Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue', in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi,

- eds, *The Cultures of Globalization*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1998, pp. 54–77. See also Fredric Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', *New Left Review* 4, July–August 2000, pp. 49–68.
3. Theodor. W. Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society', in Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2003, pp. 111–25; Werner Sombart, *Der moderne Kapitalismus: Historisch systematische Darstellung des gesamt-europäischen Wirtschaftslebens von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, 3 vols, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Munich, 1987; Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, 2nd edn, Verso, London and New York, 1998. The final chapter of the 1916 edition of *Modern Capitalism*, ch. 71, is entitled 'The Threat of an End to Capitalism'. Jameson is textually vague, referring to Mandel' in his *NLR* 'Postmodernism' essay (pp. 77–8), but in the *Postmodernism* book, attributing 'the general use of the term' to the Frankfurt School, seemingly unaware of Sombart. *Postmodernism*, p. xviii.
4. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Heinemann, London, 1976.
5. For a recent problematization of the historical association of capitalism with bourgeois revolution, see John Kraniak's review of Neil Davidson's *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, in this issue, below, pp. 42–6.
6. See Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2006. As used in English, the term 'late style' is actually a combination of the *Spätstil* and *Altersstil* (individual old-age style). See Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, 'Late Style(s): The Ageism of the Singular', *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 4, 31 May 2012, <http://occasion.stanford.edu/node/93>.
7. Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', p. 57; Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fiction*, Verso, London and New York, 2005. Jameson's Wellek Lectures, published as *The Seeds of Time* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994), delivered in 1991, the same year as the publication of *Postmodernism*, appear, retrospectively, to mark the onset of the transition. The high period of a critical postmodernism in Jameson's writing was thus actually no longer than a decade. With regard to the Americanism of Jameson's conception of a 'global yet American postmodern culture' ('Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', p. 57), it should be recalled that in 1984 both the collapse of state communism in Eastern Europe and the rise of capitalism with 'Chinese characteristics' remained largely obscured, as did the much broader and complexly distributed cultural-political consequences of the globalization of capital that they have enabled.
8. Early examples include: Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996; Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999; Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000; Dilip P. Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2001; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Multiple Modernities*, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, 2002; and Bruce M. Knauft, ed. *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2002. Jameson accommodated himself to the return to modernity, albeit with some ambivalence (disavowing its repudiation of the postmodern problematic), in his *A Singular Modernity*, Verso, London and New York, 2002.
9. See Arif Dirlik, 'Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism', *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 3, August 2003, pp. 275–92, subsequently expanded into a book of the same title, Paradigm Publishers, Chicago, 2007;



- and more recently, Arjun Appaduri, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*, Verso, London and New York, 2013. I address the formal, spatial-temporal structure of the category in Peter Osborne, 'Global Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of the Philosophy of Historical Time', in Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage, eds, *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between the Present, the Past and the Future*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2013, pp. 69–84; pp. 70–79.
10. Cf. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* [1995], Verso, London and New York, 2011, p. 61, on history as the movement of the difference between totality and infinity.
  11. See Osborne, 'Global Modernity and the Contemporary', pp. 79–84.
  12. For the philosophical history and relevant meanings of the term 'subject', see Alain de Libera, *Archeologie du Sujet: 1 La naissance du sujet; 2: La quête de l'identité*, Paris 2007 and 2008. Étienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin and Alain de Libera, 'Sujet', in Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Seuil/Le Robert, Paris, 2004, pp. 1233–54, trans. David Macey as 'Subject', *Radical Philosophy* 138, July–August 2006, pp. 15–41; and in a revised translation in Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2014; Alain de Libera, 'Subject (Re-centred)', *Radical Philosophy* 167, May/June 2011, pp. 15–23; Étienne Balibar, *Citoyen Sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique*, PUF, Paris 2011.
  13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2012, p. 1.
  14. Giacomo Marramao, *The Passage West; Philosophy and Globalization* [2003 in Italian], trans. Matteo Mandarini, Verso, London and New York 2012, ch. 1. This lack of conceptual unity is apparent in Jameson's attempt to demonstrate the 'ultimate cohesion' of 'five levels' of globalization in his 'Globalization and Political Strategy'. This takes the simple form of a posited 'dedifferentiation' of the levels, which, it is claimed, 'characterizes postmodernity and lends a fundamental structure to globalization'. It is unclear that such a generalized dedifferentiation can provide anything as definite as a 'fundamental structure'. The sociological terminology of dedifferentiation is borrowed from the critique of Luhmann. See William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann's Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2000.
  15. See Chengxi Tang, *The Geographic Imagination of Modernity: Geography, Literature, Philosophy in German Romanticism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2008.
  16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 460–61: 'I call all transcendental ideas, insofar as they concern absolute totality in the synthesis of appearances, *world-concepts (Weltbegriffen)*' (A408/B434). Globalization is a transcendental idea, in this sense. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language Thought*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p. 44: 'The world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things. The *world worlds*, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home.'
  17. Marramao, *The Passage West*, pp. 6–16; Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Création du monde ou mondialisation*, Galilée, Paris, 2002, self-defeatingly translated into English as *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2007.
  18. Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, Volume 1: *Bubbles: Micro-spherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban, semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2011.
  19. See Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2004, p. 305.
  20. Robert Smithson, 'A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996, p. 364.
  21. See Peter Osborne, 'Art Space', in *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, ch. 6.
  22. Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty' [1972], in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, note 1, pp. 152–3.
  23. See James Meyer, 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity', in Erika Suderberg, ed., *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2000, pp. 23–37.
  24. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic* [1966], Frankfurt am Main, 1982, p. 314; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1973, p. 320, translation amended.
  25. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 694 (A838/B866).
  26. None of the standard synonyms for 'contemporary' in German – *Heutigkeit, Gegenwartigkeit, Gleichzeitigkeit* or *Zeitgenossen* – comes close to conveying the dual (conjunctive and disjunctive) connotation of the term 'con-temporary'.
  27. Cf. here, and in the next paragraph, Peter Osborne, 'Temporalization as Transcendental Aesthetics: Avant-Garde, Modern, Contemporary', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 44–45, 2012–13, pp. 28–49; pp. 39–40.
  28. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. VII, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1985, ch. 4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke 1, Hermeneutik 1*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1986, p. 132; *Truth and Method*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1975, pp. 112–13, translation amended to render *Gleichzeitigkeit* more literally as 'sametime-ness'. Gadamer translates Kierkegaard's *samtidighed* into the German *Gleichzeitigkeit*, which is usually rendered into English as 'simultaneity'. In order to preserve the opposition of *Gleichzeitigkeit* to *Simultaneität*, Gadamer's translator interestingly renders the former into English as 'contemporaneity'. I am grateful to Lucie Mercier for drawing my attention to Gadamer's German in this passage.
  29. Cf. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, pp. 16–17.
  30. *Ibid.*, ch. 1. On the ontology of the alienated ideality of the value-form, with its seemingly self-determining movement, see Christopher J. Arthur, 'The Spectral Ontology of Value', *Radical Philosophy* 107, May/June 2001, pp. 32–42.
  31. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, pp. 18–22.
  32. For the problematic of transdisciplinarity in the humanities, see Peter Osborne, 'Problematising Disciplines, Transdisciplinary Problematics', forthcoming in a special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society: Transdisciplinary Problematics*, eds, Peter Osborne, Éric Alliez and Stella Sandford.
  33. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone Press, London, 1997, pp. 2–3; *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften 7*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, pp. 11–12 – emphases added.
  34. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, pp. 51–3.
  35. Misconstruing the concept of nominalism in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is one of the ways in which Jameson draws Adorno into the orbit of the concept of postmodernism. See Peter Osborne, 'A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno', *New German Critique* 56 (Spring/Summer 1992), pp. 171–92.
  36. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, p. 48.