

I can't go on, I'll go on

A Response to “Questionnaire on “The Contemporary” in October

and “What is Contemporary Art?” in *e-flux* (i)

By Chris Mansour

*All the things you would do gladly, oh without enthusiasm, but gladly,
all the things there seems no reason for your not doing, and that you
do not do! Can it be we are not free? It might be worth looking into.*

– Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

In Walter Benjamin's magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*, capitalist modernity is in several instances depicted as a “hellish” existence. (ii) He describes this condition as history continuing to truck along in its course, but only doing so *regressively*. Hell, in short, is “transiency without progress.”(iii) Here, Benjamin is not voicing a Romantic sensibility; he does not bemoan modernity for having trampled over the once “harmonious” and organic way of life supposedly experienced in premodern times. Nor did Benjamin understand modernity theologically, as an age simply of despair or damnation, even if he often used

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theological terms in expressing this understanding. Rather, Benjamin
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~~saw that modernity had achieved an unprecedented qualitative leap in~~
human history—one that could actually further social freedoms for all
of humanity in ways hitherto unimaginable. So if modernity offered
this progressive possibility, why did he describe it as hellish
regression?

Benjamin's imagery of the modern as Hell is set in counterposition to the ultimately conservative idea that social progress comes about evolutionarily through the total proliferation of commodity production. It was assumed that world conditions would improve naturally within, and as part of, capitalism's own dynamics, without human intervention in the form of a politics seeking to grasp those dynamics. Benjamin rightly saw this bourgeois ideology as history resorting to myth, and directed his energy towards fighting the idea that the modern world has reached, or could reach, a kind of "heaven on earth" in the context of its current material configurations. Progress, for Benjamin, was not a matter of stabilizing commodity production and relations (which consequently deflects addressing the contradictions of capital head on), but of *overcoming* commodity production and relations *in* and *through* their inner potentialities. This would be nothing short of a total immanent revolution, entailing capital's simultaneous fulfillment and negation. To the extent that the revolutionary potential of overcoming capitalism is not recognized and seized upon within the energies and tensions of capitalism itself, humankind instead regresses, as social domination is reconstituted in new forms. In this way, capitalist modernity creates for itself a "Hell on earth." (iv)

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We are still haunted by Benjamin's work in that the hellish condition of “transiency without progress” in modern society has only deepened. The only—and major—difference is that most people are entirely disillusioned by the bourgeois myth of progress, especially after the horrors of the 20th century that were carried out in its name. We are instead wading through a time in which those who pride themselves on not “buying into” bourgeois ideology have also largely given up the struggle to emancipate humanity from its grip. Historical progress as a theoretical and practical problem is treated with pessimism and, at times, with downright hostility. This paralysis is rooted in the misguided assumption that modernity's promise of creating a better world rests in ruins to the degree that it is no longer applicable to today's problems. According to this view, modernity (and even postmodernity) is, for better or worse, a bygone era, and we have been lobbed into a different paradigm with a whole “new” set of parameters. (v) The term encapsulating such a worldview is “the contemporary,” or “contemporaneity,” and since roughly 1970, it has sealed together and fixed in place our system of cultural production like industrial glue.

This glue, however, leaves behind a murky residue that obscures the very nature of its bond. The term “contemporaneity” lacks consensus to properly sustain itself even as a purely descriptive historical category. Addressing this insufficiency has become something of an itch recently, with a number of attempts to demystify what “the contemporary” encompasses. Over the last year, two

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major publications, *October* and the online journal, *e-flux*, have made
available a series of short essays from various contributors trying to
answer the questions, "What is the contemporary?" and "What is
contemporary art?"^{vi} In the responses there are many ways
"contemporaneity" has been defined, but even when taken all together,
they point to a persisting inability to make sense of the present and
our relationship to modernism. Despite this inability, the disposition
towards "the contemporary" in the replies to both questionnaires has
been either reluctantly ambivalent or exceedingly sanguine.

For instance, "the contemporary" as a historical moment is
characterized as a "cacophonic mess,"^{vii} with component parts that
are "not clearly distinguishable"; (^{viii}) contemporaneity lacks an
overall "road map" to guide any sort of historical positioning.
(^{ix}) Yet, what follows from such claims is the belief that these
indecipherable conditions do not indicate confusion and helplessness,
but in fact provide more "freedom" to move in the present. (^x) The
"cacophonic mess" of the present gives the authors "enormous hope,"
"lacking a road map" is taken to be a "strength rather than a
weakness," it is incumbent upon us to hold a "positive vision" of
contemporaneity's "chaos and complexity," (^{xi}) and so it goes. What is
left unexplained in almost all cases is how the dynamic anarchy of the
present could actually lead to more favorable social conditions,
whether politically, artistically, or both. In the abstract, anarchic
conditions seem to allow greater room for uninhibited spontaneity, as
there are no rules or strict standards placed on artistic creativity.
Yet, this dissolution of rules has not led to a new contemporary
renaissance, to the sort of eruption of human artistic practice that
one would expect if unfreedom were only a matter of the rigidity of
the rules and standards at a given moment. However, in many cases the
authors who replied to the questionnaires take a one-sided approach to
the concept of disorder, seeing anarchy simply as a form of freedom in
the present and failing to consider how its opposite—order and
organization—is at the same time a necessary factor in the historical
process of artistic development. To these art historians and
theorists, it is as though "contemporaneity" radiates possibilities
for a better world regardless of the fact that no one seems ready to

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answer what conscious role we could play in the realization of those
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~~possibilities. Despite the plurality and pluralism of the responses,~~
the utopianism of the replies to the questionnaires consists more in
the unelaborated expression of desire and in declarations of “hope”
than in a plausible assessment of current circumstances.

The reason such utopianism fails to bridge the gap between
contemporaneity's discontents (the “is”) and an ideal
future (the “ought”) stems from an epidemic allergy towards
revisiting the modernist project to inform present
practices. Ultimately, modernism is treated as a corpse
whose death was both welcome and deserved. With this comes
the fantasy that contemporaneity is an utter and complete
“break” with modernism, based on the discontinuities
between the past and present. Such an approach towards
history results in a refusal to consider that the past may
still weigh upon us today, even if the burden of this
weight is diffuse and impalpable. Rather than a corpse,
modernity should be seen as a project that failed in its
own time and according to its own terms, but which
therefore remains *incomplete*. The “break” with the past,
then, is more apparent than real. Capitalism—the
fundamental social condition defining modernity—persists
not in spite of, but precisely *through* its structural transformations.

To grasp the vicissitudes of contemporaneity, it behooves
us to recognize how current artistic productions can
express (latently or manifestly) continuity in change, and
change in continuity. This dialectic straddles the

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historical gap between our modernist past and our
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contemporaneous present, which may open up possibilities to push beyond contemporaneity's historical impasse. To focus only on the discontinuities between moments in time, on the other hand, means that the present becomes onedimensional, holding no possibilities to move beyond the status quo. Nor does this understanding of history honestly engage with the ways in which we have inherited past struggles. This stops us from seeing the best facets of modernism as serious efforts in need of redemption, and gives us a skewed impression in learning about the past. Accordingly, many of the responses in *October* and *e-flux* promote the view of contemporaneity as a complete disconnect from modernism. A caricature is then created out of modernity in order to make it seem like a bygone era. Several contributions castigate the modernist project for subsuming everyone under "grand narratives" that are driven by "Eurocentric" or "NATO" ideologies.^{xii} What is unconsciously favored instead is an affirmation of the world as it currently exists, complete with rhetoric that sees in contemporaneity "a plurality of presents" and a "heterochronic" atmosphere.^{xiii} It is believed to be an alternative view in opposition to modernist discourse, which was supposedly conjured up by Western countries in order to stifle viewpoints other than its own. Even the attempts to "return" to some form of modernism fall into the trap they seek to avoid. "To understand [contemporaneity's] various vectors," says art historian Okwui Enwezor, "we need to provincialize modernism, that is, spatialize it as a series of local modernisms rather than one big universal modernism." (xiv) Though Enwezor ostensibly calls for the continuation of the modernist project, he does so only on the problematic basis of local flavor, which presumes that taking certain provinces in isolation will create a multitude of authentic histories liberated from any kind of universal hegemony. Such a view protests the process of globalization in its

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current form—that is, the conditions whereby art can

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~~only make headway when packaged and displayed as~~

articles of the culture industry—but it circumvents

the issue of what questions and possibilities of

artistic freedom are raised *by* globalization.

Rather than critiqued as a form of *alienated* universality,

globalization is simply rejected, and universality dismissed tout

court.

In its best ideals modernism did not seek to force the world to mirror European or NATO cultural tropes, but to transcend the unfreedom historically specific to capitalism, understood as a *totalizing* force that continuously



entangles the world in a web of necessity, whether the provinces of the world saw themselves as actors in this process or not. Thus the particular needs to be understood as a part of the whole. Or, more concretely, “provincial” histories need to be understood as affecting—and being affected by—the totality of world-historical events, which are intimately bound up in the dynamic of capitalism. Indeed, there are “many presents” in the present moment, but these do not develop in total remoteness, without overlap and correspondence. “Provincializing” modernism atomizes history during a time when our actions, no matter how localized they may appear superficially, have broad effects on a universal scale. Enwezor’s nominalism ultimately abstracts what he considers the real, concrete form of history: It ends up being a guise for a disinterested cultural relativism that cannot analyze how the husk of particular histories are governed by an overarching force beyond its own control—a force that *is* a concrete event. Such a confining vision fails to grasp its object of inquiry, much less to understand how artistic practice has developed on a

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universal scale as part of the particularity of each artwork.
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The spell of contemporaneity not only flattens the dialectical tension between the locality of an artwork's context and its positioning in a historical totality, but also renders unintelligible the interplay between an artwork's fleetingness and its lasting sociohistorical significance. Under the condition of contemporaneity, art ceases to be an activity that builds upon a historical trajectory: a project, in the words of Clement Greenberg, which is meant to “live up to the past.” (xv) Or, as Boris Groys puts it, in what has become something like the mantra contemporaneity lives by, “The present is a moment in time when we decide to *lower our expectations of the future* or to abandon some of the dear traditions of the past in order to pass through the narrow gate of the here-and-now.” (xvi) Groys goes on to note that we live in a time of “indecision,” and claims we are in a “prolonged and even infinite delay” because we have come to mistrust the aspirations of modernism. In light of the failure of modernism's best ambitions, this mistrust is merited, but nonetheless insufficient to move us beyond a delay that threatens to become infinite. Lowering our expectations of the future means that art ceases to be a platform for imagining a utopian future, only allowing it to make a fleeting impact on cultural history. In an atmosphere that no longer contextualizes working through the past to clear the way for a better future, artworks struggle to be anything more than discrete objects in this or that trend, regardless of the artist's or critic's intent.

Seeking to understand the relationship of art to history in modernity, Baudelaire said the artist “makes it his business to extract from

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fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to
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~~distill the eternal from the transitory.” (xvii) What makes modern art~~
stand the test of time, according to Baudelaire, is its ability to
recognize how art in its ephemerality has the power to interpret anew
the way the present builds upon its past, as well as visualize how
certain elements of the past remain with us. We can certainly question
the concept of the “eternal” in Baudelaire's formulation, but the
basic idea of searching out how certain conditions remain in place
within altered circumstances is apt, at least as the beginning of an
approach to the contemporary situation. The risk that contemporaneity
will become an “infinite delay” seems rooted at least partly in the
inability to envision art as developing from the past. Art, meanwhile,
can relate to the past only through superficial references stretching
across an ironic distance. Falling below the threshold of Baudelaire
and Greenberg following him, critical discourse on contemporaneity has
become one-sided, seeing developments in the art world only as a
procession of fashions that emerge and subside more or less
senselessly. Everyone waits for the “next big thing,” yet, each time
it comes, and to the embarrassment of everyone, its relevance deflates
as the next coming attraction grabs our attention.

It seems that we have stumbled into the conditions of contemporaneity
not by choice, but accidentally, in the sense that the art world has
failed to make any lasting impact in a culture of distraction. We have
found ourselves in the present not by overcoming the problematics of
modernism, but because we have been unable to make sense of what has
not yet been exhausted in the modernist project, despite its ultimate
failure. Modernity is not alive, but it is also not dead. It might be
most fruitful, then, to consider whether contemporaneity is just old
wine in a new bottle. Rather than a break with the past, might the
contemporary be better understood as a continuation of the problems
and goals of modernism, but under transformed conditions?

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If we actually do make history, but not in the conditions of our own choosing, “contemporaneity” is the most extreme scenario in which the will to take the helm of consciously directing history has been eclipsed, such that our practical activities, rather than directing events, are merely reactive. Objectively, it is always possible to discern alternate paths and recourses that could be taken. Here, the obstacle that blocks us is our own subjectivity: the hyper-focus on the present shuts off learning from the past in a way that can shape a future beyond the fetters of capitalism. The rubric of “the contemporary” skews historical consciousness to the point that the present itself, even in its multiplicity, is obscured, and art becomes as fleeting and inconsequential as last year’s fad. We have lost a sense of how art is a historical expression of the human condition, and we have lost an understanding of how art could segue into the imagination of a better future, without—or, indeed, in spite of—voicing a particular program or demand. If we fail to recognize that there is nothing novel about “the contemporary,” and that our historical moment is still very much conditioned by capitalism, any attempt to further freedom is likely to repeat the failures of the 20th century, but in a further degenerated and unconscious way. As Benjamin might word it, to recognize this form of regression would, like a lightening bolt, blast us out of the aimless historical continuum held under contemporaneity’s ruse. Emancipated from mistaking appearance for reality, perhaps harmonies could then emerge from within the cacophonic mess.

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i This article is indebted to Jan Verwoert's allegorical essay, "Standing on the Gates of Hell, My Services Are Found Wanting," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, eds. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 196-210. (Available online at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/108>) This book originally appeared as a two-part issue of the online journal *e-flux*. It is my intention to theorize Verwoert's position with respect to the stakes of contemporaneity's historical moment.

ii See Walter Benjamin, quoted in Susan Buck Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press,

1991), 97: "[Modernity as Hell] deals not with the fact that 'always the same thing' happens (a fortiori this is not about eternal recurrence) but the fact that on the face of that oversized head called earth precisely what is newest doesn't change; that this 'newest' in all its pieces keep remaining the same. It constitutes the eternity of Hell and its sadistic craving for innovation. To determine the totality of features in which this 'modernity' imprints itself would mean to represent Hell."

iii Ibid, 96.

iv This is what Benjamin referred to as "dialectics at a standstill."

v As Hans Ulrich Obrist puts it, we "have come to suspect modernity to be our antiquity." Obrist, "Manifestos for the Future," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 60.

vi See Hal Foster, "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary': 32 Responses," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), 3-

124; and *What is Contemporary Art?*

vii Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, "What Is Contemporary Art? An Introduction," 8.

viii Jörg Heiser, "Torture and Remedy: The End of -isms and the Beginning Hegemony of the Impure," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 81.

ix Jaleh Mansoor, response to "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 105.

x Zdenka Badovinac, "Contemporaneity as Points of Connection," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 155.

xi Nicholas Bourriaud, quoted in James Meyer, response to "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 75.

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xii Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Thesis," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 12.
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xiii James Meyer quoting Nicholas Bourriaud, response to "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 75.

xiv Okwui Enwezor's response to "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 36. Italics mine.

xv Clement Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern," *Arts* 54:6 (February 1980). Also available online at

<<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html>>.

xvi Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 24. Italics mine.

xvii Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *The Painter in Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed.

Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon, 1964), 12.