

Considering Time and Space in the Contemporary: Possibilities for Contemporexit as a Strategy for Art under Neoliberalism

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The contemporary through its definition, usage, and conceptualization can initially seem clear but upon further inspection can quickly become rather cryptic. Stated differently, the contemporary represents the present moment, but also has other meanings especially when applied to art and culture, as it often is. Etymologically connected to Latin roots meaning roughly “together” with “time”¹, more colloquially contingent upon a measure of time – being in the present moment, and acting as a descriptor of a particular style or category of art (or genre as Suhail Malik would say)², the term contemporary is broad reaching and also contradictory. To elaborate further, particularly in art under these terms the contemporary can represent the past, present, and future simultaneously – that is, contemporary art was made recently, it is currently being made now, and it will continue to be made in the foreseeable future. In this manner the contemporary is seemingly continuing in perpetuity, however it has an origin in the postwar era. Art wasn’t generally labeled contemporary as such prior to this origin, however art could have been casually referred to as contemporary before this origin, although clearly not constitute what we now call contemporary art as it is understood today. This is just a small example of the contradictory nature of the contemporary as a term, genre, and set of conditions, especially in relation to art.

So what does this contradiction produce? Suhail Malik has argued that contemporary art “doesn’t detail its logic”, which he further explained could be seen as an “operational power in secret where the contents and claims are now at best placeholders or alibis for these power operations.”³ Malik continued “these operations are now distribution and power channels that work inside the art world, and outside of it via gentrification, institutionalization, and marketization, etc. Contemporary art is determined by a system of logic, and this system is what needs to be understood. The focus on the singularity of contemporary art is what obfuscates the systemic logic of contemporary art”⁴. As Malik’s claims suggest, how can this singularity be put at a distance in order to examine the contemporary in generative ways that could lead to understanding its logic and what produces this logic?

Perhaps by expanding the concept of the contemporary, as the title of this conference suggests, to the *Contemporary Contemporary* is a strategy in this direction. However, I think the contemporary contemporary seems to position itself as a present contemporary that clearly

differentiates between a past contemporary and a future contemporary. As such, is it helpful to continue to assess the contemporary contemporary, as the conference's abstract states "in terms of a multitude of different times and temporalities in the same historical present"?⁵ If we focus on the historical present of the contemporary contemporary what becomes of the contemporary past and the contemporary future that co-exist under the more commonly used umbrella term "the contemporary"? Moreover, if past and future realities are brought to bear on the present moment, but then immediately obfuscated under the contemporary, especially as it relates to art, how do we begin to understand the so called logic of the contemporary?

It seems helpful to seek other ways, means, and methodologies to further understand the subtleties, complexities, and contradictions of the contemporary contemporary as well as the more generic and commonplace singular contemporary to elucidate what is producing these problematic tendencies. Similar to how the contemporary can advance notions of the present at the expense of the past and future, which it simultaneously evokes in terms of time and temporality, what other notions of the conditions of the contemporary are set aside?

I will argue that if the frameworks and context are expanded in which we analyze and understand the notions of the ever-present temporality and time under the contemporary, its obfuscated operations could begin to be understood more clearly. One strategy that could prove helpful in understanding the abstract nature of time in the contemporary, would be to couple it with a more concretized concept. David Harvey provides a suggestion with his claims on the co-dependent relationships and interconnectedness between time and space in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*.⁶ Harvey further supports this claim by referring to Frederick Jameson's analysis from *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* where Jameson states the categories of space have come to dominate those of time in our changing experience of time and space.⁷ Given these arguments about the relevance of space in relationship to time, I will suggest that by examining the notion of the contemporary in terms of *time* and *space* together, some of the indiscernibilities under the contemporary can begin to be unpacked. Furthermore, a framework to begin understanding the logic of the contemporary in art that produces "gentrification, institutionalization, and marketization"⁸ can be utilized by analyzing these concepts in tandem. Also, other assessments can begin to be made from this framework, especially socio-economically and geopolitically as it relates to the contemporary.

There are several immediately interesting and important circumstances that arise through combining space and time together in assessing the conditions that are produced under the contemporary. David Harvey noted "the objectivity of time and space are produced by material

practices of social reproduction, which vary geographically and historically.”⁹ Harvey continued, “neither time nor space can be assigned objective meanings independently of material processes, and that it is only through investigation of the latter that we can properly ground our concepts of the former”.¹⁰ These statements raise the question - what are the material conditions of the contemporary, or rather, what do the spatial and temporal materialities of the contemporary produce?

There are many ways of conceptualizing space e.g. as articulated by Henri Lefebvre, such as social space, absolute space, abstract space, contradictory space, and differential space.¹¹ Simultaneously, as these notions of space are expanded upon and the concept of time is added, further spatial temporal concepts, including absolute time/absolute space, relative space-time, and relational space time have been articulated by David Harvey through elaborating upon Lefebvre’s notions of space by combining them with notions of time.¹² How do we then analyze the contemporary within this mix of spatial and spatial/temporal conceptions? As it quickly becomes apparent from this small sample of spatial/temporal categories, there are a myriad of ways one could conceptualize time and space in the abstract, to which I will not fully elucidate in this paper (ironically, due to spatial and temporal constraints). Rather, I will focus on general tendencies of space time in the contemporary, especially with consideration to artistic production, but keeping in mind these particular spatial temporal conceptions. In doing so, it is not my objective, to deterministically suggest there is only one totalizing theory of contemporary space time, but rather my aim is to use general theoretical notions of space and time as a starting point to help identify the problematic logic of the contemporary toward seeking clearer ways of understanding its contradictions.

What are some general characteristics of space and time under the contemporary, especially as can be seen in art? If as Malik argues, indeterminacy is the hegemonic quality of contemporary art along with being characterized by “smuggling, deterritorialization, in-betweenness, counter normativity, the uncaptionable, etc.”¹³ how are these characteristics manifested in terms of time and space of the contemporary? If we think back to the previous spatial/temporal categories, combined with historical and social changes over the past several decades, it seems that the contemporary has changed radically in many locations. The individual spaces and times in social life, the bio-political and cognitive space time, the space time of urbanization, and the time/present to time/future of debt economies have radically altered human relationships to space and time under the contemporary. This particular space time of the contemporary is often used in instrumentalizing further problematic forms of financialization,

privatization, management and manipulation of crises, and state redistributions under neoliberal political ideology.¹⁴

The current logic of the contemporary has produced radical alterations in bio-political space-time, especially in contemporary art. Foucault has argued that the body exists in space and must either submit to authority or carve out spaces of resistance.¹⁵ As such, it would seem as though under contemporary art, spaces for resistance are readily accessible, but I believe this is less clear upon further examination. In some respects, contemporary space time allows for liberating bio-political circumstances, but in other situations positive bio-political positions are hindered immensely. Through the eradication of public funding structures in much of the west since roughly the late 70's (and particularly under neoliberal contemporaneity) agendas have been reprioritized causing a shift in the ability to carve out space time that facilitates resistance. The need to continuously work more hours at increasingly less well-paid secondary jobs to support oneself without regular wages (especially in highly deregulated fields, such as art) has been a radical shift in bio-political space time, intensifying the submission to the authority of work under the contemporary. This situation reinforces a notion of wealth as monetary accumulation and postponing pleasurable enjoyment which is a great shift in bio-political space time, to which Franco Berardi responds "we need a new conception of wealth as time – time to enjoy, travel, learn, and make love"¹⁶ all of which are being diminished.

On the other hand, these changing contemporary bio-political space times have wide reaching effects in terms of increased pressure and stress on the body, but also intensify anxiety, depression, and psychological alienation (among a host of other mental health issues). Berardi adds "the increasing economic competition is the dominant psychological imperative of the social consortium, we can be positive that the conditions for mass depression will be produced. This is in fact happening under our eyes."¹⁷ Elaborating on Berardi's point, through the exacerbated hustle artists and art workers have to put up with due to the shifts of contemporary space time, an increase in mental health issues is being created and intensified in completely new ways. Jodi Dean argues that under these conditions, the individual form itself, not just from a pathological standpoint, is breaking down under the increasing mental health pressures.¹⁸

Another changing dynamic under contemporary space-time are intensifying urbanization processes that have damaging effects for those living and working under the contemporary art regime. One of the features of the logic of contemporary art is that it closely follows and is instrumentalized by finance power. As such, museums, galleries, educational institutions, and other entities tend to be anchored in many of the world's financial centers such as New York,

London, and Paris as well as many emerging centers on the Asian Pacific Rim such as Los Angeles, Shanghai, and Singapore among others. Since these centers are also international megacities ripe with urban geographic problems such as lack of affordable housing, overcrowding, and increasing costs of living, the space time of living and working in these areas under contemporary conditions is proving increasingly difficult. As the demand for housing increases, and rents rise, the space time of work via subjugation to wage labor as a survival mechanism is re-prioritized over the space time of the social and the personal. It is as if Foucault's emphasis on imprisonment within spaces of social control (as further described by David Harvey) as resulting in the entrapment of impoverished populations in inner city spaces¹⁹ is a further intensified space time reality for those operating in contemporary art. Moreover, the little traction artists do get in socio-economic contexts within urban situations is often exploited where contemporary art in urban areas is instrumentalized via gentrification to further financialize the city, which intensifies the space time for everyone living there, artists included. The end result is increased precarization and an intensification in the space time dynamic of work (usually not as artistic labor but as gig work) for those living, working, and educating themselves in urban areas.

Another feature of the space time of the contemporary is the problem of debt. As newer generations of artists and cultural workers enter the field of contemporary art, they increasingly have greater debt as a result of obtaining an expensive and underfunded art education that has become a necessary qualification to even be considered, let alone accepted, into the professional framework of contemporary art. The consequences of these debts can be crushing. Franco Berardi has described indebtedness as "economic submission, producing need and lack, which makes us time dependent, transforming our life into a meaningless run towards nothingness."²⁰ Berardi continues this critique by discussing Anya Kamenetz's more intense claim about those taking out student loans where "debt functions like a symbolic chain whose effects are more powerful than the real metal chains formerly used in slavery. This new model of subjugation goes through a cycle of capture, illusion, psychological submission, financial trap, and finally pure and simple obligation to work."²¹ In contemporary art, as it relates to indebted former and current students, this marks a massive shift from a time/present relationship to a time/future reality via the debtor/creditor dynamic where artists are coerced into an almost servitude like work obligation under this shift in the relational space time of the contemporary. This is on top of their already precarious situation.

In summary, striking comparisons can be drawn between the contemporary and how its logic is instrumentalized via changes in space and time to advance a neoliberal ideology. As Suhail Malik has argued, there needs to be an “exit, not an escape, from the contemporary in art.”²² Frankly, I would agree, as the fashionability of the contemporary as a genre is being used to accelerate a neoliberal political project that has dire socio-economic and geopolitical consequences for those involved in the production of contemporary art, whom according to Ben Davis are mostly middle-class working people.²³ How then could the contemporary in art be exited from and how would this *contemporaryexit* strategy manifest itself?

An exit from the contemporary in art would also similarly coincide with, or be facilitated by an exit from neoliberalism in broader society, and vice versa. This may sound like a hefty task, but socio-political changes are happening at multiple levels that are laying the groundwork for such transformations to occur. As Jodi Dean has argued for the transition from organic dissent to organizable, sustainable entities that can affect political change, we have begun to see this very recently on major political fronts.²⁴ From the rise of Podemos in Spain, the election of Syriza in Greece, the surge of American democratic socialist Bernie Sanders in the U.S., and the recent election results in the U.K. with the rise of the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn, broader anti-austerity politics are gaining major traction. Of course, it is still very much a neoliberal world, but these gains on a macro political level in western democracies present a positive outlook for broader political futures.

However, what specific political policies would help facilitate an exit from the neoliberal authority of the contemporary? Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have argued for the necessity of universal basic income, towards automating more meaningless jobs, reducing working time, and reclaiming utopian imaginaries (from perspectives of the political left) as emancipatory political ideas toward “inventing the future”.²⁵ They have argued that through endless repurposing and using experimental tactics to identify, locate, and use leverage in political processes, changes on multiple political levels can begin to take place.²⁶ Their idea is to create utopian narratives via repurposing technology and mobilizing organizational capacities. They argue through taking actions at an every day level, through workplace organizing, and campaigning via social alliances, strategic thinking, and ideological work, with and through institutions, change can be created and public discourse can be altered. This is a slight shift in thinking, at least in art, to become the institution or move through them as a form of radical politics, but could also be seen as an expansion or development of institutional critical, political, and social art practices. However, I agree and believe that to exit the contemporary it is important for artists to collectively take up legal, financial, political, and other institutional entities vis a vis existing organizational

frameworks, social structures, and strategic positions with the intent of repurposing their roles and power to work toward better conditions in art and society.

Although art is in a somewhat difficult position due to the individual and fragmented nature of artists, these could be strategies used to exit the contemporary toward a better version of it. We've already seen numerous artist led and art orientated organizations from The Precarious Workers Brigade in the UK, to Co-operative Real Estate for Artists and W.A.G.E. in the U.S, to NICC in Belgium, to the UKK and BKF art unions here locally in Denmark organize, operate, and work toward exiting the contemporary toward brighter socio-economic and geopolitical futures while employing a number of these strategies in not only art, but in broader societal contexts as well. Furthermore, the development of new organizations, continuing to work within and through already existing organizational structures, as well as "the creation of alliances, or ecologies of networks" as Michel Feher would say, all seem like pertinent strategies.²⁷ By using combinations of folk political organizations with and through current structures as well as taking over and going through existing institutions in art and on larger scales, such as on the societal level, we could, eventually begin to leave the problematic conditions of the contemporary behind.

¹ James A.H. Murray, et al., eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Volume III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 813.

² Suhail Malik, *Exit, not Escape – On the Necessity of Art's Exit from the Contemporary*, Lecture presented at Artist's Space, London, UK, June 21, 2013.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Contemporary Contemporary, *About the Conference*. Last modified 2017, <http://conferences.au.dk/contemporary2017/>

⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Limited, 1991), 203.

⁷ Ibid, 201.

⁸ Suhail Malik, *Exit, not Escape – On the Necessity of Art's Exit from the Contemporary*, Lecture presented at Artist's Space, London, UK, June 21, 2013.

⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Limited, 1991), 203.

¹⁰ Ibid, 204.

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 46 – 53.

¹² David Harvey, *The Time and Space of Value*, Lecture presented at The Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, November 21, 2016.

¹³ Suhail Malik, *Exit, not Escape – On the Necessity of Art's Exit from the Contemporary*, Lecture presented at Artist's Space, London, June 21, 2013.

¹⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 160 – 165.

¹⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Limited, 1991), 213.

¹⁶ Franco Berardi, *The Soul At Work*, (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2009), 140.

¹⁷ Ibid, 100.

¹⁸ Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, (London: Verso, 2016), 57.

¹⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Limited, 1991), 213.

²⁰ Berardi, Franco *The Soul at Work*, (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2009), 140.

²¹ Ibid, 140 – 141.

²² Suhail Malik, *Exit, not Escape – On the Necessity of Art's Exit from the Contemporary*, Lecture presented at Artist's Space, London, UK, June 21, 2013.

²³ Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 27 – 37.

²⁴ Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, (London: Verso, 2016), 4 – 5.

²⁵ Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future – Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, (London: Verso, 2015), 108 – 121.

²⁶ Ibid, 152 – 156.

²⁷ Michel Feher, *Bearings of the left*, Lecture presented at the Visual Cultures Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, London, June 20, 2017.