

The fiction of the contemporary

The construction of a critical concept of contemporary art requires, as its premise, the construction of a more general concept of the contemporary. After a brief reflection on the semantics of the contemporary, this chapter outlines such a construction, via the extension of this semantic field to its widest and philosophically most fundamental object: history. The contemporary appears there, first, structurally, as *idea, problem, fiction* and *task*; and second, historically, in its most recent guise as *the time of the globally transnational*. When this conception is transposed onto the artistic field, contemporary art appears, in its strongest critical sense, as the artistic construction and expression of contemporaneity. Two aspects of the artistic articulation of the space-time of the contemporary as a transnational globality are highlighted below, with reference to the work of The Atlas Group, 1999–2005 (to whom I return at the end of the book, in Chapter Seven): the *fictionalization of artistic authority* and the *collectivization of artistic fictions*. Attention to these two constitutive aspects of contemporary art, as an art of contemporaneity in a global context, makes the work of The Atlas Group emblematic of a new kind art, which aspires to articulate the fiction of our incipiently global contemporaneity to its fullest extent.

Together in time?

The root idea of the contemporary as a 'living, existing, or occurring together' in time, specifically, within the periodicity of a human life, has been around a long while. Derived from the medieval Latin *contemporarius*, and the late Latin *contemporalis*, the English 'contemporary' dates from around the mid-seventeenth century. It was only after the Second World War, however, that it began to acquire its current historical and critical connotations through its use, first as a specification of, and then in contrast to, periodizing uses of 'modern'. Perhaps it was the collective sense of survival in the aftermath of a war that had opened up social experience

beyond national frontiers that produced in Europe the association of a new historical period with the temporal quality of the shared present itself. The immediate postwar years saw new uses of 'contemporary' in English to denote both a specific style of design ('contemporary design') and the artistic present more generally ('contemporary arts'), in their differences from the preceding period. This is the source of that sense of up-to-dateness with which the term remains predominantly identified in popular usage.

When the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) was founded in London in 1946, for example, it was very up to date indeed. Doubly and paradoxically so, in fact, in so far as it both fed off the residual energies of the pre-war avant-garde, acting out a weakened version of its temporal logic of futurity, and took a step back from that avant-garde's ruptural historical futurity into the more expansive present of a new beginning. In the years immediately following the Second World War, the future was imaged as much by the desire to throw off the restrictions of wartime life and achieve some kind of 'normality' as by the fundamental social changes that the end of the war was to bring about.¹ In the UK, unlike France and Italy, no break with capitalism was envisaged, but rather a different capitalism, of peace and social democratic reconstruction (although 'Cold War' would soon become the new name for peace in Europe). The transformation of 'advanced' art's identification with a radically different future – associated in Britain largely with surrealism – into an identification with a more extended present exchanged the anticipation of an 'end of art' (the famous avant-garde dissolution of art into life) for a focus on interactions between the arts, and popular and technologically advanced arts, like cinema, architecture and advertising in particular. This was characteristic of the work of the Independent Group at the ICA (1952–55), for example, culminating in the *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1956. The future, apparently, had already arrived – a standpoint later ironized in Victor Burgin's 1976 photowork, *This Is the Tomorrow You Were Promised Yesterday*.

However, the separating of 'modern' and 'contemporary' that this notion of contemporary arts involves in no way dominated the historical consciousness of the institutional field of art at that time.² Rather, the contemporary acted there mainly as a qualification of (rather than a counter to) 'the modern': the contemporary was the most recent modern, but a modern with a moderated, less ruptural futurity. 'Contemporary' was still not enough of a critical concept in its own right by the 1970s to be included in Raymond Williams's influential *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976). And a decade later, when Matei Calinescu updated his book *Faces of Modernity* (1977) into *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987), it was 'post-modernism' that provided the topic for the new chapter, alongside terms already established by the end of the 1930s – 'modernism', 'avant-garde',

'decadence' and 'kitsch' – despite the fact that the chapter on 'The Idea of Modernity' (written in the mid-1970s) still ended with the emphatic declaration that 'the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* has been replaced by a Quarrel between the moderns and the contemporaries.'³ By the mid-1980s, postmodernism had become the periodizing term of choice to mark the distance from a now-historical modernism, a distance that had previously been registered by the presentness of the contemporary. For some historicists, like Fredric Jameson, this seemed to imply that the postmodern was 'post-contemporary'.⁴ Fortunately, the term did not stick. In fact it has only been in the last ten years, with the decisive discrediting of postmodernism as a coherent critical concept, that 'contemporary' has begun to emerge into the critical daylight from beneath its commonplace function as a label denoting what is current or up to date. Hence the recent rush of writing trying to make some minimal theoretical sense of the concept.⁵

This writing reflects the fact that having emerged as a self-designating periodizing term after 1945, of a quasi-epochal kind (much like 'Renaissance' self-designated its present as a new beginning), thereby gradually condemning the established referents of 'modern' to the past, the structure of contemporaneity is itself changing. Indeed, the very idea of contemporaneity as a condition is new. At the same time, the widespread diffusion of the term has placed it in danger of being emptied out of its increasingly complex temporal-existential, social and political meanings, by being treated as a simple label or periodizing category. This is of particular concern because 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 characterized by a coming together of different but equally 'present' temporalities or 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times.⁶ This problematically disjunctive conjunction is covered over by straightforward, historicist use of 'contemporary' as a periodizing term, in the manner in which it is encountered in mainstream art history – for example, in its stabilization of the distinction between modern and contemporary art. Although, within this discourse, as a register of the continual historical movement of the present, we nonetheless find at least three competing periodizations of contemporary art, three overlapping genealogies or historical strata, three differently extended senses of the present, within the wider time-span of a Western modern art. Each is constructed from the standpoint of the rupture of a particular historical event, and each privileges a particular geopolitical terrain.

Three periodizations of contemporary art

The distinction between modern and contemporary was first stabilized after 1945 not in Western art history, but in Eastern Europe, as part of the Soviet reaction against the categories of modernity and modernism.⁷ For Georg Lukács, for example, in the 1950s, socialist realism was 'contemporary realism', since the actuality of socialism defined the historical present.⁸ The City Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, founded in 1954, was one of the very few art institutions to use the term before the 1960s (it became the Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, in 1998). In Eastern Europe, 'modernity' was considered an ideological misrepresentation of the historical time of capitalism, covering over its internally antagonistic class forms of historical temporality and representation. Later, in the West, as the distinction between modern and contemporary gradually took hold, it was less of a polemically political one, and more of a straightforward historicist partitioning of chronological time – which is not to say that it was thereby any less ideological in its implicit theoretical structure and its effects. It was not until the 1980s, in fact, that 'art after 1945' was recoded by art institutions and art publishers as 'contemporary art', joining the end of a queue of major historical movements running from the Renaissance through Baroque, Neoclassicism and Romanticism, up to its predecessor, Modern Art.⁹ This was an acknowledgement not only that a particular canon of modern art increasingly belonged to the past, but also that the art of the present was no longer to be identified with modernism, in its formalist, medium-specific sense. A wider range of 'art since 1945' could thus be embraced within an extended present, which engulfed and recoded the postwar canon of modernist formalism itself. 'Contemporary' thereby became the art-institutional successor to 'modern' at precisely the same time that, in critical writing, a variety of what had initially been grasped as 'post-formalist' practices were being reconceptualized as 'postmodern'.

1945 represents the beginning of the international hegemony of US art institutions, and thereby of US art itself, of the incorporation of the waste products of pre-war avant-garde practices into the museums, and of the institutional advance of the so-called neo-avant-gardes. Chronologically, this is the broadest periodization of contemporary art currently in use. It is in various respects too broad, while at the same time being, in others, too narrow. Do we really still inhabit the same present, art-historically and art-critically, as Abstract Expressionism, for example? Alternatively, is the Duchamp of the years of the First World War really so distant from us as to fall outside the category of 'contemporary art' altogether, as this chronological periodization is forced to insist? Such problems draw attention to the inadequacy of any merely chronological conception of the time of art history. Nonetheless, even within such

crude periodizations, there is always a suppressed qualitative aspect: the moment of the break, in this case, the beginning of the period at issue, the beginning of the postwar. Reflecting on this moment from the standpoint of the present raises a question that is familiar from Japanese debates but is rarely asked in Europe or the US: namely, when will the postwar end? Has it not, in fact, already ended?¹⁰ It is those offering an explicitly affirmative answer to this latter question who have the sharpest, most critically delineated sense of the contemporary, represented by the third periodization (below). On the broad definition, however, we are still essentially living, art-critically, in an extended postwar.

The geographical terrain of this periodization is formally worldwide – marked as it is by the end of a 'world' war. Yet it is effectively an art world seen and selected from the standpoint of the USA – that is, one side of the Cold War inaugurated by the postwar. The postwar definition of the contemporary, until very recently, effectively excluded the 'actually existing socialist' states (1945–90) from historical time, recognizing only an externally intelligible artistic 'dissidence' based on the continuation of past modernist legacies or the importation of then-current Western forms. Art-historically, this was made possible by the Museum of Modern Art's institutional appropriation of the work of the pre-war European avant-gardes during the 1930s, which allowed for the subsequent narration of postwar US abstract art as the authentic continuation of this project, and thereby of the 'Western' artistic tradition as a whole. In artistic terms, the dominant version of this periodization thus privileges the heritage of abstraction.¹¹ It has tended to read later work in these terms, to the detriment of the conceptual and political heritage of Duchamp, Dada and Surrealism – although the canon is now gradually expanding. (Dadaism and Surrealism appear on Alfred H. Barr's famous flowchart only in so far as they feed into 'non-geometrical abstraction' – that is, as essentially painterly traditions.)

If the first periodization is geopolitically epochal in character – registering the weight within Western art history of the broadest political determinations – yet also parochial in both its backward-lookingness and restricted geographical focus, the second periodization focuses more tightly, in its framing terms, on developments immanent to artistic practices and their art-institutional recognition. This is a periodization that conceives contemporary art as beginning some time in the early 1960s, in that ontological break with prevailing object-based and medium-specific neo-avant-garde practices carried out by a range of new types of work, of which performance, minimalism and conceptual art appear, retrospectively, as the most decisive.¹² From this point of view, contemporary art is post-conceptual art.¹³ The 'event' marking this rupture is not an empirical, punctually datable one, but rather 'the Sixties' itself – that complex

conjunction of social, political and cultural radicalisms that swept through not just North America and Western Europe,¹⁴ but whole swathes of the globe – from South America to South-East Asia. Politically, it is often conveniently epitomized in the figure of '1968', although its artistically decisive manifestations were earlier in the decade. This was also the decade of an initial internationalization of contemporary art *within* its largely North American and residually European hegemonic frame. Japanese and South American artists, in particular, were incorporated into an internationalizing US hegemony.

Despite a conceptual focus on the ontology of the work of art, which derives from a predominantly US narrative frame, this periodization is thus, ironically, more geopolitically expansive in its sense of the artistic terrain than the previous one – although it too has incorporated 'Second World' (state socialist) art of the 1960s and 1970s from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China largely only retrospectively (after 1989), as a supplement, rather than as contributing constitutively to art's contemporaneity. One reason for the expansiveness of this standpoint is that the opening of this period coincides with the intensification of anti-imperialist struggles for national liberation, which had decisive domestic political effects within Western states. Another reason, more simply, was the development of commercial air travel and communications technology. Nonetheless, it is the radically dispersed, materially distributed character of the art – associated with its incorporation of non-traditional means, often from the mass media – that is the unifying principle of the periodization, enacting a decisive break with what went before. Here, contemporary art deploys an open infinity of means, and operates with an institutionally- and philosophically-grounded generic conception of 'art' that exceeds the historically received conventions that had previously defined artistic mediums. A significant amount of the institutionally validated art currently produced still fails to attain contemporaneity in this art-critically immanent sense.

③ The third main periodization of contemporary art one finds in current art-critical discourse is more immediate: 'art after 1989' – symbolically, the breaching of the Berlin Wall. With respect to the Cold War, 1989 is the dialectical counterpart to 1945. After 1989, the Cold War is finally over. But with respect to world politics, 1989 is the dialectical counterpart to 1917 (the Russian Revolution). If 1917–89 is a meaningful 'period' in world history (the epoch of historical communism) the argument goes, then surely 'contemporary art should now be redefined as art after 1989? Politically, '1989' signifies the end of historical communism (or 'actually existing socialism'), the dissolution of independent Left political cultures, and the decisive victory of a neo-liberal globalization of capital – incorporating the current engine of the world economy, capitalism in China.¹⁵

This corresponds artistically to three convergent features of institutionally validated art since the 1980s: the apparent closure of the historical horizon of the avant-garde; a qualitative deepening of the integration of autonomous art into the culture industry; and a globalization and transnationalization of the biennale as an exhibition form.¹⁶ Of these, it is the first that is most problematic, since the question of the avant-garde is now as much that of the critical construction of historical meanings as it is of any formal, identifiable features of the works themselves. It is further complicated by the existence of two distinct forms of the avant-garde.

Following Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,¹⁷ it has become conventional to distinguish the conjointly artistic and political perspective of the classical or 'historical' avant-gardes of the early twentieth century from the purely artistic 'neo'-avant-gardes of the 1940s and 1950s, which attempted to sustain the avant-garde model of art history independently of its relations to socio-economic and political change. It is this neo-avant-garde art-historical consciousness that is most directly challenged by the sheer diversity of forms of internationally exhibited work produced since 1989 – in fact, since the 1960s. On the other hand, the more socially and politically complex perspective of the historical avant-gardes was also revived in the 1960s and 1970s by a range of work, which was either directly political in character, had strong anti-art elements, or embodied art-institutional and social critique. Such work continued to derive its historical intelligibility from its claim on the future, albeit, increasingly, an abstractly projected (imaginary) future, or mere horizon, rather than a politically actual one. These kinds of work – suspended between the perspectives of the historical- and neo-avant-gardes – continue into the immediate present. Nonetheless, international art-institutions rarely present contemporary work in terms of the historical consciousness of the avant-garde, other than in a 'retro' mode, borrowed from some of this work itself (by the Russian group *Chto Delat*, for example).

One reason for this is that the increasing integration of autonomous art into the culture industry has imposed a more immediate and pragmatic sense of historical time onto the institutional framing of contemporary work – although this remains a profoundly contradictory process. For this integration is by no means an outright negation of autonomy by commodification and political rationality, so much as a new systemic functionalization of autonomy itself – a new kind of 'affirmative culture'.¹⁸ This new systemic functionalization of autonomy (this new 'use' of art's 'uselessness') corresponds to the global transnationalization of the biennale as an exhibition form, and its integration into the logics of international politics and regional development. From this point of view, art must reflectively incorporate this new context into its procedures if it is to remain 'contemporary'. From the

standpoint of this last periodization, then, our three periodizations of contemporary art are not so much self-sufficient and competing alternative definitions as different intensities of contemporaneity, different interpenetrating historical strata. Each may become closest to the surface on particular occasions, but always as mediated by its relations to the other two. It is this differential historical temporality of the present that renders dynamic, in any particular instance, a work's articulation of the structural features that characterize contemporary art ontologically, according to the second definition.

Idea, problem, fiction, task

The root idea of the contemporary as a living, existing, or occurring together 'in' time, then, requires further specification as a differential historical temporality of the present: a coming together of different but equally 'present' times, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times. As a historical concept, the contemporary thus involves a projection of unity onto the differential totality of the times of human lives that are in principle, or potentially, present to each other in some way, at some particular time – paradigmatically, now, since it is the living present that provides the model of contemporaneity. That is to say, the concept of the contemporary projects a *single historical time of the present*, as a living present: a common, albeit internally disjunctive, present historical time of human lives. 'The contemporary', then, is another way of referring to the historical present. Such a notion is inherently problematic but increasingly inevitable.

It is problematic, theoretically, first because it is an 'idea' in Kant's technical sense of the term: its object (the total conjunction of present times) is beyond possible experience. It is thus an object that exists only 'in the idea' and is hence the site of a problem that requires investigation. All ideas, as concepts of the totality or the unconditioned, are problematic for Kant.¹⁹ Such concepts depend upon an 'as if' – Kant also calls them 'heuristic fictions' – which cannot be objectively validated, but which may legitimately be used to 'regulate' experience, so long as they are not contradicted by it. This is the 'hypothetical' employment of pure reason: the idea of the contemporary hypothetically projects an internally differentiated and dynamic spatial-temporal unity of human practices within the present. As such it is a hypothetical presupposition of any possible 'human science'.²⁰

However, the concept of the contemporary is problematic theoretically not only because it goes beyond possible experience (in the narrow Kantian sense of experience as the experience of spatio-temporally given objects of knowledge); it is also problematic, in a more fundamental sense, because of its attribution of unity to the temporal mode of the present,

however hypothetical, as such. As Heidegger famously argued, 'the present' itself, by itself, in its presentness, cannot be considered some kind of self-contained temporal receptacle for objects of experience, since it only exists as the differentiation or fractured togetherness of the other two temporal modes (past and future), under the priority of its futural dimension.²¹ The concept of the contemporary thus projects into presence a temporal unity that is actually, in principle, futural or anticipatory. The concept of the contemporary is thus inherently speculative, not just because it is epistemologically problematic in its application to history, but because it is *structurally anticipatory*, as such. For Heidegger, it is this essential futurity that allows one to be 'for' one's time.²²

Third, within the terms of these two problematic theoretical aspects, as a historical concept, the contemporary is also empirically problematic. At the level of the empirical investigation of the contemporary as a problematic concept (the possibility of problematic concepts, Kant says, 'has to be investigated'),²³ the relational totality of the currently coeval times of human existence undoubtedly remains fundamentally socially disjunctive. There is no socially actual shared subject-position of, or within, our present from the standpoint of which its relational totality could be lived as a whole, in however epistemologically problematic or temporal-existententially fragmented anticipatory form. Nonetheless, the concept of the contemporary functions as if there is. That is, it functions as if the speculative horizon of the unity of human history had been reached. In this respect, the contemporary is a utopian idea, with both negative and positive aspects. Negatively, it involves a disavowal; positively, it is both an act of the productive imagination and the establishment of a task.

The concept of the contemporary involves a disavowal – a disavowal of its own futural, anticipatory or speculative basis – to the extent to which it projects into existence an *actual* total conjunction of times. This is a disavowal of the futurity of the present by its very presentness; essentially, it is a disavowal of politics. More positively, it is a productive act of imagination to the extent to which it performatively projects a non-existent unity onto the disjunctive relations between coeval times. In this respect, in rendering present the absent time of a unity of present times, all constructions of the contemporary are *fictional*, in the sense of fiction as a narrative mode. Epistemologically, one might say, the contemporary marks that point of indifference between historical and fictional narrative that has been associated, since the critique of Hegel, with the notion of speculative experience itself.²⁴ More specifically, the contemporary is an operative fiction: it regulates the division between the past and the present within the present. And it does so, in part, not simply by recognizing certain contemporaneities, but by projecting contemporaneity – the establishment of connections within the living

present – as a task to be achieved. (In Kant, the ideas of reason ground, first, morality, and later, historical politics, as infinite tasks.)

We can see this regulation at work in, for example, the transformation of the effective meaning of 'generation'. Based in the periodicity of the human life span, 'contemporary' is at base a generational term: generations share time. However, in the wake of modernity's subjection of the temporality of generations to the destruction of tradition (the handing down of knowledge and practices between generations), and its consequent subjection of the temporal rhythms of the social transmission of knowledge and experience to those of communications technologies, the social actuality of 'generational' change no longer just corresponds to human generations, but equally, possibly predominantly, to 'generations' of technologies,²⁵ to which all human generations are subjected, albeit unequally. And these generations are of shorter and shorter duration. The fiction of the contemporary is thus becoming, in this respect at least, progressively contracted. The present of the contemporary is becoming shorter and shorter.²⁶

It is the fictional 'presentness' of the contemporary that distinguishes it from the more structurally transitory category of modernity, the inherently self-surpassing character of which identifies it with a permanent transitoriness, familiar in the critical literature since Baudelaire. In this respect, the contemporary involves a kind of internal retreat of the modern to the present. As one recent commentator has put it, contemporaneity is 'the pregnant present of the original meaning of *modern*, but without its subsequent contract with the future.'²⁷ This fictive co-presentness of a multiplicity of times associates the contemporary – at a deep conceptual level – with the theological culture of the image. In Michael Fried's famous phrase – from which all sense of the imaginary, fictitious character of the experience is absent – 'presentness is grace'.²⁸

If modernity projects a present of permanent transition, forever reaching beyond itself, the contemporary fixes or enfolds such transitoriness within the duration of a conjuncture, or at its most extreme, the stasis of a present moment. Such presentness finds its representational form in the annihilation of temporality by the image. It is in the photographic and post-photographic culture of the image that the contemporaneity of the contemporary is most clearly expressed. The image interrupts the temporalities of the modern and nature alike. It is with regard to the disruption of these normative rhythms that the contemporary appears as 'heterochronic' – the temporal dimension of a general heteronomy or multiplicity of determinations – or even as 'untimely' (*unzeitgemässe*), in Nietzsche's sense.²⁹ The contemporary marks both the moment of disjunction (and hence antagonism) within

the disjunctive unity of the historical present and the existential unity of the disjunctiveness of presentness itself.

This disjunctive, antagonistic unity of the contemporary is not just temporal, but equally – indeed, in certain respects primarily – spatial. This is the fourth respect in which the concept of the contemporary is problematic: the problem of the disjunctive unity of times is the problem of the unity and disjunction of social space – that is, in its most extended form, the problem of the *geopolitical*. The idea of the contemporary poses the problem of the disjunctive unity of space-time, or the *geopolitically historical*. The temporal dialectic of the new, which gives qualitative definition to the historical present (as the standpoint from which its unity is constructed), but which the notion of the contemporary cuts off from the future, must be mediated with the complex global dialectic of spaces, if any kind of sense is to be made of the notion of the historically contemporaneous. That is, the fiction of the contemporary is necessarily a *geopolitical fiction*. This considerably complicates the question of periodization: the durational extension of the contemporary 'backwards', into the recent chronological past, at any particular time. This durational extension of the contemporary (as a projected unity of the times of present lives) imposes a constantly shifting periodizing dynamic that insists upon the question of *when the present begins*. But this question has very different answers depending upon where you are thinking from, geopolitically.³⁰

The historical motto, 'to each present, its own prehistory,' must thus be interpreted to mean: to each geopolitically differentiated construction of the present, its own prehistory. In this respect, we can distinguish *the subject* of the contemporary (the contemporary's 'I') from that of a classical modernity. For as Ricoeur has put it, the 'full and precise formulation' of the concept of modernity is achieved only 'when one says and writes "our" modernity', at the level of the concept of history.³¹ And one can only say and write 'our' modernity at the level of history, in the collective singular, by positing, following Hegel, an 'I that is we and we that is I' as its speculative absolute subject.³² When one says or writes 'our' contemporaneity, on the other hand, one is referring to the temporal conjunction of differential subject positions, differential temporalities, which produces not 'a we that is I', but a we that is a conjunction of a plurality of temporally co-present 'I's. The subject of modernity (and there is ultimately a singular one) has a 'collective' dialectical unity; the equally speculative, but differently unitary, subject of the contemporary has a 'distributive' unity.³³ In this respect, one might suggest, the discourse of nationally or regionally specific 'multiple modernities' can achieve theoretical coherence at the level of the whole (history) only in articulation with the concept of the contemporary – despite the discrete conceptual content of modernity and contemporaneity as temporal ideas. For the idea of an

immanently differential *global modernity* presupposes a certain global contemporaneity as the ground of its immanent production of the temporal differential of the new.

For all these theoretical problems of the fictive character of temporal unity and the disjunction of spatial standpoints, however, constructions of the contemporary increasingly appear as inevitable, because growing global social interconnectedness gives meaningful content to these fictions, filling out their speculative projections with empirical material ('facts'), thereby effecting a transition from fictional to historical narrative. This is the domain of the booming genre of global histories of the present (Hobsbawm, Arrighi, Gunder-Frank, et al.).³⁴ Such histories are as performative as they are empirical (that is, they are constructions), but they aspire to an empirically consistent hypothetical unity of the present, beyond pure heteronomy or multiplicity. In this respect, the concept of the contemporary has indeed acquired, in practice, the regulative necessity of a Kantian 'idea'. Increasingly, 'the contemporary' has the transcendental status of a condition of the historical intelligibility of social experience.

The global transnational, or, the contemporary today

And increasingly, the fiction of the contemporary is primarily a global or a planetary fiction. More specifically, the fiction of a global transnationality has recently displaced the 140-year hegemony of an internationalist imaginary, 1848–1989, which came in a variety of political forms. This is a fiction – a projection of the temporary unity of the present across the planet – grounded in the contradictory penetration of received social forms ('communities', 'cultures', 'nations', 'societies' – all increasingly inadequate formulations) by capital, and their consequent enforced interconnection and dependency. In short, today, the contemporary (the fictive relational unity of the historical present) is transnational because our modernity is that of a tendentially global capital. Transnationality is the putative socio-spatial form of the current temporal unity of historical experience.³⁵

As Gayatri Spivak has argued, 'demographic shifts, diasporas, labour migrations, the movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization' have rendered the twin geopolitical imaginary of a culturalist postcolonial nationalism and a metropolitan multiculturalism at best problematic and at worse redundant. Rather,

What we are witnessing in the postcolonial and globalizing world is a return of the demographic, rather than territorial, frontiers that predate and are larger than capitalism. These demographic frontiers, responding to large-scale migration, are now appropriating the

contemporary version of virtual reality and creating the kind of parastate collectivities that belonged to the shifting multicultural empires that preceded monopoly capitalism.³⁶

Territorial frontiers or borders (basically, nation-states) are subject to erosion by 'globalization' in two ways. First, they have an increasing albeit still restricted physical 'permeability'. 'Borders are easily crossed *from* metropolitan countries, whereas attempts to enter from the so-called peripheral countries encounter bureaucratic and policed frontiers, altogether more difficult to permeate.'³⁷ People mainly cross borders from the so-called periphery to the metaphorical centre only as variable capital – including as art labour. (Art is a kind of passport. In the new transnational spaces, it *figures* a market utopia of free movement, while in actuality it embodies the contradiction of the mediation of this movement by capital.) Second, informational technology makes possible the constitution of new social subjects, and – equally importantly – the reconstruction of the unity of fragmented older ones, across national frontiers, in a new way.

But how is this geopolitically complex contemporaneity to be experienced or represented? And, in particular, how is it to be experienced through or as art? The issue is less 'representation' than 'presentation' (less *Vorstellung* than *Darstellung*): the interpretation of what is, through the construction of new wholes out of its fragments and modalities of existence. This is as much a manifestation of the *will* to contemporaneity – a will to force the multiplicity of coeval social times together – as it is a question of representation. Art is a privileged cultural carrier of contemporaneity, as it was of previous forms of modernity. With the historical expansion, geopolitical differentiation and temporal intensification of contemporaneity, it has become critically incumbent upon any art with a claim on the present to situate itself, reflexively, within this expanded field. The *coming together of different times* that constitutes the contemporary, and the *relations between the social spaces* in which these times are embedded and articulated, are thus the two main axes along which the historical meaning of art is to be plotted. In response to this condition, in recent years, the inter- and transnational characteristics of an art space have become the primary markers of its contemporaneity. In the process, the institutions of contemporary art have attained an unprecedented degree of historical self-consciousness and have created a novel kind of cultural space – with the international biennale as its already tiring emblem – dedicated to the exploration through art of similarities and differences between geopolitically diverse forms of social experience that have only recently begun to be represented within the parameters of a common world.³⁸

If art is to function critically within these institutions, as a construction and expression of the contemporary – that is, if it is to appropriate

the de-temporalizing power of the image as the basis for new historical temporalizations – it must relate directly to the socio-spatial ontology of its own international and transnational sites and relations. It is at this point that the critical historical significance of the transformation of the ontology of the artwork, effected in the course of the last fifty years (our second periodization of contemporary art, above), from a craft-based ontology of mediums to a postconceptual and transcategorical ontology of materializations, comes into its own.

This leads me to my main thesis, which at this point I can do no more than baldly state: it is the *convergence* and *mutual conditioning* of historical transformations in the ontology of the artwork (Chapters 2 and 4) and the social relations of art space (Chapter 6) – a convergence and mutual conditioning that has its roots in more general economic and communicational processes – that makes contemporary art possible, in the emphatic sense of an art of contemporaneity. These convergent and mutually conditioning transformations take the common negative form of processes of ‘de-bordering’ (the Germans would say, *Entgrenzung*): on the one hand, the de-bordering of the arts as mediums, and on the other, the de-bordering of the national social spaces of art. More positively, one might say that these de-borderings have opened up distinctive new possibilities for the practices of a generic ‘art’, on the one hand, and those of an in-principle-infinite exchange, on the other.³⁹ This has been an extraordinarily complicated and profoundly contradictory historical process, in which artists, art-institutions and markets have negotiated the politics of regionalism, postcolonial nationalism and migration, in order to overwrite the open spatial logic of post-conceptual art with global political-economic dynamics.

But how can ‘art’ occupy, articulate, critically reflect and transfigure so global a transnational space? Only, I think, if the subject-position of its production is able to reflect – that is, to construct and thereby express – something of the structure of ‘the contemporary’ itself. The work of The Atlas Group (1999–2005) is emblematic here because it focuses attention on two distinctive and related aspects of this construction of a subject-position of the contemporary: fictionalization and collectivization.

Joseph Bitar

Joseph Bitar, we are told in the opening section of a 2004 video work by The Atlas Group/Walid Raad entitled *We Can Make Rain but No One Came to Ask*, ‘lives in Beirut and is the city’s only resident explosives expert . . . [He] has been injured several times in his long career and was decorated in 1952 by Guy Mollet. Booby traps, mines and other murderous or incapacitating devices have no secrets for Joseph, who has plenty to do in today’s Beirut.’⁴⁰ The text is laid over a photograph – we are



Fig 1: The Atlas Group in collaboration with Walid Raad, Bilal Khbeiz, and Tony Chakar, *We Can Make Rain But No One Came to Ask*, 2006

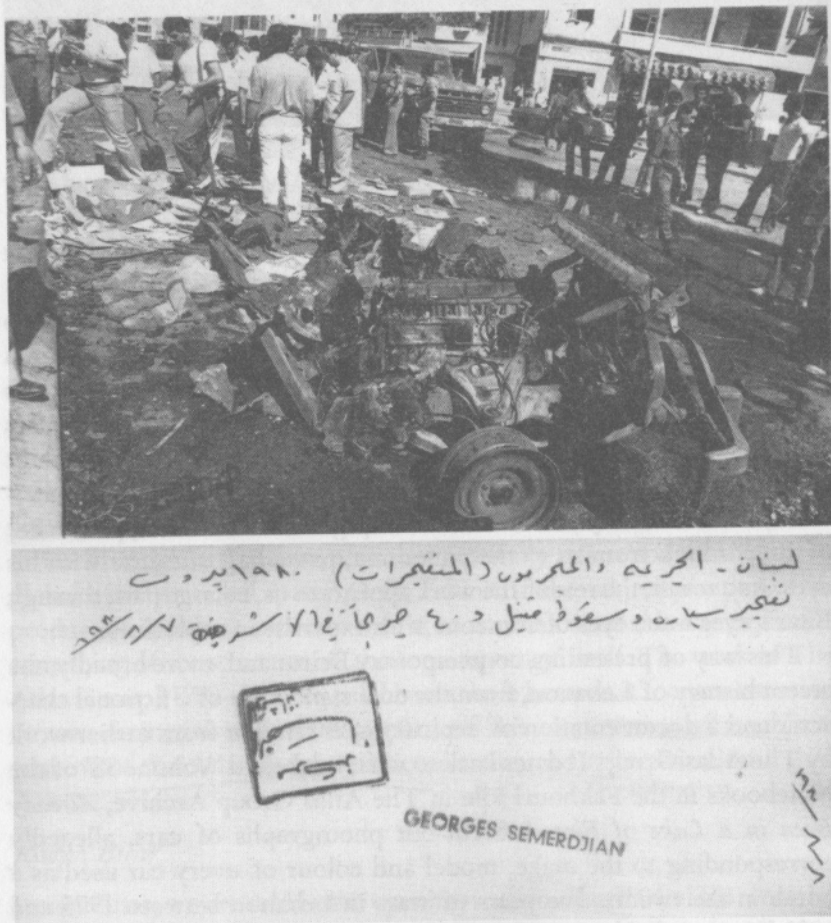
invited to presume of Bitar – credited to Laurent Maous of the Gamma agency, and provided with the classification number, 197880 (Fig. 1).

The figure of Bitar frames and gives narrative meaning to the video that follows, which is largely made up of disjunctive footage from a panoramic camera located at a road junction in the Beirut suburb that is pictured above Bitar in the opening montage. The footage documents the passing of cars and the transformation of the bomb-damaged built environment. Looking out at us as we look onto the suburban panorama, and back at him, a subtle transfer of gazes effects the displacement of Bitar’s look from us to the panorama, providing our gaze with his eyes. As a result, the rest of the work appears to us, in large part, through Bitar’s eyes – the eyes of someone with expertise in explosives.

This way of presenting contemporary Beirut and, more broadly, the recent history of Lebanon, from the dual standpoint of a fictional character and a documentation of explosions, is familiar from earlier work by The Atlas Group. It dates back to what is labelled ‘Volume 38’ of the Notebooks in the Fakhouri File in The Atlas Group Archive, *Already Been in a Lake of Fire*: 145 cut-out photographs of cars, allegedly corresponding to the make, model and colour of every car used as a bomb in the twenty-five years of wars in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991.⁴¹ It is probably most familiar from various presentations of material from the Group file, *Thin Neck*; in particular, *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars, Volumes 1–245* (Fig. 2), parts of which were shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale, for example. One hundred four mixed-media works from this document make up the whole of Volume 2 of The Atlas Group’s collected

works.⁴² In these linked series of works, including the more recent, but rather different, 'A Disclosure' (2007) – about the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on Valentine's Day 2005 – the last three decades in the history of Lebanon is condensed into a history of exploding cars. Bitar's surprisingly long life – decorated fifty-five years ago, but still with plenty of work in 'today's Beirut' – encompasses this history, acting as a further condensation: a condensation of the history of the Lebanese car bomb into the figure of Bitar.⁴³

The character of Fakhouri (compiler and annotator of the earlier cut-out photographs of exploded cars) was established at the outset of



Date: 7 August 1980
 Photographer | Original Archive: Georges Semerdjian | An-Nahar Research Center (Beirut, Lebanon)
 Subjects and/or Keywords: Lebanon_Crimes_Criminals (Explosions)_1980_Beirut

Fig 2: The Atlas Group in collaboration with Walid Raad, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*. Document attributed to the Atlas Group. Date (attributed): 2001. Date (production): 2003.

The Atlas Group's activities in 1999, in a transitional work that was first attributed to Walid Raad (when it was published as a project in *Public Culture*) and subsequently appeared in the name of the group: *Missing Lebanese Wars* (Fig. 3), a collection of newspaper clippings of the winning horses in weekly races allegedly bet upon by 'the major historians of the Lebanese war'. These are taped into a notebook and embellished by Fakhouri with details of 'the race's distance and duration; the time of the winning horse; calculations of averages; the historians' initials with their respective bets; the time discrepancy predicted by the winning historian' – they were betting not on the winners, but on the timing of the track photographer's photograph of the winner, relative to the winning line – along with 'short descriptions of the winning historian'. Fakhouri had previously appeared in the acknowledgements to an earlier work, *Miraculous Beginnings* (published in 1997), attributed to the Arab Research Institute in collaboration with Fouad Boustani and Walid Raad, in the foreword by Boustani, director of the Beirut Photographic Centre.⁴⁴

In the presentation of *Missing Lebanese Wars*, Fakhouri is claimed to have been 'the most renowned historian of Lebanon', to have died in 1993, and 'to everyone's surprise' to have 'bequeathed hundreds of documents to The Atlas Group for preservation and display'. This surprise was perhaps not least occasioned by the fact that he died some six years prior to the formation of the Group. Systematically aberrant chronologies are a distinctive feature of all of the narratives presented in The Atlas Group's work, and the main sign of their fictional status.

Fakhouri is one of three characters to whom files are attributed in the Group Archive – the other two being Souheil Bachar (a Lebanese man held hostage for ten years between 1983 and 1993, who is said to have spent a brief period with the famous British and American hostages) and Operator #17. Souheil Bachar is heard on the soundtrack of the two videos *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, #17 and #31 (two of a purported fifty-three short videos made by Bachar, and the sole items in his file), which narrate a secret erotic dimension of the hostages' relations with their captors. Operator #17 is a Lebanese security agent who regularly turns his surveillance camera from the promenade in Beirut towards the sunset, producing a video document, which The Atlas Group entitled *I Only Wish I Could Have Wept*.

Fakhouri's identity is fixed by a series of twenty-four photographs of him on a trip to Paris and Rome in 1958 and 1959. Yet in 2006, he returned from the dead to collaborate with The Atlas Group, on a project called 'Vituperative Speeches', published in the NYU drama review *TDR*, which also published his correspondence with its editor.⁴⁵ As will already be clear, a significant proportion of Atlas

ISBN 978 0 223 30000 0
 Printed in the USA
 2007 The Atlas Group
 1000 University Avenue
 Cambridge, MA 02138

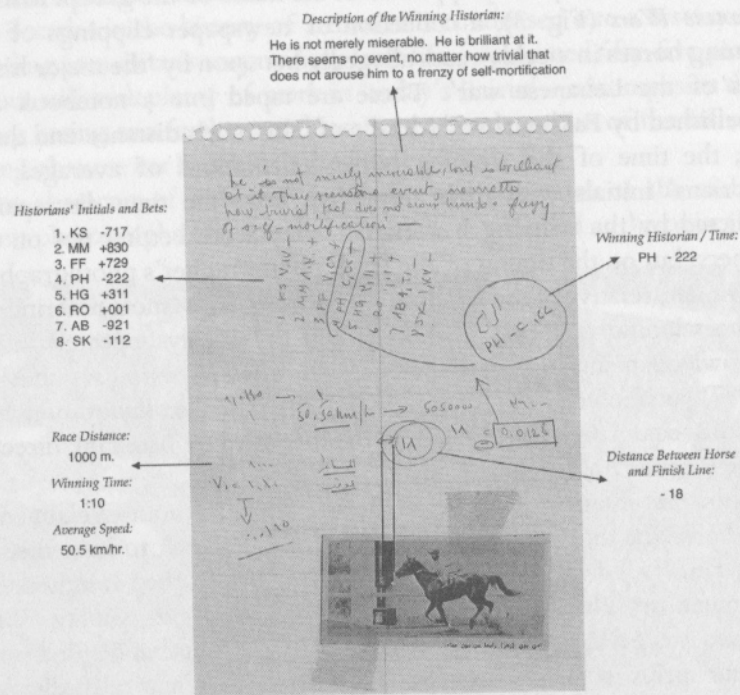


Fig. 3: The Atlas Group in collaboration with Walid Raad, *Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars*, Plate 132. Document attributed to Dr Fadl Fakhouri. Date (attributed): 1989. Date (production): 1998.

Group work has its public origins in intellectual publications, and only thereafter in art spaces.

On brief inspection and reflection, the division of The Atlas Group Archive into the 3 categories of A (for authored), FD (for found documents) and AGP (for Atlas Group Project documents) is thus clearly fictional – since all are actually different types of Atlas Group Project documents. But despite the numerous, albeit at times subtle, markers of the project’s overall fictitious character, its documentary apparatus and forms, combined with its significant actual documentary content, continue to persuade viewers of its factual status. This is sometimes true even under extreme provocation, as shown by the audience reaction to Walid Raad’s performance at the 2006 Biennale of Sydney, for example, when it seemed that no fictional exaggeration, however extreme, could undermine the presumption of factuality.

Joseph Bitar, then, is the latest of a small cast of fictional characters used by The Atlas Group (to whose own status I shall return) to

transfigure documentary material into art by means of fictions, posing, via the documentary form, as facts. There is a double movement here: these are fictional documentaries, but they nonetheless carry important elements of actual documentation within the art. History thus appears here both within and via art, in different ways, as a complex transaction between ‘documentation’ (as both an indexical and an institutional process) and fiction, in which fiction is the guiding hand.

Fictionalization of artistic authority/collectivization of artistic fictions: A First Transnational

Fictionalization works at two levels here and takes two main forms: the fictionalization of artistic authority or what, adapting Foucault, we may call ‘the artist-function’, and the fictionalization of the documentary form, in particular, the archive. In the work of The Atlas Group, this dual fictionalization corresponds to and renders visible the fictitiousness of the contemporary itself. It also renders explicit a certain general fictitiousness of the post-conceptual artwork, which is an effect of the counter-factuality inherent in its conceptual dimension, and imparts to it a structurally ‘literary’ aspect. Each material work, or materialization, can be understood as the performance of a fictive element or idea. In this respect, as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 4, below, the generic post-medium concept of art reincorporates ‘literature’, returning it to its philosophical origins in early German Romanticism: postconceptual art articulates a post-aesthetic poetics.

Historically, the fictionalization of the artist-function is, of course, not an uncommon authorial strategy. It represents an extension of both the strategy of pseudonymity (prevalent under conditions of censorship and the need for social dissimulation of various kinds) and the ‘impersonality’ of an Eliotian modernism. Theoretically, it is best conceived in terms of Foucault’s analysis of the author-function, which was itself in many ways (like much of post-structuralism) a theoretical generalization of the implications of the practice of the modernist avant-gardes. For Foucault, the replacement of the concept of the author by that of the author-function was ‘a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse . . . [by] grasp[ing] the subject’s points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies’.⁴⁶ The construction of an artist-function named ‘The Atlas Group’ is in many ways a precise application of the terms of this analysis to the production of artistic authority. Its primary characteristic is its dissemblance of a documentary practice.

This dissemblance is dependent upon, first, its creative use of anonymity, within pseudonymity, via the ‘Group’ form (pseudonymity, one

might say, is a condition of *historical* fictionalization); and second, the exploitation of the documentary, simultaneously, as indexical mark and pure cultural form. More deeply, it relies for its productive ambiguity upon a general ambiguity in the relationship between historical and fictional narratives, through which it achieves both its philosophical and political force. On the one hand, this ambiguity is constitutive of a practice that uses fictional historical narratives for critical ends; on the other hand, a rigorous internal demarcation between the indexical and purely formal (that is, fictional) use of documents is marked by systematically aberrant chronologies and narrative contradictions – a procedure that is at times applied to the narration of the formation of The Atlas Group itself, variously specified as 1999, 1977 and 1986–99 (1999 was the actual year). It is through the relation between the anonymous collectivity of the fiction of the Group itself and the national specificity of its fictions ('Lebanon') that the 'contemporary', global, transnational character and political meaning of its practice are constructed.

Artist collectives (fictional and actual) are fashionable once again. For over a decade now, they have been proliferating like wildfire through the international art community, whether in purportedly singular form ('Claire Fontaine') or explicitly collective guise (Raqs Media Collective). And there is now a revisionist historiography of such collectives' recent past.⁴⁷ There are a variety of reasons for this, mostly to do with the attempts to refashion the modes of effectivity of the relations between politics and art. My thesis is that artistic collectivism has a new function here tied to its fictionalization, at the moment of global transnationalism. The recent spate of collectives (fictional or otherwise) are its generally unconscious manifestation.

The collectivization of the fictionalization of the artist-function works, once again, at two levels: the collectivity of the Group, and the collectivization of authority inherent in the (in this case fictionalized) documentary form – at its limit, the material 'collectivity' of indexicality itself, the signifying power of nature. The link is anonymity. It is through the combination of anonymity and reference inherent in the pseudonym 'The Atlas Group', with its global connotations, that its fictive collectivity comes to figure the *speculative collectivity of the globally transnational* itself.

I claimed earlier that currently it is only capital that immanently projects the utopian horizon of global social interconnectedness, in the ultimately dystopian form of the market: only capital manifests a subject-structure at the level of the global. Yet capitalist sociality (the grounding of societies in relations of exchange) is essentially abstract; it is a matter of *form*, rather than 'collectivity'. Collectivity is produced by the interconnectedness of practices, but the universal interconnectedness and

dependencies that capital produces exhibit the structure of a subject (the unity of an activity) only objectively, in their product, separated from individual subjects and particular collectivities of labour, in the self-development of the value-form. Historically, of course, nationalism (the cultural fiction of nations) has filled this lacuna. Nations ('imagined communities') have been the privileged social subjects of competing capitals. But the subject-structure of capital no longer corresponds to the territorially discrete entities of nation-states, and other societies outside the nexus of global capital are being drawn inexorably into it. In this respect, the immanent collectivity of capitalism remains, and will always remain, structurally, 'to come'; hence the abstract and wholly formal character of its recent anticipation as 'multitude'.

The fictional collectivity of *The Atlas Group* and its narrative 'characters' is a stand-in for the missing political collectivity of the globally transnational, which is both posited and negated by capital itself. As such, it corresponds, at a structural level, to the work of such 'authors' as Luther Blissett and Wu Ming in the field of literature.⁴⁸ Politically, one might say, such work represents, by virtue of its effective relations to the philosophical history of capital, the continuation of the intellectual tradition of Marxist internationalism by new transnational artistic means. The Atlas Group could be construed as the artistic representative of a kind of 'First Transnational'.

But what then of the specifically *national* focus of the Group's work, its exclusively Lebanese fiction? The transnational is not the non-national, but it changes the status of the national, which was in any case famously only ever an 'imagined community'. Here, the fictionalization of 'Lebanon' – through the fictionalization of the evidence of its existence – effects an emblematic fictionalization of the national itself. Furthermore, this fictionalization of the national acts as the *de-nationalizing* condition of its *transnationalization*; a transnationalization that is effected via the socio-spatial structure of the artwork/artworld. This is not transnationalism as the abstract other of the nation, but transnationalization as the mediation of the form of the nation-state with its abstractly global other. On the horizon of this movement, we can glimpse something of the radical-democratic aspect of Foucault's projection of a possible replacement of the conventional author-function (tied to relations of ownership) by some form of anonymity. It evokes the rhetorical question that closes Foucault's essay: 'What difference does it make who is speaking?'⁴⁹