

THE ART OF DISAPPEARANCE

Conference paper, *Dark Eden: Sixth International Conference on Transdisciplinary Imaging 2020*
University of New South Wales Art & Design

Baudrillard's paper from 2006, *On Disappearance*, deals with the disappearance of concepts, particularly those of the real and the human. In his argument for disappearance as a model, Baudrillard uses contemporary art as an example of the *failure* of a concept to disappear; this is a negative account of contemporary art, in line with Baudrillard's general approach towards the subject. Here, I attempt a practitioner's view of contemporary art according to this critique and argue for Baudrillard's strategy of disappearance – in his words, an *art* of disappearance – as a means by which to approach the problem. I'll describe the broader ideas Baudrillard addresses within *On Disappearance*, outline the nature of contemporary art as a problem, and finally argue for the application of Baudrillard's 'analytical grid' of disappearance to the field of the contemporary.

To Baudrillard, the advent of modernity marks the moment wherein human beings conceptualised 'the real' in their attempt to gain knowledge of it. He refers to Hannah Arendt's idea concerning the invention of the Archimedean point to illustrate this: 'the real world begins, in the modern age, with the decision to transform the world, and to do so by means of science, analytical knowledge and the implementation of technology – that is to say it begins, in Hannah Arendt's words, with the invention of an Archimedean point outside the world'¹. By locating a point outside the world, or outside reality, in order to access reality, humans attempted to capture, describe and transform their world. To Baudrillard, this is the moment that humans *leave* the world, their attempt to analyse it and lend it a certain reality simultaneously resulting in that world, that real and the human as subject disappearing: 'We may say, then, that the real world begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the very same time as it begins to exist'². Concepts such as reality or the human are known only at their end: 'it is when a thing is beginning to disappear that the concept appears'³. Baudrillard makes the point that 'to analyse' means 'to dissolve'; in this sense, the representation, naming or conceptualising of a subject dooms that very subject to a state of non-existence or non-reality.

In his essay, Baudrillard compares contemporary art's inability to disappear to the structure of the previous model, that of modern art. To Baudrillard, the modern project was one of disappearance via self-abolishment, which he describes as having constituted an important event: 'Art itself in the modern period exists only on the basis of its disappearance – not just the art of making the real disappear and supplanting it with another scene, but the art of abolishing itself in the course of its practice (Hegel). It was by doing this that it constituted an event, that it was of *decisive importance*' (italics added)⁴. It could be said that art's imminent disappearance as a concept – *at its outset* – was subverted by modern art's movement towards and embrace of its end, or its embrace of anti-art, of that which is *not* art. In his essay, Baudrillard critiques contemporary art for remaining unaware of the fact that art had disappeared within the modern: 'art today, though it has disappeared, doesn't know it has disappeared and – this is the worst of it – continues on its trajectory in a vegetative state'⁵. The current tendency to ignore the fact of art's disappearance within the story of the modern represents a denial of the significance of that history, leading Baudrillard to his somewhat scathing critique of the contemporary.

Baudrillard maintains that concepts that continue beyond their end lead a 'clandestine existence' and exert an 'occult influence', assuming the form of demons⁶. To Baudrillard, there is something dangerous about a subject that exists beyond its disappearance; he likens this subject – that which remains – to the Cheshire Cat's grin, a 'narcissistic double' which he describes as, 'a diffuse, floating, insubstantial subjectivity, an ectoplasm that envelops everything and transforms everything into an immense sounding board for a disembodied, empty consciousness'⁷. According to Baudrillard, to avoid this outcome we must reinvest in disappearance: 'we must give disappearance back its prestige or, quite simply, its power, its impact'. For Baudrillard, 'there is

¹ Jean Baudrillard, 'On Disappearance', *Jean Baudrillard: Fatal Theories*, D. B. Clarke, M. A. Doel, W. Merrin, R. G. Smith (eds), Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 24.

² *ibid*

³ *Ibid*, p. 25

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 27

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 28

no better analytical grid' than disappearance⁸. Where contemporary art's tendency to remain beyond art's disappearance might render it a 'narcissistic double' of the modern, it may be useful to apply the analytical grid of disappearance to the problem of contemporary art.

In order to apply this grid, it's necessary first to outline how the field of the contemporary may in fact constitute a problem. From the viewpoint of theory, the problem may be exemplified by a sense that contemporary art lacks a philosophy or definition. In 2013, theorist Peter Osborne described contemporary art as 'badly known'⁹, a state he attempted to rectify with his book *Anywhere or Not at all: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. In 2009, Terry Smith wrote that, 'generalization about contemporary art has evaded articulation for more than two decades'¹⁰, and attempted to locate a definition for it with his book, *What is Contemporary Art?* In the same year, Hal Foster declared, 'the category of "contemporary art" is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment'¹¹. A sense of contemporary art as 'floating free', as lacking historical determination and as lacking criticality may, ultimately, be the most we can say about it in reference to its difference from the modern. In reality, Osborne, Smith, and others' attempts to reign the contemporary in to a more significant definition or philosophy are, ultimately, plagued by their efforts to remain true to these very same characteristics, to its evasion of determination. That which artists and theorists frequently find valuable about the contemporary – its lack of definition, its a-historicity and its heterogeneity – are equally qualities deemed necessary to overcome, a paradoxical state that tends to stymie a systematic view.

A common tendency in theorising contemporary art is to describe it as an entirely new period, one seemingly unburdened by the progressive narrative of the modern, a final escape of the former period's perceived restrictions and inequalities. That which is frequently overlooked however is the manner in which such declarations tend to mirror claims typical of those made in modernist manifestos. According to theorist Andrew McNamara, 'efforts to claim any advance on modernist culture since the 1960s have floundered because in one way or another they have relied on modernist precedents in order to claim they surpass the modern'¹². An attempt to characterise contemporaneity in opposition to the modern is seen by McNamara to hinder the development of discourse concerning the current moment, 'the zeitgeist frenzies that have regularly broken out since the late 1960s around terms that promise a sheer break from modernity in order to announce a new and unique cultural situation actually inhibit understanding of how our contemporary situation remains embroiled within its wayward, far from resolved legacy'¹³. Rather than strive for a break with the modern, it may be more effective here to theorise contemporary art *in relation to* the modern, to view it as an effect, outcome or continuation of modernity than something altogether new.

For artists, the very term 'the contemporary' can represent a barrier to critical practice. Artist Liam Gillick writes that while it was not uncommon for modern artists to have denied the name lent their style or movement, "'contemporary art" activates denial in a specifically new way. It does not describe a practice but a general "being in the context"¹⁴. Citing the tendency for contemporary art to refer to, 'that which is being made now—wherever'¹⁵, Gillick identifies the difficulty of producing art within such a state: 'The contemporary necessarily restricts the sense in which you are looking for a breakthrough'¹⁶. He describes works produced within this context as lacking political or social affect, claiming that, 'moving against the stream is a problem, for it goes in every direction'¹⁷. Further, he declares, 'it is currently impossible to escape the hold of the contemporary'¹⁸. Where 'the contemporary' constitutes a stream going in every direction, it

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All – Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London, 2013, p. 1.

¹⁰ Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, p. 1.

¹¹ Hal Foster, 'Questionnaire on "the Contemporary"', *October*, no. 130, 2009, p. 3.

¹² Andrew McNamara, 'What is Contemporary Art? A Review of Two Books by Terry Smith', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, no. 12, 2012, p. 255.

¹³ *ibid*, p. 257.

¹⁴ Liam Gillick, 'Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place,' *e-flux journal*, no. 21, December 2010, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67664/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place/>; accessed 17 January 2021.

¹⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁶ *ibid*.

¹⁷ *ibid*.

¹⁸ *ibid*.

feels impossible to work *against* it via a critical practice, the flexibility of current art's direction resulting in a sense of impotence for practitioners who may want to oppose it.

In 2012, Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood echoed Gillick's sentiments concerning the difficulty of practicing in opposition to or critique of the contemporary. They claim that where it was once possible to make work that broke with accepted forms of art, now:

...the enclosure of contemporary art has accounted for this work in its calculations, for we have come to see the insertion of political art in museum spaces as a zombie-like caricature of social commitment, a walking dead of social life and artistic currency that masks a total confusion with regard to the question of how to render artistic form relevant and challenging.¹⁹

Gillick's sense of the impossibility of moving against the stream relates to this impossibility of rendering art challenging *as form*. Contemporary art's openness to all form stymies attempts to make art that challenges *via form*: when the stream moves in 'every direction', it is impossible to move against it or challenge its flow. When all forms are acceptable as art, including total lack of form, artists themselves are prevented from questioning what art is *via art*. In combination, the impotence and entrapment felt by some artists, alongside theorists' seeming inability to locate a theoretical structure for the field, point broadly to the manner in which contemporary art can be considered problematic.

A chronological and progressive view of modern art, from its (arguable) inception with realism to its (again, arguable) culmination with conceptual art, embodies quite visually a sense of art's disappearance. In this version of the story of modern art, formal characteristics considered extraneous to the concept 'art' were progressively withdrawn, or abolished, in order to reduce art to its essence formally. Components such as the frame, the image, the requirement that art be a painting, or that an artist even need manufacture an original object *at all* were progressively deleted, to land in the moment wherein a sense of art as something necessarily visual, aesthetic, or object-bound was challenged by conceptual artists. Some conceptual practices that embody the complete disappearance of art as a visual concern could include *Dissolution* (1975-1976), wherein artist Raivo Puusemp was elected mayor of Rosendale, New York; *General Strike Piece* (1969) in which Lee Lozano began her total withdrawal from art practice and her engagement with the art world; and Bas Jan Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), his attempt to single-handedly navigate a crossing of the Atlantic in a 13 foot boat.

While photographs document certain aspects of these works, or the likenesses of the artists that made them, the works themselves were quite literally invisible, or non-aesthetic, the concept 'art' residing finally within the real world. Here, art *embodied* reality, completing the trajectory of art's literal disappearance, initiated originally by the emergence of art as a concept prior to modernity. Ultimately however, conceptual art failed a total escape to the real, as described by conceptual curator and theorist Lucy Lippard: 'However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread)²⁰. With the advent of conceptual art, institutions such as the museum or the market moved to embrace the new ephemerality of art as a concept, consequently exploding it to inhabit every instance and every form in a move that simultaneously and inadvertently increased the institutional stronghold over art's new infinity of instances.

The entrapment felt in the contemporary connects to a notion of contemporary art as a post conceptual art. Peter Osborne describes the proposition, 'contemporary art is a postconceptual art'²¹ as speculative, one which he believes evades the chronology of 'modernism-to-postmodernism' periodisation due to the 'infinite movement of thinking' that takes place between its terms²². Unlike Osborne, I view contemporary art as quite literally a post conceptual art, in its most chronological sense, a situation wherein the conditions for the art of

¹⁹ Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood, 'Breaking the Contract,' *e-flux journal*, no. 37, September 2012, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/37/61241/breaking-the-contract/>; accessed 17 January 2021.

²⁰ Lucy Lippard, 'Escape Attempts', *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, California, 1997, p. xvii.

²¹ Osborne, p. 51.

²² *ibid*, p. 52.

the current moment were set by the outcome of the conceptual period prior. In line with Osborne, I believe these conditions are based on conceptual art's failure to free art as a concept from the aesthetic and the object. Contrary to Osborne, I am not content to conclude that this, 'demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a *necessary*, though *radically insufficient*, component of the artwork'²³, or that a philosophy or practice of art in the current moment demands an even partial re-embrace of the aesthetic. Although it is true that any art practice today, ephemeral or otherwise, seems necessarily and finally confined to some degree of material embodiment and aesthetic consideration, I suggest that a confrontation with the problem of conceptual artist's stated aim at escape, an attempt to work *with*, *within* or *in relation to* that problem, offers a more engaging artistic project than does simple acquiescence to a seemingly necessary materiality²⁴.

The re-embrace of the aesthetic and the material in current art is evident in the notion of romantic conceptualism²⁵, a recent attempt by artists and theorists to argue for aesthetic responses to artworks that adopt traditionally 'conceptual' formats. It is also exemplified by the popularity of new materialist or object-oriented applications to art's theorisation, which assume a sense of art as necessarily material or object-bound. To me however, materialist considerations of art post its attempted dematerialisation suggest Baudrillard's grin of the Cheshire Cat, rendering contemporary art 'a diffuse, floating, insubstantial subjectivity, an ectoplasm that envelops everything and transforms everything into an immense sounding board for a disembodied, empty consciousness'²⁶. The problem of contemporary art – its indefinability for theorists and its preclusion of critical practice for artists – will continue to exist so long as this 'diffuse subjectivity' remains unaddressed.

To complete art's disappearance, to avoid the sense of art's having outstayed its welcome and to maintain a project of significance, the puzzle of art's recapture by the institution must be confronted. Where the current moment's total openness to form renders a radical or questioning practice impossible *via form*, it may be necessary to turn instead, finally, to art as a concept, to that which would remain post art's dematerialised ideal. The 'analytical grid' of disappearance holds the greatest potential to considerations of art's current entrapment by the object and the aesthetic, to our acquiescence to conceptual art's failure. Despite the seeming impossibility of eradicating art as a concept, or imagining a world without art, it seems necessary to maintain the trajectory of art's disappearance and finally render everything – every instance, every action, every object – 'art', in line with conceptual ideals. It may be that simply talking about this is the best we can achieve, as either practice or theory, but the analytical grid of disappearance most successfully allows for a theorisation of contemporary art as the *continuation* of the modern rather than a false new moment. As outlined by McNamara, if we rely on modernist ideals of progress and the new to define the contemporary, we are stymied. Instead, we may need to embrace the modern effort at self-abolishment, the 'important event' described by Baudrillard, and disappear completely. Here, we create Baudrillard's 'art of disappearance' by pushing that which is leaning – art as a concept – and risking the result.

²³ Ibid, p. 49.

²⁴ To the extent that this essay itself constitutes a grappling with this problem, it equally constitutes my attempt to practice in relation to it.

²⁵ Jörg Heiser, 'Emotional Rescue', *Frieze*, no. 71, November 2002, <https://www.frieze.com/article/emotional-rescue>; accessed 21 March 2021.

²⁶ Baudrillard, p. 28.