



Heterogeneity and Historicity: On What Makes Art Contemporary

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary art is a category that can admit art made in any medium, form, genre, and style. However, this unprecedented heterogeneity can make it difficult to understand what makes contemporary art distinct from other kinds of art. In this article, I aim to provide an account of what makes art contemporary. I develop my position by focusing on the philosophy of contemporary art emerging from the so-called analytic tradition. I argue that, though these philosophers have reckoned with many of the puzzles posed by contemporary art's heterogeneity, they fail to provide compelling theories of what makes art contemporary. In response, I propose that the best way to understand what makes an artwork contemporary is understanding how it attempts to grapple with the issues of its own historical condition of 'contemporaneity'.

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Contemporary art is a global success story. Cities around the world are filled with museums, art fairs, biennials, and art schools devoted to it. Contemporary artists accrue public acclaim and rich critical literature. But what is most notable about contemporary art is its unprecedented diversity. It is a category that admits work made in any material, art form, genre, or style, accommodating both cutting-edge formal invention and revivals of techniques and styles from the past. As Arthur Danto proposed, in contemporary art '[e]verything is permitted'.¹

However, though contemporary art flourishes, many have also observed that there are no visual tropes, methods of making, or thematic concerns that appear to unite all the works that fall within the category. This burgeoning diversity creates unease: "What is new [in contemporary art] is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgement."² When artists can strive for both innovation and continuity, it can be unclear how art historians should distinguish contemporary art from art of the modernist or even pre-modernist past. If every material, style, and genre can find a home in contemporary art, then it can be hard to see what justifies the widespread institutional practice of taking only a small fraction of recent art to be contemporary. Moreover, if critics and audiences are faced with such boundless variety, it looks hard to find the common ground to critically compare works as contemporary art. The problem that emerges is that the heterogeneity of contemporary art makes the historical, conceptual, and critical ramifications of the term worryingly vague.

Given these difficulties, arriving at a theory of contemporary art should be of both philosophical and practical interest. However, what would make for a good account of this phenomenon? The passage I have quoted from Hal Foster succinctly provides three key desiderata for any such theory. To understand what makes contemporary art distinct, we need (1) some plausible account of contemporary art's historical determination that will separate it from the art of the past, (2) to say what conceptual distinction marks only some recent art as contemporary, and (3) to indicate which aspects of an artwork are relevant for critically evaluating it as contemporary art. In this article, I present what I take to be the most promising approach for fulfilling these desiderata. While contemporary art's heterogeneity is one of its key features, I urge that focusing only on this does not actually help us to understand what makes art contemporary. Instead, I argue that the desiderata can only be fulfilled by understanding how heterogeneous contemporary artworks reflect upon the distinctive features of their own historical condition of '*contemporaneity*'.

To motivate my view, in Section II I begin by assessing studies of contemporary art emerging from the so-called analytic philosophical tradition. Though contemporary art has garnered much attention and acclaim among these philosophers, the underlying goals, assumptions, and methods that guide their study have been subjected to little scrutiny. I argue that these philosophers fail to produce theories of contemporary art because they focus on understanding what contemporary art's heterogeneity tells us about art as such rather than what makes it distinct. In Section III, I argue that the most promising way to arrive at a theory of contemporary art is

¹ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 12.

² Hal Foster, "Questionnaire on "The Contemporary"", *October*, no. 130 (2009): 3.

not to focus only on its heterogeneity but rather to understand the particular ways it reflects upon its own historical condition. Following recent trends emerging from other intellectual traditions, I suggest that philosophers interested in what makes art contemporary should strive to understand exactly what *contemporaneity* is and how artists can reflect upon it using the increasingly diverse means they have available to them. Finally, in Section IV I will justify the revisionary nature of this approach.

II. EXPANDING HORIZONS

Summarizing philosophical responses to recent gallery-based art emerging from the analytic tradition, Julian Dodd and Sherri Irvin approvingly remark that ‘contemporary art has expanded the philosophical horizons of philosophers of art, enabling them to see that hitherto uncharted theoretical moves are possible’.³ They show that reflection on contemporary art has allowed philosophers to arrive at new definitions of art, ontologies of art, and theories of what an artistic medium is.⁴ But analytic philosophers have also found that reflection on contemporary art produces novel theories of art interpretation,⁵ the legal status of artworks,⁶ a range of innovative theories of specific genres taken to be distinct to contemporary art, such as conceptual art,⁷ installation art,⁸ and participatory socially engaged art,⁹ and even creative philosophical analyses of individual artworks.¹⁰

Given that this research sees contemporary art as being of great philosophical interest, one might expect these philosophers to have much to say on the question of what makes contemporary art distinctive as a category. However, I propose that the main methodology of the analytic philosophy of contemporary art runs contrary

3 Sherri Irvin and Julian Dodd, ‘In Advance of a Broken Theory: Philosophy and Contemporary Art’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75 (2017): 375.

4 Key works Irvin and Dodd see as responsive to contemporary art include Timothy Binkley, ‘Piece: Contra Aesthetics’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (1977): 265–77; Jerrold Levinson, ‘Defining Art Historically’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 232–50; David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Sherri Irvin, ‘The Ontological Diversity of Visual Artworks’, in *New Waves in Aesthetics*, ed. Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1–19; and Dominic McIver Lopes, *Beyond Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

5 See Hans Maes, ‘Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 121–38; Karen Gover, ‘What Is Humpty-Dumptyism in Contemporary Art? A Reply to Maes’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 169–81; Gianluca Lorenzini, ‘The Problem of Intentionality in Contemporary Art’, *Estetika* 56 (2019): 186–205.

6 See Karen Gover, *Art and Authority: Moral Rights and Meaning in Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Elizabeth Cantalamessa, ‘Appropriation Art, Fair Use, and Metalinguistic Negotiation’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60 (2020): 115–29.

7 See Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Who’s Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (London: Routledge, 2010).

8 See Elisa Caltarola, ‘Katharina Grosse, *It Wasn’t Us*’, in *Bloomsbury Contemporary Aesthetics Case Studies*, ed. Darren Hudson Hick (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350930063.0004>.

9 See Vid Simoniti, ‘Assessing Social Engaged Art’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76 (2018): 71–82.

10 See Diarmuid Costello, ‘Xenophobia, Stereotypes, and Empirical Acculturation: Neo-Kantianism in Adrian Piper’s Performance-Based Conceptual Art’, in *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, ed. Connie Butler and David Platzker (New York: MoMA, 2018), 166–215; ‘On the Very Idea of a “Political” Work of Art’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 29 (2020): 1–21.

to this goal.¹¹ Dodd and Irvin propose that philosophical innovation emerges when philosophers use contemporary art as a font of compelling problem cases that they then try to accommodate within broader theories of art. To see this, consider Irvin's own work.¹² She engages closely with a wide range of formally inventive contemporary artworks, arguing that they motivate a novel metaphysics of art. Consider Felix Gonzalez-Torres's '*Untitled*' (*For Ross in L.A.*) (1991), a canonical contemporary artwork constituted by a pile of sweets in colourful wrappers that the audience is free to take and which are periodically replenished back to a weight of 175 pounds. For many, this artwork may appear to fall within the category of sculpture. However, as Irvin observes, sculptures made in prior eras usually consist of unique material objects that cannot admit changes to their materials without being destroyed. By contrast, '*Untitled*' is constituted by no one specific pile of sweets, and audiences can take parts of it away without destroying the artwork. To grasp the ontology of this work, Irvin proposes that we must instead attend to the set of publicly accessible custom rules laid down by the artist for how the artwork's materials should be displayed and conserved by institutions and how audiences can interact with the artwork. But she also proposes that doing so does not just help with the conceptual clarification of what the artwork is but also shapes the interpretation and appreciation of the work. For instance, the title of the work refers to Ross Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres's lover, who passed away from complications of AIDS. When we correctly grasp that Gonzalez-Torres has ruled that the work should be constituted by no one set of sweets and that audiences can freely take the sweets, we grasp that the work is a moving memorial that continually decays and regrows as audiences interact with it. If a curator instead decided not to follow Gonzalez-Torres's rules and placed a pile of sweets in the gallery but forbade the audience to touch them, Irvin reasons that the work would still act as a playful memorial but one that coldly places Laycock at a distance from the viewer, losing the generosity and sensuality evoked by a correct presentation.

Irvin convincingly shows that a novel, rules-based metaphysics of art can illuminate our conceptual and critical understanding of a wide variety of formally diverse contemporary artworks. However, though Irvin is motivated by the metaphysical puzzles posed by contemporary art, her theory surprisingly tells us little about what then makes art contemporary. This is because Irvin proposes that understanding the metaphysics of contemporary art actually helps us to better understand the metaphysics of art of other eras. She points out that Renaissance paintings, for instance, have all kinds of rules: that they are displayed with the painted surface facing the viewer, that they are displayed the right way up, that they are maintained in the state they left the artist's studio, and so on. Understanding these rules is essential for grasping how the artwork comes into existence, endures over time, can be destroyed, and what aspects of the work are suitable for interpretation appreciation. Though contemporary artists are more likely to mint custom rules rather than accept conventional ones, Irvin ultimately finds that reflecting on contemporary art produces a general ontology of art that applies equally well to non-contemporary art.

This is undoubtedly a great philosophical achievement. However, it embodies a widespread tendency in the analytic philosophy of contemporary art that has limited its

11 For alternative, analytically informed methodologies – both of which also defer advancing a theory of contemporary art – see Costello, 'Xenophobia, Stereotypes, and Empirical Acculturation' and Vid Simoniti, *Artists Remake the World: A Contemporary Art Manifesto* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

12 Sherri Irvin, *Immaterial: The Rules of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

ability to focus precisely on what makes the category distinct. The focus is on dealing with the puzzles of contemporary art's heterogeneity in order to motivate novel theories that apply to art as such. But this results in theories that clarify more about what makes contemporary art the same as other categories of art, rather than theories that clarify what makes contemporary art historically, conceptually, and critically distinct.

However, it is instructive to consider an alternative approach. Arthur Danto's 1964 article 'The Artworld' arguably inaugurates analytic aesthetics' interest in using the provocations of recent art to arrive at new philosophical theories of art as such. He observes that Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* – a work constituted by a series of plywood boxes, silk-screened to look like boxes of Brillo pads – motivates a question that has been posed by many subsequent contemporary artworks: how does an artwork differ from a non-art object with which it is perceptually indistinguishable? Danto answers this by putting forward an essentialist philosophical theory of art that names the conditions for arthood for all cases in the present, the past, and even the future.¹³ However, though Danto is an essentialist about the intension of the concept of art, he is a historicist about its extension. He observes that many essentialist theories of art have been attempted at different points in time and have subsequently been refuted as artists have produced counterexamples. For instance, post-impressionist painting challenged imitation-based theories of art, and coolly rationalist modernist art overturned art theories premised upon emotional expression. However, Danto also famously holds that with the appearance of *Brillo Boxes* this progressive development of art theory came to an end. This is because only when it was finally possible to begin trying to accommodate artworks that were perceptually indiscernible from mere things could the actual essential definition of art finally be put forward.

This combination of essentialism and historicism allows Danto to use his theory of art as such to understand what makes an artwork contemporary. By the nineties, he began to see what the artworld called 'contemporary art' as identical to what he termed 'post-historical art'.¹⁴ He proposed that, after the 'end of art', artists suddenly have an unprecedented amount of freedom, finding themselves able to experiment with whatever medium they please – including the use of everyday objects like Brillo boxes or sweets – without automatically facing the charge 'that is not art'. Contrast this to certain modernists, such as manifesto-writing avant-gardes or artists inspired by Clement Greenberg. According to Danto, these theorists produced a huge array of increasingly exclusive theories that attempted to match the concept of art to only certain artistic innovations but faltered as soon as a new artistic experiment emerged. For Danto, the sudden move to the pluralist heterogeneity of artmaking that has come to be identified with 'contemporary art' is living proof that we finally reached the state of post-historical creative liberty and conceptual clarity that followed from his 'end of art' thesis.

This theory of art history is highly controversial.¹⁵ But here I will grant Danto his argument in order to assess its performance as a theory of contemporary art. Danto's theory tells a clear story of why contemporary art emerged, why it appeared when it did, and what makes it distinct from modern/pre-modern art.¹⁶ He even goes so far as to assert a specific time and place that marks the advent of the contemporary

13 Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

14 Danto, *After the End of Art*.

15 See Noël Carroll, *Arthur Danto's Philosophy of Art: Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 79–114.

16 See Danto, *After the End of Art*, 11–12.

period – Andy Warhol’s exhibition at East 74th Street, New York, in April 1964. Finally, Danto also showed, both in theoretical writings and in his own practice as an art critic for *The Nation*, that contemporary art required a distinct style of art criticism.¹⁷ By doing this, Danto’s theory of the end of art looks like it is able to show what makes contemporary art historically, conceptually, and critically distinct.

However, I claim that, even if we grant Danto his ‘end of art’ thesis, his theory of contemporary art is still wanting. This is because contemporary art is, in fact, not identical to post-historical art. Danto holds that for something to be regarded as art it must be supported by the background theories endorsed by the relevant artworld. This means that, on his view, anything that is produced today within artworlds that can pose the question of indiscernibles should fall within the category of contemporary art and should have a right to be displayed under this label. For instance, amateur Sunday painters doing traditional, figurative landscape paintings for the sheer aesthetic joy of it could be held to be making contemporary art because what they make can, under the aegis of a post-historical theory of art, be regarded as art. But, looking at the limited amount of art that gets labelled as contemporary art, it does not seem that the category is quite as accommodating as this. It appears that only some works are selected from the mass of post-historical art to participate in the more limited category of contemporary art. Many Sunday painters’ landscapes do not seem to make the cut.¹⁸ Danto thus appears to fail to fulfil the desideratum that a theory of contemporary art should be able to explain why only some recent artworks are considered contemporary art, while many others are not. Post-historical art is too capacious to be identical to contemporary art.

Danto could respond that his theory serves as a critique of the exclusivity of mainstream contemporary art. Perhaps the institutions of contemporary art work in bad faith, failing to embrace the true pluralism that is required to understand art as such after 1964. However, this line of criticism is dialectically moot because it incorrectly identifies the criteria the contemporary artworld uses for selection. Given the fact that contemporary art institutions exhibit paintings by artists like David Hockney, Peter Doig, and Etel Adnan, who make landscape paintings, use many traditional techniques, and even aspire to be visually pleasing, this would indicate that they do not hold a theory of art as such that could not accommodate all the features characteristic of the work of many Sunday painters. Whatever the criteria might be for usually excluding works by Sunday painters within the more limited category of contemporary art, it has little to do with whether these works fulfil the broader theory of art as such that the contemporary artworld endorses.

Though Danto makes more progress on the question of what makes art contemporary than many subsequent analytic philosophers, he runs into a similar problem. While contemporary art’s heterogeneity challenges the restrictions of prior theories of art, expanding our theories of art as such to accommodate its experimental front leads to theories that are too broad to fully capture what makes it distinct. To correct this, I contend that we must move from the question ‘What makes contemporary artworks art?’ to the question ‘What makes an artwork contemporary?’

17 See Arthur Danto, ‘From Philosophy to Art Criticism’, *American Art* 16, no. 1 (2002): 14–17.

18 As I will clarify below, I am not committed to the view that all Sunday painters should or always will be rejected from the category of contemporary art.

There are many ways philosophers have attempted to make sense of the term ‘contemporary’ and its application to art. Here, I will consider two leading accounts. Both depend upon the idea that when we use the word ‘contemporary’, we are saying that two or more things share the same time. Fiona Hughes exemplifies one way of applying this to art.¹⁹ She proposes that things become contemporary by the ‘sharing of time during a shorter or longer extended period’, but that this does not necessarily mean that they have to occur at exactly the same moment.²⁰ Artists can become contemporary by ‘electing’ others to share time with them. For instance, even though Francisco Goya and the Chapman Brothers are separated by a vast gulf of chronological time, by making *The Disasters of Everyday Life* (2017), in which they make their own additions to copies of Goya’s works, they could be interpreted as taking up similar concerns about how to depict the brutalities of modern society that motivated Goya himself. By sharing the same concerns or influences, artists can become contemporaries with others, even if they are not living at the same point in chronological time.

Hughes certainly captures an important phenomenon. It is common for audiences to feel that the art of both the present and the past can suddenly align with our current concerns and projects. It is also plausible that not all art manages to achieve this, some art being so attached to its own time that it produces no feeling of contemporaneity for future generations. Moreover, it is certainly the case that many leading recent artists who are seen as making ‘contemporary art’ are interested in investigating their connections to art of the past. Likewise, since Hughes places no restrictions on the means that artists should use to forge such connections, this theory of art’s contemporaneity can accommodate the heterogeneity that is standardly associated with ‘contemporary art’. However, Hughes’s approach to understanding what makes artworks contemporary also seems out of step with the way the term ‘contemporary art’ is used in mainstream curatorial, art-historical, and art-critical practice. Here, the term usually picks out a far more delimited category of art that is thought to be both recent and distinct from the art of the past in some historically, conceptually, and critically significant way.²¹ By contrast, on Hughes’s view, art made at any time could, under the right circumstances, become contemporary. If this transhistorical understanding of contemporaneity is applied to the artworld phenomenon I am interested in here, it yields a hugely revisionary theory of what makes art contemporary insofar as it suggests that our conception of contemporary art should be far more temporally expansive than what seems to undergird most current artworld practice. Like Irvin, Hughes’s approach thus fails to meet the desideratum that a theory of contemporary art should explain what makes contemporary art different from the art of the past.

I will instead sketch an alternative to the transhistorical approach that I think can both make better sense of the recency of contemporary art and fulfil all three desiderata

19 For a similar approach, see Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54, who also produces an account of ‘being contemporary’ that could plausibly apply to people living at any point in history. Despite his differences, I think his view falls to the same critique I will level at Hughes.

20 Fiona Hughes, ‘The Temporality of Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art: Kant, Kentrige and Cave Art as Elective Contemporaries’, *Kantian Review* 26 (2021): 583.

21 See leading art-historical surveys which all take contemporary art to be only a recent phenomenon: David Hopkins, *After Modern Art 1945–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Peter R. Kalb, *Art Since 1980: Charting the Contemporary* (London: King, 2015); Tony Godfrey, *The Story of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

set out at the start of this article. When applied to art, the term ‘contemporary’ is usually used to play a role similar to that of the term ‘modern’. A common way to understand what makes an artwork ‘modern art’ is by understanding how it reflects upon the wider historical condition of modernity. For example, one common way to articulate the modernity of a work of art is by drawing attention to the way it responds to certain changes in technology (for example, the advent of new forms of transport, new technologies like photography and cinema, and mechanized warfare), politics (for example, the increased interest in the idea of ‘progress’, the maturation of political ideologies like communism and fascism, the spread and decline of colonial power, and expanded suffrage), or other aspects of culture (for example, the rise of popular culture, changes to gender roles, and the expansion of capitalist schemes of value into everyday life), all of which in different ways have been taken to exemplify the broader phenomenon of modernity. Importantly, for our purposes, these changes only emerge at certain points in chronological time. If artists can only become modern when they can be affected by and reflect upon these phenomena, then it follows that modern art also only emerges at a certain point in chronological time.

What exactly links all these phenomena together into a single idea of ‘modernity’ and when exactly it emerges is an endlessly debated topic, and it is not one I will try to resolve here. Whatever view one takes, the idea that undergirds many accounts of modern art is that it can be defined as the art that is influenced by and reflects upon this particular complex of contingent, historically emergent economic, technological, political, and cultural changes – what I will call its ‘historical condition’. If the term ‘contemporary art’ is used to function in a similar way to the term ‘modern art’, then we may also assume that ‘contemporary art’ is art that also responds to some historical condition distinct from modernity. This is a line of thought that several recent theorists of contemporary art outside of the analytic philosophical tradition have begun to attempt to flesh out, calling this distinctive historical condition *contemporaneity*.²² Though this is only a nascent research project, I believe it is possible to trace the outline of some of its key hypotheses.

In a similar vein to Hughes, theorists of *contemporaneity* often begin with the observation that, to be contemporary, one or more things must share time. However, what marks their approach apart from Hughes’s transhistoricism is that they argue that, owing to certain recent economic, political, cultural, technological, and ecological changes, people’s experience of their contemporaneity with others has become markedly intensified in unprecedented ways. To approach this, advocates of *contemporaneity* often begin by enumerating the various phenomena they think have created the most significant changes. For example, the art historian Terry Smith proposes that

[t]he notion of contemporaneity [...] pinpoints the dynamic at work between the many factors usually adduced as the predominant explanations of what shapes the contemporary world: modernity, globalisation, neoliberalism, decolonisation, fundamentalism, terrorism, network culture, and global warming, among many other less prominent but just as profound, such as indigenisation.²³

22 I will italicize ‘contemporaneity’ when speaking of the specific historical condition under discussion and non-italicize it when using the standard sense of the term introduced at the start of this section.

23 Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 4.

Similarly, philosopher Peter Osborne suggests that our sense that we share the present with others becomes intensified in the wake of globalization, enhanced communication technology, and the emergence of various transnational entities (for example, the IMF, the UN, multinational companies like Amazon and Huawei, and even international terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda).²⁴ In an impressively broad, empirically substantiated global history of the world since 1945, historian Jonathan Sperber also argues that evidence overwhelmingly shows that this era has been defined by unprecedented global interconnection.²⁵ He demonstrates this by focusing on phenomena similar to those listed by Smith and Osborne but also pointing to other phenomena like increased rates of migration across the world, increased interest in global public health projects, and the increased spread and growth of the tourism industry.

By identifying *contemporaneity* with such phenomena, the theorist is then in a position to put forward three hypotheses. First, they can hypothesize that, if we study any of these phenomena, we will find that they have led to an increased awareness among an unprecedentedly large number of people across the world that they live at the same time as many other people in many other far-flung parts of the world. To be clear, this awareness does not imply agreement or cosmopolitanism. It can produce bitter division, conflict, and crisis. Moreover, as Osborne points out, within such world-spanning conditions, our sense of our increased contemporaneity is often only ever partial, given the fact that it is almost impossible to fully represent to ourselves all the interconnections, similarities, and conflicts that we currently share with our globally distributed contemporaries.²⁶ The point is simply that, by becoming entangled in globalized economies or transnational projects of governance, it has become more difficult than ever before to ignore the vast range of different people around the globe who are entangled in exactly the same phenomena at the same time.

Second, the theorist of *contemporaneity* hypothesizes that these phenomena have only fairly recently become particularly salient to understanding human life. It is, of course, a contested question to say exactly how recent these changes are. Just as with the periodization of modernity, we should expect a plurality of overlapping start dates to be offered, and we should expect different aspects of *contemporaneity* to come into view in different parts of the world at different times. However, one general observation that can be made is that the emergence of many of the phenomena listed above often coincides with the periodizations that historians and art institutions offer for contemporary art – roughly, various dates across the second half of the twentieth century. The historical condition of *contemporaneity* is thus not a transhistorical phenomenon but one that has emerged over a fairly recent span of time.

Third, the theorist of *contemporaneity* can hypothesize that the world that has emerged in the wake of these changes is markedly different to the world of modernity. This can be done in various ways, perhaps by charting the ways they have led to a fracturing of the progress-oriented, utopian worldviews that often characterized modernity,²⁷ or by showing how the weakening of the hegemonic Western political, economic, and

24 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 26–28.

25 Jonathan Sperber, *The Age of Interconnection: A Global History of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

26 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 22–26.

27 Juliane Rebentisch, 'The Contemporaneity of Contemporary Art', *New German Critique* 42 (2015): 230–37.

cultural models that were thought to exemplify modernity has led to a diversity that is at odds with most theories of modernity.²⁸ Put otherwise, the hypothesis is that, in many contexts, the unprecedented contemporaneity people have experienced across the second half of the twentieth century has slowly overturned so many of the main tenets of various modernist worldviews that a genuinely distinct historical condition has emerged.²⁹

Putting these three hypotheses together, the theorist of *contemporaneity* contends that, while one could plausibly feel that one shared time with others at any point in history, various changes in the second half of the twentieth century have led to an unprecedentedly intensified awareness of the sheer scale of living people we share time with. It is this period of intensification that the term *contemporaneity* picks out. Of course, here I have only presented this notion in its faintest outline, giving no details of how exactly globalization, the internet, or climate change make us feel more contemporary at a greater scale than previous eras. Fully building out the idea of *contemporaneity* is clearly a highly ambitious, demanding project that requires a vast amount of collaborative empirical and analytical work from historians, economists, cultural theorists, philosophers, and many others to understand the various phenomena indicated, trace their interconnections, and prove that they have indeed intensified interconnection in some genuinely unprecedented way in the second half of the twentieth century. This is a heavy burden of proof, and it goes far beyond what I can achieve in this article, but it is one that scholars from many different disciplines have begun to work on. Nevertheless, even if I cannot fully prove the *contemporaneity* hypothesis here, I can at least suggest that it is a compelling hypothesis for philosophers of contemporary art to consider because it promises to help us fulfil all three desiderata for a theory of contemporary art.

Turning back to art, Osborne makes the following claim:

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.³⁰

On this view, art does not simply become contemporary by experimenting with form or materials for the sake of experimentation, or by just generically 'sharing time' with any other thing or person. Rather, it becomes contemporary not only when it is produced within artworlds that accept that art can explore the boundlessly heterogeneous

28 Terry Smith, *Art to Come*, 156–74. It is important to note that few theorists assert that modernity has been completely replaced, and many still uphold parts of its particular worldviews and projects. There is no clear point at which we have wholly moved from modernity to *contemporaneity*. Rather, the latter has slowly emerged as an alternative way of interpreting the present. On the layering of historicities, see Helge Jordheim, 'Against Periodization: Koselleck's Theory of Multiple Temporalities', *History and Theory* 51 (2012): 151–71.

29 I note that a further distinction can be drawn between *contemporaneity*, modernity, and postmodernity, but this requires far more space than I have available here. For further analysis of this issue, see Pamela Lee, *New Games: Postmodernism after Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

30 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 27.

means afforded to them in the wake of modernism, the avant-garde, and the 1960s but when it also reflects upon the various, specific features of the world that exemplify *contemporaneity*. Here, I will understand this 'reflection' to involve making artworks that can be interpreted as representing, investigating, exploring, or actively intervening in the various phenomena thought to exemplify *contemporaneity*.³¹

This theory of contemporary art as the formally, generically, and stylistically heterogeneous art that reflects upon *contemporaneity* can fulfil all three desiderata for a theory of contemporary art. First, provided that *contemporaneity* can be given some plausible start dates grounded in historically emergent events, processes, or conceptual configurations, and provided that we can use this to distinguish it from prior modernist and pre-modernist art, then we can use our conception of this distinct historical condition to furnish contemporary art with its missing historical determination.

Second, this view can also provide answers to the problem of conceptual definition. Appealing to reflection upon *contemporaneity* can neatly explain why not all recently produced artworks should be considered to be contemporary art. For instance, imagine a landscape painting produced by a Sunday painter in 2024. If this work is found by critics to be best interpreted as an exploration of the visual features and colour relations of the depicted landscape, but these critics then also find it inappropriate to interpret the work as a reflection on any features of the world distinct to *contemporaneity*, then, on my view, this work is not best understood as contemporary art (as I will show in the next section, the same can hold even for formally inventive artworks). Naturally, arriving at such interpretations may be a highly contested matter, and in some cases it might be hard to settle whether an artwork is or is not engaging with *contemporaneity*. In the case of our Sunday painter, a critic may well contend that the fact that the artwork could be considered contemporary art because the painter, in choosing to spend their leisure time reflecting upon colour and form, could be interpreted as attempting to make art that actively repudiates the increasing encroachments of neoliberal schemes of value into all areas of life.³² Given the intractable controversies surrounding theories of art interpretation, I will not try to resolve the issue of what interpretative policy should be used to decide these debates. The important point is that the view I am advocating at least provides a question that can ground disputes over whether artworks should be considered contemporary or not: does this artwork reflect upon *contemporaneity*?

This also suggests a solution to the question of how we should critically assess artworks as contemporary art. After ascertaining that an artwork does reflect on features of *contemporaneity*, we can ask how well or badly the artist has reflected on these features. Here, there is no one-size-fits-all evaluative schema that should be used. Some artworks might strive towards trying to simply accurately represent some aspect of *contemporaneity*, in which case critics may assess it for how accurate or inaccurate it is. Other artworks might attempt to engage in some particular crisis of *contemporaneity* in an activist way, such as attempting to mitigate the harms of climate change or the mistreatment of migrants. In these cases, critics may assess the artwork for how morally insightful, politically effective, and artistically valuable

31 An alternative, more demanding approach, suggested by Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, and Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, trans. Daniel Hendrickson and Gerrit Jackson (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), is to see heterogeneous 'post-conceptual' or 'installation' artworks as actually having a privileged capacity to mediate *contemporaneity*. Given my limited space, I cannot investigate these further proposals here.

32 I thank an anonymous referee for canvassing such an interpretation.

the work is.³³ As above, I allow that we may disagree in our critical evaluations of the value of artworks qua contemporary art. Again, the important point is that the view I am advocating at least provides the right kind of question that we can ask if we want to evaluate an artwork as contemporary art: what is the value of its reflection upon *contemporaneity*?

If we conceive of contemporary art as the heterogeneous art that reflects on *contemporaneity*, we can thus answer all three of our desiderata for a theory of contemporary art in ways that other approaches cannot. Indeed, this appears to be a conclusion that many within the contemporary artworld have come to. It is increasingly common to find curators proposing major exhibitions or biennale editions that find unity between diverse contemporary artworks by virtue of their shared attempts to reflect upon certain of the features of *contemporaneity* I have enumerated above. If the philosopher of contemporary art thus wants to try to make sense of what makes their object of study distinct, they should not just attempt to try to understand how experimental, heterogeneous contemporary art can fit with our theories of art as such. I propose they should instead focus on attempting to turn the tools of philosophy towards understanding how recent art uses its heterogeneous means to reflect its historicity.

However, before continuing, there is one issue to contend with. I have suggested that basing a theory of contemporary art on an account of *contemporaneity* is different from basing it on the transhistorical account of 'being contemporary' that Hughes put forward. However, one may now wonder if I have really succeeded in defending this last point. Could artworks of the distant past not help us to reflect upon features of *contemporaneity* and be evaluated for how well they perform this task? For instance, is it not the case that Goya's *Disasters of War* can be interpreted as bearing in interesting ways upon various conflicts that have resulted from intensified *contemporaneity*? If so, does this not make Goya a contemporary artist, even though he died well before the second half of the twentieth century, thus leading to the idea that, though *contemporaneity* is a comparatively recent historical condition, contemporary artworks need not be so recent?

I do not dispute the fact that artists from the past can sometimes help us to reflect on the world that has emerged across the second half of the twentieth century. However, I think there are also some significant differences in the ways those who have lived through certain changes can reflect upon them, as opposed to those who died long before those changes took place. An artist who has also lived through some aspect of the emergence of *contemporaneity* will always be in a better position to reflect upon it in a more empirically detailed way. Since an artist working in the past lacks access to the relevant experiences and knowledge of these changes, I think they can only help us reflect on things in a very general way, helping us to see the broad commonalities between different times rather than the more specific, unique aspects of recent times. Goya might be able to help us reflect on the horrors of war that are common to all conflicts, but a group of contemporary artists like Forensic Architecture can do the same thing while also helping us to account for the novel effects of post-World War Two military technologies or recent debates about the way bodies like the International Court of Justice should intervene in such conflicts. My proposal is thus that the fact an artist has actually lived through *contemporaneity* plausibly makes their reflection on it significantly more vivid, direct, and non-fortuitous than anything

33 See Simoniti, *Art to Come*.

a long-dead artist can achieve. Thus, I think there is a meaningful difference between the way recent art and art of the more distant past can interrogate *contemporaneity*, which justifies regarding only the former as ‘contemporary art’.

IV. WHAT CONTEMPORARY ART SHOULD BE

Let me end by considering an important further objection that can be raised against this way of thinking about contemporary art. One may worry that, if contemporary art is taken to be only the art that reflects upon *contemporaneity*, then this leads the philosopher to violate a methodological doctrine widely endorsed within analytic aesthetics that David Davies has named ‘the pragmatic constraint’. On this view, any philosophical theory must be consistent with how things are in the relevant ‘reflective critical and appreciative practice’.³⁴ A theorist observant of this constraint may worry that emphasizing reflection upon *contemporaneity* causes many works that are widely regarded as being central examples of contemporary art within critical and appreciative practice to suddenly be deprived of a good claim to being placed within this category.

Consider Anish Kapoor. Kapoor is regularly shown in contemporary art galleries and is regularly praised for his formal and technical innovations. However, there is an open question as to whether many of Kapoor’s works are best interpreted as reflecting on *contemporaneity*. Take, for example, his work *At the Edge of the World* (1998). This work is constituted by a large fibreglass dome suspended above the audience, the interior of which is coated in deep, red pigment. When the audience walks under the dome, their sense of space is confounded since the colouration of the dome’s interior makes the curved space appear depthless. In its installation at the Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Wijnegem, the work is shown alongside a large wall text that reads:

The idea is to make an object which is not an object, to make a hole in the space, to make something which actually does not exist. Even more, the extraordinary appearance, loved and feared, of a piece of void, at once finite and infinite, reactivates the symbolic contact between inside and outside, earth and heaven, male and female, active and passive, conceptual and physical, thus renewing the process of knowing.

Kapoor and the gallery choose to present the work as dealing with timeless metaphysical and spiritual themes. Supposing that the critic uses this statement to guide their interpretation of the work, it quickly becomes hard to see exactly what might link the artwork to the specific, contingent features of *contemporaneity*. In fact, the critic may reason that to reflect upon its universal, perennial themes, the work has to step away from referring to the particular topical concerns of its own historical moment.

At the Edge of the World is just one example of a vast array of significant recent artworks that could plausibly be interpreted as not reflecting upon *contemporaneity* but yet are still regularly categorized as contemporary art. If the contemporary artworld includes works like these within the category of contemporary art, and my account of contemporary art cannot admit them, then it looks like it risks ignoring real artworld practice by instead imperiously revising the category. In short, it violates the pragmatic constraint.

34 Davies, *Art as Performance*, 18.

This charge can be resisted in two ways. First, it is possible that each of the works under consideration could, under another interpretation, reveal a more subtle reflection upon features of *contemporaneity*. For instance, *At the Edge of the World* clearly references industrial modes of production, both in its use of materials and in its satellite-like form. A critic may thus contest reading the work as a purely timeless piece, contending instead that it could be a reflection upon the very possibility of finding space for a connection to the timeless even in the midst of the processed, monumental spaces that fill late-capitalist industrial societies, so often thought to conflict with such a contemplative, spiritual worldview. If such an interpretation is plausible, then critics have some reason to think that Kapoor's work does have a claim to be understood and evaluated as contemporary art. In such cases, the pragmatic constraint is not violated.

However, suppose that, even after careful consideration, critics do find that Kapoor's work is best interpreted as having no specific relation to any features of *contemporaneity*. In this case, the defender of the view I am taking is under pressure to find a way to justify rejecting Kapoor from the category of contemporary art without violating the pragmatic constraint. I think justification is available. First, note that Davies specifies that the relevant practices that the constraint considers are those that are 'reflective'. The philosopher should only be constrained by the thoughts and actions of those practitioners who subject their practice to rational scrutiny, critically assessing the concepts they use, attempting to align these with their domain-specific goals, and attempting to correct problems they encounter in this process. We should thus not be constrained by all practice in the relevant domain, much of which may be entirely unreflective and even misguided. But nor should we invent new, wholly revisionary theories out of whole cloth. Rather, we should make sure our theories are responsive to the actual thoughts, actions, and problems encountered by those who are already attempting to reflect upon their practices.

Second, if the views we arrive at are not simply meant to accord with everything everyone within a practice believes, then Davies holds that any theory that respects the pragmatic constraint 'stands in an essentially normative, and not merely descriptive, relationship to the norms that operate in actual critical practice and the judgements in accordance with those norms that we actually make'.³⁵ Practically constrained philosophers strive towards views that cohere with sufficiently reflective accounts of how appreciative and critical practice should function, with the proper function of the practice arising from 'conceptions of the goals of our critical practice, the values sought in such practice, and the values offered by the works that such practice takes as its object'.³⁶ We can thus admit some degree of revision, especially when participants in the domain are highly uncertain or vague about what they are doing, provided such revision helps practitioners better realize the tasks and goals of their practices.

I have derived the desiderata for a theory of contemporary art by responding to genuine difficulties that face the reflective artworld practitioner. In fulfilling these desiderata, my theory of contemporary art is thus directly responsive to the problems faced within the relevant artworld community. It clearly indicates how art historians might distinguish contemporary art from the art of the past and helps them see what features of this art will be of art-historical significance. It draws our attention to the features of contemporary art that will be of distinctive critical relevance for art critics and audiences and how these parties can coherently comparatively appreciate

³⁵ Ibid., 20.

³⁶ Ibid.

heterogeneous contemporary artworks alongside each other. It even indicates how curators and art institutions can reasonably mark the conceptual boundary between contemporary art and other recent art. As I have attempted to demonstrate, while it may be appealing to try to solve these problems by showing what makes heterogeneous artworks work within broader theories of art as such, these approaches will not yield the above benefits. Neither will approaches that attempt to argue that contemporary art is a transhistorical phenomenon. Therefore, my approach is well in keeping with the method of the pragmatic constraint and better produces the kinds of rewards it is meant to yield.

The cost of such benefits is the exclusion of certain works from the category of contemporary art. Biting the bullet in this way and rejecting works by artists who are widely regarded as being contemporary artists may sound like a sad fate. I wish to take a more optimistic outlook. I claim that a further surprising benefit of being more vigilant about our application of the category is that it may improve our appreciation not just of the artworks that we do rightly take to be contemporary art but also of those we realize we have miscategorized. Given just how pervasive the category of contemporary art is, it can be easy to put any novel artworks within it with little thought to historical, conceptual, or critical harms this may do artworks that are not well served by this categorization. When a work is found to not fall within the category, it may actually free that artwork from theoretical disputes and critical approaches that do not serve our understanding and appreciation of what that work is trying to do. We may be better able to seriously appreciate the timeless nature of Kapoor's work if we simply detach it from concerns about its connection to contemporaneity that are implied once we try to regard it as contemporary art. Narrowing the concept of contemporary art shows that, rather than being the monolithic category into which all significant recent gallery-based art must be subsumed, there is actually a far greater variety of ways to find value in recent art that are gained by removing certain artworks from a category in which they have often been placed without reflection.

V. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have put forward what I take to be the most compelling way to identify what makes art contemporary. Just making sense of the philosophical puzzles posed by heterogeneity is not enough, since this often leads to accounts of what makes contemporary artworks art rather than what makes them contemporary. Building up a picture of contemporary art's historicity and how an artwork can reflect upon this historicity is the more promising path to take. Though many have taken up this task, it is still a project with much distance left to cover. I think the tools of philosophy are well suited to answering the many broad conceptual questions that such a project is still trying to grapple with: what exactly was modernity, and how can we tell if it is or is not waning? Why might artistic modes of reflection be particularly suitable or unsuitable for engaging with certain features of *contemporaneity*? How can an appreciation of art's successful engagement in such reflection help us to understand what makes it good as art? How can we justify not calling a recent artwork contemporary? These are tasks that philosophers from all different traditions – both analytic and non-analytic – can have a hand in contributing to. By formulating and responding to these kinds of questions, a clearer idea of what makes art contemporary emerges that may not just be of abstract, conceptual use but be able to positively affect those who make, disseminate, and appreciate contemporary art.

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