

— Sebastian Olma

# THE POST- CONTEMPORARY

## A Speculative Debate

### LOOP, INTERRUPTED

Over the past decades, the term ‘post-contemporary’ has popped up occasionally here and there in the art world, but it hasn’t quite taken on.<sup>1</sup> This is probably not that surprising, given the questionable achievements of the notion of postmodernism. There is an understandable lack of enthusiasm for denominations and labels that come with the prefix ‘post-’, particularly if they are meant to herald a new era or movement or something to that effect. Hence, it needs to be stated from the outset that this new edition of *Making & Breaking* by no means proposes the term ‘post-contemporary’ as a theoretical label for a new, perhaps even revolutionary (what would that even mean today?) turn in art and culture. Instead, it represents an attempt to use the notion of the post-contemporary as a speculative future horizon for a critical debate on the social conditions in which art and aesthetic practice are presently taking place. Our theoretical point of departure can perhaps be best communicated by sharing the statement that was sent out to potential contributors about a year ago:

*We live in a time when it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of neoliberal capitalism. Mark Fisher famously marked this historical moment in terms of ‘capitalist realism’, i.e., a state in which the thought of a future that is qualitatively different from the present becomes near impossible. The fatal*

*fusion of marketing and platform technology is streamlining and automating psychic processes in such a way as to prevent the emergence of emancipative forms of collective consciousness. The result is a process of severe consciousness deflation supported by an increasingly generalized state of aesthetic poverty. In this situation the contemporary turns into a penal complex for cultural and political imagination where temporality turns on itself in a perpetual loop.*

*This issue of Making & Breaking has the ambition of punctuating the penal walls of the imagination by inviting theorists and practitioners to speculate on the post-contemporary. We have asked potential contributors to share their visions of the post-contemporary. How do we escape the hamster wheel of the contemporary? Where are the traces of a desirable future found in the present? How can they be activated toward a post-contemporary practice that points beyond the aesthetic poverty of the here and now?*

In retrospect, it could seem almost comical to have bemoaned a perpetually looping present just weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic spread globally. Yet it would be absolutely fatal to misunderstand the cascade of hard and soft lockdowns that brought many aspects of social life to a standstill as a reminder of how smoothly time (and social life) was flowing in pre-Covid-19 times. Rather, the pandemic has worked as a magnifying glass on the rampant

injustices caused by decades of neoliberal politics. Inequities in access to medical care, inhumane working conditions in industries such as meat processing, and the devastating demagoguery of social-media-based business models (the likes of the German *Querdenken* and the Dutch *Viruswaarheid*), are just a few examples of the painful contemporary realities revealed by the pandemic across the entire spectrum of society. Simultaneously, however, Covid-19 also demonstrates that the contemporary loop of numerical acceleration can indeed be interrupted, and the economic imperative can be tempered by politics. Our societies are becoming economically significantly less active because concern for the well-being of the population makes this necessary. We are no longer storming obsessively into the void. Of course, we have to accept that this potentially meaningful rupture is an exceptional situation, after which everything could well go back to business as usual. However, Alexander Kluge and Ferdinand von Schirach remind us that states of emergency resulting from natural disasters are capable of leaving their mark on the future trajectory of a society.<sup>2</sup> The huge earthquake in Lisbon in 1755, for example, shook the ideological and religious foundations of the Middle Ages so badly that it provided an important impulse for the Enlightenment. As is well known, Voltaire finally lost his confidence in ‘divine benevolence’ after the quake, and many of his contemporaries also had to admit: ‘God is no longer suitable as a foundation’.<sup>3</sup>



## POST-CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE AGAINST THE ‘NEW NORMAL’

In this sense, this issue of *Making & Breaking* should be seen as an invitation to speculate on forms of art and aesthetic practice that can help turn the post-pandemic reality into one that breaks with the foundations of the contemporary (in the sense outlined in the invitational statement) – and could in this sense become truly post-contemporary. While writing this introduction, another earth-shaking event has taken place, this time in the sphere of politics. The failed coup d’état in Washington, D.C. exposed the political abyss that opens up underneath the surface of a contemporary that is marked by decades of wilful neglect of society’s democratic cohesion. Tyranny and fascism are raising their ugly heads again because neoliberalism has been rather successful in turning societies globally into aggregations of monocultural networks that have a hard time recognizing value in anything that is not submissible to market validation. Instead of the liberating social networks that the optimistic nineties promised, we are now moving toward *antisocial* network societies that are comprehensively unsustainable as they tend to deplete the very resources they are built on, be they natural, social or psychological.

The purpose of the struggle ahead is to reverse this process of resource depletion. We need to commit our societies to a collective effort of radical construction. It should be clear that this is going to be a multi-dimensional effort and thus a struggle to be fought on several fronts at once. Naomi Klein deserves credit for having popularised this notion in her writing. As she puts it in her 2019 book *On Fire*:

‘We will need to rebuild the public sphere, reverse privatizations, relocalize large parts of economies, scale back overconsumption, bring back long-term planning, heavily regulate and tax corporations, maybe even nationalize some of them, cut military spending, and recognize our debts to the Global South’.<sup>4</sup>

What we have to resist – post-pandemic, post-white-supremacist-insurrection – is what is already being called ‘the new normal’, that is, a return to an intensified version of social and planetary exploitation. Instead, we need to collectively construct a path out of the misery of the contemporary, while also taking into account the important learnings from the pandemic. Artists, designers and creatives in general have an important role to play in such a project. Where, if not in the aesthetic fields, are we to find the resources we need to produce shared symbols for emancipative social cohesion? Such shared symbols must be extended to the planetary solidarity humanity needs to achieve in order to address today’s existential challenges. However, as Bernard Stiegler pointed out nearly two decades ago, in order to contribute effectively to the search for a path into the post-contemporary, those working in the aesthetic fields have to overcome their own complicity in the ‘symbolic misery’ of our time. For Stiegler, this means that they have to rediscover the fundamental connection between aesthetics and politics.<sup>5</sup> In the sphere of contemporary art, Hito Steyerl has recently updated Stiegler’s demand by making it absolutely clear that the question of how to build a sustainable art world can only be posed as a political challenge.<sup>6</sup> Hence,

from our perspective, the project of sensing a post-contemporary future must begin by re-thinking and reconstructing the current state of aesthetic practice and cultural production.

### THE CONTRIBUTIONS

In the opening essay of this issue, ‘The Great Deflation: Arts and Culture after the Creative Industries’, Justin O’Connor starts this process of rethinking from the point of view of cultural policy. He argues in favour of a post-contemporary cultural policy that tries to reimagine the fields of aesthetic production *beyond* a largely failed creative industries approach. Retracing the rise of what he calls ‘the creative industries imaginary’ since its inception in the 1990s, he diagnoses a decoupling of the initially ambitiously progressive idea of the creative industries from a reality that has become fully complicit with the brutal operations of extractive capitalism. Rather than continuing to openly lie to ourselves about the transformative powers of the sector in its current form, he argues in favour of a new imaginary for cultural policy that re-aligns arts and culture with public services, recognises arts and culture as a foundational element of the economy as well as a public good, and practices creative justice in terms of pay as well as social diversity.

Marina Vishmidt’s ‘Post-Reality Markets and Structured Financial Time Products’ also addresses the debilitating confines of current aesthetic production, this time from the more abstract theoretical perspectives of philosophy and economics. The provocative argument she develops is that there is a strange equivalence between the financial and creative industries in so far as they serve as ideal playgrounds of contemporary capitalist ideology. The pandemic has revealed the extent to which financial markets now operate independently from the real economy (production, purchase and flow of goods and services). They have achieved a breath-taking degree of autonomy, thanks, not least, to ceaseless investment (corporate welfare), through which states willingly uphold the fiction of financial



productivity. In the creative industries, Vishmidt sees ideological fiction as well, in a sense not dissimilar to O'Connor's 'creative industries imaginary' that has lost touch with an increasingly sordid reality. However, while financial capital is insulated from the crises of economy and society, creative 'human capital' is not. What those working in the creative industries can take away from Vishmidt's argument is that creative vanguardism toward a post-contemporary future has to start with the rejection of both fictions: the fiction of neoliberal finance and of neoliberal creativity.

In his 'Notes on the Platform Condition', Internet critic Geert Lovink zooms in on a specific aspect of contemporary creative fiction. For him, the platform model represents not just a business model or a market place but a *Kulturideal*: a cultural ideal within the contemporary where neoliberal an-aesthesia does its best to choke the life out of any aesthetic aspiration (Lovink refers to Rao's notion of the 'premium mediocre'). At the same time, platforms have begun to exert political and even quasi-religious powers as they influence not just elections but also our very sense of reality. The assault on the Capitol should be seen as only the latest, if particularly despicable, manifestation of a digitally enabled war against the very foundations of a collectively shared sense of reality. It should disqualify technological solutionism indefinitely and give us the courage to begin the debate about regaining democratic sovereignty over our means of communication.

Angela Dimitrakaki's point of departure is the observation that a potential leap into a post-contemporary future will always have to be based on such a sense of collectively shared reality which is necessarily located *in the present* (the con-temporary). Today, such a sense of shared reality is under attack from the alt-right, enabled by the aforementioned social media/platform technology. However, as an art historian, Dimitrakaki's argument goes in a different direction. 'From Postmodernism to the Alt-right: Notes on the Loss of Objective

Reality' explores the historical relationship between globalisation, postmodernism and the alt-right. Didn't postmodernism, she asks, introduce the relativism and scepticism about the existence of objective reality that has become the cornerstone of the current success of the ideologies of the alt-right? And by extension, doesn't the art world bear a certain responsibility for having so eagerly and uncritically embraced postmodern theory? These are fascinating questions because their discussion reveals that the attempt to take refuge in the seemingly political neutrality of (in this case) postmodernism has had catastrophic political consequences. Following Dimitrakaki's argument, one could almost quip that much of contemporary art has been a super-spreader for the alt-right's attack on our sense of a collectively shared reality. A post-contemporary artistic practice will have to learn from this historical failure, and do so fast.

In her contribution to *Making & Breaking*, Patricia Reed also addresses the question of learning, taking a more general philosophical perspective. Reed's essay 'The End of a World and its Pedagogies' is a meditation on what it means to live in a world that is coming to an end. Her notion of 'world' seems to be located somewhere half-way between the phenomenologist life-world (the world of daily experience) and the objective world of science. 'World' is also understood as an historical formation and in this formal sense it is related to Fernand Braudel's notion of *longue durée*, or Immanuel Wallerstein's capitalist world system.<sup>7</sup> As such an historical formation, our current 'world' is clearly coming to an end. The fascinating problem that Reed is raising is that the futurity of a given world – the way it projects itself into the future – loses its validity once this world ends. In other words, her argument goes to the heart of the key question of the post-contemporary: how can we think and create a truly post-contemporary futurity, that is, one that is neither caught in the obsolete assumptions of the contemporary, nor in a mystification of the future? Finding effective responses to this challenge is necessarily a

pedagogical task, involving, on the one hand, honesty about the unsustainability of current structures and systems of reference and, on the other hand, the will to take the risk to experimentally explore untraveled paths.

Suhail Malik's essay 'Risk Exposure — Surfeit Futurity' challenges the idea that the present can be characterised by a lack of futurity, by a cancellation of the future, or, as we put it in our invitational statement, as a situation in which 'temporality turns on itself in a perpetual loop.' In a critique that partly resonates with Reed's point about the end of a world necessarily coinciding with the exhaustion of that world's futurity, he argues that the assumed cancellation of the future is an illusion based on the illegitimate extension of a modern, linear understanding of temporality. Instead of a lack of futurity, he sees the present marked by an abundance of it, a surfeit futurity that seems to overwhelm our collective semantic ability to narrate effective future imaginaries. Rather than insisting on an obsolete modernist understanding of temporality (that was Western-centric to begin with), Malik invites us to engage with the idea of a speculative time complex where 'calculations and actions in the present are initiated on the basis of implacably incomplete knowledge' about the future. Whilst the full ramifications of such a conceptual reorientation remain to be worked out, Malik's foregrounding of the future's 'asemantic contingency' implies a call for an intense awareness of the material conditions of the contemporary and, following from that, prudence and care with regard to a politics that aspires to truly post-contemporary futures.

Both of those qualities are on ample display in Dmitry Vilensky's 'From Nomads to Roots, and Back', which transitions this edition of *Making & Breaking* from theoretical-scholarly analyses to practice-orientated contributions. A member of the Russian art collective *Chto Delat*, Vilensky urges the art world to use the interruption caused by the pandemic as a moment of critical self-reflection. The particular target of his critique is the notion of

'nomadism'. Originating in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work as an attempt to project the possibility of a revolutionary, radically open form of subjectivity, the notion of nomadism has been perverted by the art world into a justification for a hyper-individualist lifestyle whose faux cosmopolitanism consists of not much more than Western middle-class privilege and mobile consumption patterns based on cheap jet fuel. Covid-19 has brought this mockery of nomadism to a provisional end. Localism, meant here in the sense of radical environmental politics, can be an interesting antidote, going forward, but only if it integrates the openness that was inherent to the revolutionary notion of nomadism. Instead of trying to retrieve 'our shabby, semi-ruined, colonised-by-capital cultural environment and its unjust histories', Vilensky writes, we should mobilise 'all possibilities for the defence of another world which is hidden in plain sight'. In doing so, he provides a signpost for an artistic practice looking for a path into the post-contemporary.



Exposing the faux cosmopolitanism of the art world?: Christopher Kulendran Thomas's *New Eelam* (2016)

Brian Holmes' appeal to 'Map the Power' represents one possible and potentially powerful response to Vilensky's critique. His essay issues an invitation to join a project of building a collaborative information and communication infrastructure that can help to confront and manage from below the two major crises we are facing today: ecological collapse and economic depression. 'To get to the light of day', he writes, 'the rising sun of social and ecological recovery is going to need a serious push from the people at the bottom'. Achieving

what in North America is today often called a 'Just Transition', collaborative artistic practices have a crucial contribution to make in generating the knowledge for and vision of a more equitable economic system. The point here is not to argue that everyone should join the just cause of breaking the global fossil fuel infrastructure, but that artistic practice can and should be mobilized in the name of a post-contemporary future that is liveable and even desirable for the many, not the few. What is at stake in this project is the generation of democratic power for civilisational change.

In the final essay of this edition, Aiwen Yin returns to one of the great current obstacles to such civilisational change: the problem of antisocial networks. Entitled 'On Post-Temporariness', the essay opens with a meditation on the temporary and reductive nature of social relations in neoliberal capitalism, which develops into a radical critique of contemporary design. The charge Yin levels against her own discipline is that it has been complicit in a 'mode of design [that] disassembles human beings and their experiences so that they can become disconnected modules'. There is a reductionism in the design of our contemporary social networks that to her mind has shown little evolution since Chaplin's satire on conveyor-belt production in *Modern Times*. The essay focuses on the temporariness of social relations as a dimension of this reductionism. Meaning and resonance in social relationships require time, which is something that the quick fix of transactional exchange excludes by definition. In other words, our current (anti)social networks are in need of a thorough *redesign* that encourages sustainable, long-term relationships. In order to be able to take up such a task, the practice of design needs to renounce its current complicity in a system 'that isolates individuals for the sake of endless capitalist growth, towards one that focuses on relationships and human growth, in the form of individual and collective development'.

One of the conclusions we can draw from Yin's

argument for the project of a post-contemporary future is that it will require long-term commitment. Functioning as a magnifying glass on the brutal inequities and anti-democratic effects of our current economic system, the present pandemic rupture should give us the momentum, sincerity and perseverance for the struggle and the joy of radical reconstruction that lies ahead. For those working within the aesthetic fields of cultural production, the project of sensing a post-contemporary could provide a thrilling alternative to the default complicity demanded by the neoliberal creative industries. How do we get from the contemporary to the post-contemporary? To quote Vilensky again, we get there by mobilising 'all possibilities for the defence of another world which is hidden in plain sight'.

#### REFERENCES

1. For one of the first mentions of the term, see Gillick, Liam (2010) 'Contemporary Art Does Not Account for that which is Taking Place', *e-flux*, #21, December, retrieved from: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67664/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place/>. See also the overview in Smith, Terry (2019) *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 279 – 310.
2. Although current research very much points to the human-made character of

- the pandemic.
3. Von Schirach, Ferdinand and Kluge, Alexander (2020) *Trotzdem*, Munich: Luchterhand, pp. 50 and ff.
  4. Klein, Naomi (2019) *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*, New York: Allan Lane.
  5. Stiegler, Bernard (2014) *Symbolic Misery, Vol. 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, London: Polity.
  6. Steyerl, Hito (2019) 'How to Build a Sustainable Art World. In Conversation with Despina Zefkili,' *Ocula Magazine*, London, 18 October, retrieved from: <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/hito-steyerl/>.
  7. It might be interesting to note that Wallerstein predicted the end of the capitalist world system around 2025-2050.

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