Present's Disjunctive Unity

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In his genuinely thought-provoking and – in terms of developing a critical concept of "contemporary art" – much needed "Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art", British philosopher Peter Osborne proposes that our present, or more objectively speaking, the historical present is defined by contemporaneity, and that the idea of contemporaneity as a condition is something new. Thus the contemporary is not only a label or a periodizing category following the modern. According to Osborne "what seems distinctive and important about the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through 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 characterised by a coming together of different but equally 'present' temporalities or 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times." [1]

This temporal unity in disjunction or disjunctive unity of present times was the theme of a recent conference entitled "Present's Disjunctive Unity" at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The conference was organized by art historians Birgit Hopfener, Franziska Koch, and Kerstin Schankweiler with the aim of questioning different conceptions of the contemporary and their historical contexts around the globe with a particular interest in the geopolitical aspects of contemporary art. Thus the conference also served as the launch of a research network for transcultural practices.

If the contemporary version of the contemporary is conditioned by contemporaneity, that is, by a coming together of different times or temporalities, it was, as it turned out, mainly the contemporaneity of different temporalities and cultural clusters, rather than the very coming together of these differences, that was brought to the fore during the conference. The three-days event, comprising both of keynote lectures open to the public and of workshops for junior researchers closed to the public, conveyed deep insight especially into Chinese, Indian, and African (and some Western) contemporary art and thus into some of the concrete social spaces in which the idea of contemporaneity is embedded and functions as an operative fiction as Osborne phrases it.

The lectures represented a number of very different approaches to the topic of the present – which due to its obvious urgency of course calls for multi-disciplinary perspectives – and were held by scholars Knut Ebeling, Paul Gladston, Atreyee Gupta, Fabian Heubel, Lourdes Morales, Philip Rosen, Francesca Tarocco, Tobias Wendl and artists Ato Malinda and Milumbe Haimbe. Through the many "case studies" focusing on particular cultural clusters, periods of time and/or geographical areas – for instance photomontage in interwar India (Gupta) or Canadian cinéma direct and Mexican cine testimonio in the 1970s (Morales) – the conference, as it unfolded, gener-

ated a sense of contemporaneity, an experience of this coming together in the same historical present (and space) of heterogeneous cultural clusters generated along different historical trajectories and in different localities.

On the other hand, the time-philosophical aspects and the historical dimension of the contemporary version of the contemporary, characterized by interconnectivity and intensified temporal complexity – that is, the very coming together of different temporalities in the same historical present – were only to a lesser degree addressed as theoretical questions in themselves. Philosopher Knut Ebeling was, however, an exception as he tried to outline "an archaeology of contemporaneity" seeking to establish a material conception of time and the contemporary. In opposition to what he sees as Osborne's endeavour, i.e. to develop a transcendental concept of the contemporary, Ebeling asked what an a posteriori judgment of the contemporary is, stressing its sensuous and emotional aspects, and proposed to reflect on a contemporaneity of materiality. Ebeling's understanding of the materiality of temporality can be seen as building upon Giorgio Agamben's and Georges Didi-Huberman's concepts of anachronism and is a highly useful contribution to the development of a more critical concept of the contemporary, even though the materially conditioned experience of contemporaneity in all three cases still appears somewhat ahistorical and in need of a larger historicizing contextualization, as it may be our very experience of time itself that is undergoing change. Ebeling, however, hinted at such a historically reflected understanding of the contemporary version of the contemporary by initially referring to the Internet as the medium par excellence of contemporaneity and thereby connecting the present contemporaneity to digital media and technological conditions. The questions of mediation and how the sense of "real-time" and nowness is organized and signified in the global media universe were also the object of a critical analysis in Philip Rosen's lecture on "The Fragment and the Forecast", although he did not reflect on the contemporaneity issue in relation to this production of nowness or (pseudo-)presence.

Another contribution to – and problematization of – the concept of contemporaneity as it is currently being developed by Osborne, art historian Terry Smith and others came from Tobias Wendl who is, tellingly, the first professor of African art and visual culture in Germany (such professorial chairs are still relatively rare in Europe while those dedicated to contemporary art proliferate). In his lecture "Neoliberalism and Contemporary Arts in Africa", Wendl questioned whether we can actually speak of a shared experience of the global present. He rather stressed that despite the increasing global interconnectivity, the world's different cultural clusters and geographical regions do not experience this interconnected present and presence in the same way. The persistence of structures that block interconnectedness, not least the world's highly uneven economic and political relations, should also be taken into consideration when trying to conceive the present's disjunctive unity. What constitutes this unity? What does it consist of? How much disjunction can it bear? The "non-contemporaneous contemporaneities" or die "Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen" that Ernst Bloch spoke of in "The Heritage of Our Times" 80 years ago subsist: "Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, through the fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living at the same time with others." [2] What makes "the non-contemporaneous" of today different from the non-synchronized people living in the rural areas of Germany during the modernization in the 1930s is the fact that today no area is excluded from being conscious of the interconnected state of the globe – even though the possibility of taking part in this interconnection is highly unevenly distributed. Thus, Wendl convincingly showed how

neoliberal globalization occasions an NGO-isation of the art sector in Africa as new contemporary art spaces and biennials come into being as direct results of an adaption to the agendas and ideologies of Western donors whose aim is to utilize art for social engineering. The more common discussion of art's complicity with the neoliberal capitalism it tries to critique was also an important topic of Paul Gladston's lecture on "Contemporary Art and the (Differentiated) Limits of Criticality".

All in all, the conference came across as a welcome initial effort to begin to substantialize the philosophy of contemporary art as proposed by Peter Osborne in particular and to investigate the social spaces in which the abstract idea of contemporaneity might be seen to be operative. It also made it clear that art history alone cannot grasp the stakes of contemporary art if this is understood as a representation – and sometimes even a production – of contemporaneity. An apprehension of the present present and its disjunctive unity demands an inclusion of politico-historical, time-philosophical as well as media related and technological aspects.

Notes:

[1] Osborne, Peter, Anywere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art, London: Verso, 2013, p. 17.

[2] Bloch, Ernst, The Heritage of Our Times, Cambridge: Polity, 1991, p. 90.

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