

CRISIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY: THE END OF ART

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This paper was to be presented at the seventh biennial conference of the European Network for Avant-garde and Modernism Studies to be held in Belgium in September 2020. The conference organisers had proposed the theme of 'CRiSiS' early in 2019, unable at that point to anticipate the degree to which 2020 would in fact embody a sense of crisis. In the email notifying that my paper had been accepted, the organisers also relayed the fact that the conference was to be cancelled, due to travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. I present this paper here instead, in the context of contemporary art, at Love[f]Art.

The current moment in art, or 'the contemporary', in itself can be seen to represent a sense of crisis. This is the case in relation to a view of contemporary art as it is historically situated at the end of, and as the result of, that which is perceived as the progression of Western art history through 'the modern'. It is in relation to this specifically historical view of Western art that I'll attempt to outline here a notion of contemporary art as embodying a sense of crisis, factors of which include its perceived lack of definition or philosophy, its a-historicity and openness to form, and its nature as having been directly determined by the outcomes of the conceptual period in art immediately preceding. I'll then attempt to describe this situation as one that offers hope and delineate a method by which this sense of crisis may in itself prove to be the saviour of contemporary art.

A retrospective view of the history of modern art can present it as a semi-linear, developmental attempt by progressive art movements to work through the problem of art. This problem may be described as modernism's ongoing and cumulative attempt to define 'art', primarily as it was embodied by the visual or aesthetic reduction of art as a concept to its essence. This currently unfashionable idea was somewhat incompletely theorised by art critic Clement Greenberg in the mid-20th century, while philosopher Arthur C Danto took the idea to its more final conclusion up into the early years of the new millennium. In this view of primarily Western modernism, the attempt by artists to reveal art's true nature resulted in various mutations of the art object's visible form. These actions were frequently considered attacks on art, adjustments made to its visual conditions initiated by a sense of radicality and self-critique. Modern artists questioned and challenged the accepted conditions relevant to the nature of the art object *in their time*, cutting and reducing that which was deemed visually irrelevant, or 'extra', to art's purity as a concept.

Here, an abbreviated view of this history reveals that, in the first instance, the element of representation or the depiction of visually recognisable forms, for example in a painting, was cut away from art. These actions included blurring and ultimately abstracting the visual forms contained within a work, for example by movements such as impressionism (in the first instance) or cubism (in the second). The invention of the monochrome did away with the need for art to represent any kind of form *at all*, whether blurred or abstracted, and

proved that art as a concept did not need to subscribe to these conditions in order to exist *as art*. With the monochrome, the painting itself became something closer to an object than an image, challenging and shifting again the understanding of the concept 'art' via its embodiment. In the conceptual moment, arguably the final movement of the modern, artists came to idealise art's dematerialisation altogether. Here, finally, not only did art as a concept no longer demand a sense of representation or form, but evaded its objectification, or its existence in a physical or material sense.

This historical view of art can be characterised as a progressive critique of art *by art*; that is, the gradual attack on and reduction of the forms of art by artists until art – as a *concept* – no longer required material or visual manifestation. By stepping outside the forms expected of the art of their day, modern artists critiqued and reduced the concept to its barest and most essential form. This can be conceived as an attempt by progressive movements to meld art with its opposite, or to show where and how art could exist within that considered 'not'-art. Various conceptual practices tried, to greater or lesser extents, to reveal art within the everyday, or within not-art: conceptual forms such as mail art, earthworks, walking as art, political activity or cleaning as art meant that art's lack of differentiation from other objects, situations or concepts in the everyday world rendered it frequently invisible. If art can be embodied by cleaning, communication, cooking, and craft, what ultimately is art? If non-art is also art, what is art?

Conceptual artists wanted their work to escape the institutions of the museum and the market. They wanted to free art as a concept from the hierarchical and frequently capital-driven strongholds that tend to separate it from recognition within ordinary life and its actions, or within the 'real' world. This idealistic aim towards art's dematerialisation and art in the everyday is viewed to have failed by conceptual practitioners themselves – immediately post its short-lived existence, curator and writer Lucy Lippard and artist Joseph Kosuth both declared the fact of conceptual art's failure. Today, historically a time of 'post' conceptual art, art's openness to all forms, including absolute lack of form, has been incorporated, or re-captured, by the very institutions it sought to escape. The gallery, the museum and the market have morphed to accommodate art as a dematerialised concept, documenting and re-materialising otherwise ephemeral artworks and practices for the purposes of consumption, and recapturing social or relational practices by lending them institutional representation and authorisation. For contemporary artists, there is no 'outside' to art's institutions from which to make a critique *via art*. The forms of art today are as varied and open as it is possible for them to be; no longer can we critique, cut away or reduce art via form. In addition, where all forms are now possible – for example painting, sculpture, video, ceramics, performance, social practice or ephemeral work – the current moment has seen the development of an ironically conservative return to a sense of art as necessarily material, as an object and as aesthetic, frequently via a theoretical embrace of new materialist philosophy and object-oriented ontology. Contemporary art's sense of crisis, that which contemporary artists must confront, is founded on the conceptual

movement's failure to escape the expectation of art as necessarily an object – consumable, viewable and collectable – via the return of 'art' as a concept to form and its subsequent re-entombment within the institution.

The current moment is popularly considered to represent an end to art's progressive history, brought about somewhat logically by the final movement of conceptual art. While a desire for 'progress' as such, whether in art or more generally, is frequently viewed as outdated, it is also in fact *impossible* to maintain this sense of progression within contemporary art's theorisation or practice. Alongside art's recapture by the institution post conceptual art, the a-historicity of the current moment constitutes another way in which contemporary art may be considered a crisis, with contemporary theorists and practitioners positing that the field's tendency toward a-historicity renders the moment slippery and lacking in definition or substance. Theorist Peter Osborne claims that contemporary art is 'badly known', while author Terry Smith has written that, 'generalization about contemporary art has evaded articulation for more than two decades', adding further that, 'whatever one's engagement with art, it will always be, at root, an entanglement within art's questioning'. The end of the profound and ultimately philosophical reduction of art to its essence in the modern has moved some writers to see a need to theorise the art of the current moment. Frequently embodied via the question, 'what is contemporary art?', theorists and critics have attempted to answer this question in order to prove that a convincing definition or philosophy of contemporary art can be made. Terry Smith and Peter Osborne in particular made significant movements towards this aim with books published in 2009 and 2013 respectively.

These admirable attempts to reign in contemporary art to its final definition, to lend it a sense of gravity and philosophical significance, tend finally to fail due to the writers' aims to remain true to contemporary art's sense of openness and its particularity. The current moment is seen to lack a single significant metanarrative or project, however this is a characteristic many practitioners and theorists of contemporary art hold dear. If the best definition of contemporary art is that it ultimately lacks definition, and that its openness to a vast multitude of particular instances, media, forms and lack of form results in our inability to pin it down or theorise it in any one way, the best that can be achieved here is a *description* of its various instances, which is where theorists' attempts at definition frequently land. Whether contemporary art requires definition or not, whether its philosophy is desirable or not, attempts made to arrive at these destinations are unconvincing.

In the era of the modern, the philosophical definition of art was the project of artists themselves, via the embodiment of the concept 'art' in the manifestation of their artworks. Where modern artists critiqued and reduced the form of the art object for their time, today such definition is confined to the realm of the written form. Alongside the perceived sense that contemporary art requires definition, a philosophy or more significant historical relevance, the confinement of contemporary art's definition to the world of theory in itself

represents a sense of crisis. Where modern artists were able to challenge art as a concept in their time by visually, or aesthetically, removing that deemed unnecessary to its definition or ontology, they can be said to have been enfranchised: artists were free to create that which they deemed most necessary as art in order to challenge the status quo. By doing this, artists retained a sense of ownership over what art *was*, or *should be*; they could prove or demonstrate that which they considered to be 'art' by making artworks which *embodied* these conditions. If an artist felt moved to suggest that paintings no longer required an image, that an empty canvas might as legitimately be considered 'art' as one that was representational, they were impelled to *make that work* and test the theory; it was their responsibility to embody the idea that artworks no longer required a sense of representation. Here it can be said that artworks and artists were enfranchised, they were free – in fact they were required – to make the statement 'this is art'. When conceptual artists ultimately suggested that art as a concept no longer required material embodiment – that is, that art should be something available within the everyday and therefore invisible, or non-aesthetic – they made artworks embodying this idea by making invisible artworks. The aesthetic embodiment of art as a concept *beyond* the everyday or beyond the visible seems impossible, so the project of defining art in the current moment is left to theorists and their words, a state of affairs that disenfranchises art and artists.

While the end of the modern project of art's self-definition, a sense of contemporary art's a-historicity, and the disenfranchisement of artists in defining the boundaries of their project all represent a sense of crisis, they may also be viewed as constituting a certain 'end' of art. Modern art was theorised as the end of art by Hegel at its outset and by Danto at its end; however, since the modern was a dealing with the end of art, a gradual process of stripping away its unnecessary conditions, it can more properly be said that the current moment represents less an 'end' of art, than 'the end of the end' of art. The project of ending art is over, and yet 'art' remains. This is the challenge for contemporary artists. How do we make historically significant art, art that embodies a sense of philosophy, when the modern project, that did embody these ideals, ultimately failed? How do we deal with the failure of conceptual art's aim towards escape? Is it possible to revisit this project, or has the institution won? For some artists, the very term 'the contemporary' is a symbol of entrapment, preventing our ability to conduct a radical or questioning practice in the current moment. Artist Liam Gillick claims that the term 'contemporary art' simply refers to, 'that which is being made now—wherever', a term which he claims does not encompass, 'all dynamic current art, if only because an increasing number of artists seek to radically differentiate their work from other art'. For Gillick, the term 'the contemporary' is only useful for the purposes of 'auction houses, galleries and art history departments'.

While existing definitions and philosophies for contemporary art tend to resemble mere descriptions, theorists' claims for the contemporary also tend to point towards a certain idealism. Contemporary art is frequently viewed as post-colonial and egalitarian, a space of freedom and openness that allows for the expression of previously marginalised

viewpoints. What is frequently overlooked however is the modernist nature of these stated outcomes and ideals. Contemporary art's claim towards a final moment of open self-expression tends to replicate the claims made by each progressive modern movement historically, the repetition of the ideals of absolute freedom and enfranchisement of art as it is situated in the everyday and within every citizen. The contemporary is frequently delineated as an entirely new moment, a break with the idealism of the modern and the final achievement of an unsurpassable openness. In reality, this claim in itself merely repeats those made by modernist manifestos throughout history, replicating the progressive tendencies contemporary theorists aim to avoid.

I argue that these characteristics of openness and freedom are not in fact true to the current moment, and I'm more aligned with the view of conceptual artists who view their project to have failed. Art *was* recaptured by the institution, and the current moment *does* represent the failure of the conceptual period to fully realise the ideals of the modern movement of self-critique, reduction and finally escape. If this is what is really real about our current situation – that is, art is entrapped by the object, the institution and the aesthetic, artists are disenfranchised, art lacks adequate significance, philosophy or definition, and the modern project of art's definition *via art* is over – the best definition available for contemporary art, one that accommodates this sense of failure and negativity, seems to lie within a consideration of contemporary art as the end of art, or as the end of the end of art. An embrace of this idea, in whatever form, seems the most redemptive approach, for either practitioner or theorist. If art as object or action can no longer embody its definition or absolute essence (since this essence seems to lie ideally within the real and the everyday), we need to stop expecting, demanding, or searching for these ideals within art as object, situation or concept.

A definition of contemporary art as the *end* of art means the end of the very concept of art *at all*. I suggest that a strategy that allows the escape of art from the institution in line with conceptual ideals would be an embrace of contemporary art as the end of art. If art is in crisis, in the spirit of realism it seems that art should somehow embody this crisis, whether as object, action or theory, in order to finally locate art as truly 'outside' art. Rather than decry modernist ideals while paradoxically defining the contemporary as a new and idealised moment, we should perhaps look to revere the spirit of the modern, to recapture that project and push it to its extreme, even if only from a spirit of curiosity or experiment. A view of contemporary art as a crisis demands that we treat it as such; any other viewpoint is unstable and false. Contemporary art's openness to form should be pushed towards the ultimate disappearance of form as demanded by the conceptual moment preceding it rather than theorised towards some idealistic and concrete outcome. It is hard to imagine what a real end of art would look like, but it may be artists' responsibility to at least embrace this idea, to declare the end of art in the face of its reclamation by the institution. Such an action would respect the true ideals and outcome of the modern and push that which is leaning, cutting away the final form that separates art from the world: the concept 'art' altogether.