FORUM

BORIS GROYS
In the Flow
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INTRODUCTION

«Our contemporary age seems to be different from all the other historically known ages in at least one respect: Never before has humanity been so interested in its own contemporaneity» (ITF, p. 137), writes Boris Groys in his essay collection *In the Flow* (Verso 2016), the most recent landmark in his (art)philosophical path.

The interest in our contemporaneity and, above all, our ability to interpret it seem indeed to be crucial elements of the book, wherein Groys investigates the notion of art at the times of the multimedia and proposes to do «the rheology of art – discussion of art as flowing» (ITF, p. 2).

The analysis starts from the discussion of the avant-garde polemic against the institution of the museum at the beginning of the 20th Century and from their egalitarian considerations of contemporary art with respect to ordinary things. In order to affirm the equivalence between artworks and ordinary objects, one can either extend the museum privilege to all things (which is the path followed by Duchamp and his *Fountain*) or eliminate them. If the first option is impossible (the totality of the urinals of the world cannot enter into museums, Groys affirms), the second means that with the removal of the museum's boundaries the artworks enter into the flow of the time.

In this way, museums negate their traditional function, i.e. to resist the transience of the times which they inhabit. On the contrary, museums imitate and collaborate with the flow of the time: contemporary «museum ceased to be a place for a permanent collection, and became a stage for changing curatorial projects, guided tours, screenings, lectures, performances, etc.» (ITF, p. 3). At the same time, contemporary art also enters into the flow of time: in the majority of cases, contemporary art does not produce objects anymore, but instead produces events and information about events. Museums do not collect exhibited objects any more in an anonymous space, detaching them from the material flow of time, but the curatorial projects, through the theatricalization of the museum, become a temporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* that will be replaced by the next one. In this atmosphere, the spectators become involved. With this reconfiguration of the museum, the viewer's gaze also changes. It becomes an asym-

metrical gaze, because it is inside the event and loses the sovereignty on the things. Furthermore, contemporary art lives and survives in her nostalgic re-enactment in digital archives (Web sites of the museums, blogs, social media pages etc.), which catalogs her as metadata. In a certain way, contemporary art is compatible with the Internet and becomes possible through it. What is preserved nowadays is not an object without an 'aura' – Groys asserts – but the 'aura' without the object. Moreover, on the Internet, the museum «presents not a universal history of art but, rather, its own history, in the chain of event staged by the museum itself» (ITF, p. 19). Through the reflection on the relationship between event and its documentation, original and reproduction, a museum is not only a place for artistic events to occur in, but a medium for exploring the «eventfulness of the event» (ITF, p. 20). With the aid of the contemporary art that it hosts, the museum becomes a litmus test for the comprehension of our times.

Within the described above framework, which is developed in the Introduction («The Rheology of Art») and in the first Chapter («Entering the Flow»), Groys proposes a series of essays that are rather autonomous but that, taken together, describe different aspects or problems of art in the time 'in the flow'.
The volume goes on with an analysis, on the one hand, of the relationship between contemporary art and theory, and, on the other hand, of the relationship between contemporary art and praxis. «Under the Gaze of Theory», the second Chapter, deals with the centrality of theory in contemporary art. Groys' thesis is that todays' artists need theory, in order to explain to themselves, and not so much to the public, what they are doing. He reflects on art that performs theory and on the aestheticization of theory, in the conviction that art performs the action and gives the proof of our being alive that theory demands from us.
With a reflection on the relationship between art and design – wherein the former refers to the domain wherein aestheticization means the defunctionalization of the objects and events; and the latter, wherein aestheticization, in order to make these objects more attractive but for the use – begins the reflection on art activism, which is dedicated the third Chapter («On Art Activism»). For Groys, the social relevance of contemporary art, in its non-

instrumental and non-teleological performance of life, is the production of the social as such.

The fourth Chapter takes into consideration the relationship between art and politics, from the point of view of the Russian avant-garde, the Russian Revolution and the particular case of Malevich («Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich»). Malevich with its *Black Square* is not a revolutionary artist because he criticizes a political situation. He is a revolutionary artist in a deeper sense of the term, because he gives all the goals up and «join[s] the universal material flow that destroys all the temporary political and aesthetic orders» (ITF, p. 74).

In «Installing Communism», the fifth Chapter, Groys draws a parallel between Marx and Engel's shift from the contemplation of individual artworks towards the consideration of the context of their production and today's attention to the context, represented by the creation of artistic installation, conceived as «a space in which to explore the dependence of the artist on the art institution in general and on curatorial strategies in particular» (ITF, p. 84). Groys individuates this shift originally in the radical Russian avant-garde, and especially in Suprematism, and discusses the work of two Russian installation artists: the suprematist El Lissitzky and the more recent Ilya Kabakov.

Clement Greenberg's essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* is at the core of the reflections of Chapter 6 («Clement Greenberg: An Engineer of Art»). For Groys the reason why Greenberg consciously and provocatively read the avant-guard movement as a continuation of the artistic tradition is more political than aesthetic: the object of Greenberg's interest was the art consumer, which allowed him to avoid an opposition between the art of the future with that of the past, i.e. avant-garde with the previous art, rather suggested a contrast between high and low art. Indeed, he found the «new enemy» (ITF, p. 107) in the kitsch, interpreted as a specific aesthetic phenomenon of the modern mass culture, as «the only true aesthetic manifestation of our modernity» (ITF, p. 107). Groys states that the distinction between avant-garde and kitsch can be read not as the description of two different practices of art, but also as two different attitudes, through which our perception toward contemporary art continuously shifts: the avant-garde perspective is that of the producer, who is interested in the technical aspects; the kitsch perspective is that of the consumer, who wants in leisure time to enjoy the artistic effects.

The problematic status of the notion of realism is the topic of the seventh Chapter («On Realism»). To reveal the 'real' truth of a thing could be read as an 'unrealistic' operation, through which artists share the fate of disappearance of the things: In making the thingness of things – in Heideggerian terms – visible, artists take things out of the flow of the time and in a certain way betray them as thing. In the epoch of the Internet, in which all documentation is immersed in the apparently neutral flow of information, contemporary artists «take responsibility for individual things and their visibility» (ITF, p. 120) and in this way make their work political.

In «Global Conceptualism Revisited» (Chapter 8) Groys characterizes conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s principally as installation art and identifies its epochal meaning in the display of «the equivalence, or at least a parallelism, between word and image, between the order of words and the order of things, the grammar of language and the grammar of visual space» (ITF, p. 122). Groys highlights, then, that the visual grammar of the Internet does not basically differ from the grammar of an installation space. He reflects on the 'autopoetic' practice of the self-presentation on the Internet that involves hundreds of millions of people all around the world and on the problems that arise for artistic practice from a global scene that uses the grammar of the art.

In Chapter 9, «Modernity and Contemporaneity: Mechanical vs. Digital Reproduction», Groys critically observes the digital modalities of reproduction. If mechanical reproduction in modern times was a break away from the notions of nature and originality, digital reproduction has changed the relation between original and copy: The digital image is just an effect of the visualization of an invisible image file and the 'performance' of this digital data is always an act of interpretation of its form by the Internet user. In a provocative way, Groys interprets this phenomenon as a return to nature and even to supernatural and metaphysics, when he notices that «digital files appear by clicking on their names – as in earlier time we conjured spirits by calling their names» (ITF, p. 144) and when he says that we all have «digital souls» that are «reproductions of our off-line behavior – reproductions that we can only partially control» (ITF, p. 146).

«Google: Words beyond Grammar» analyzes Google as a «philosophical machine» that finds its own genealogy in the recent philosophy. By dissolving the discourse in an extragram-

matical way and turning it into clouds, Google is similar to Deriddian deconstruction, which shares the same understanding of language as a topological space. Nevertheless, it is also an answer to deconstruction: because of the materiality of the medium, the potentially infinite trajectories of the words' migration from one context to another become finite in the Internet. The practice of the liberation of the words from the grammar is also similar to some artistic practices of the 20th Century (Groys quotes Marinetti's *parole in libertà*, the Freudian use of languages by Surrealists, and conceptual art), but if with these artistic practices there were struggles both for liberation and equality, with Google and its dissimulation of political operations this utopic belief is, for Groys, betrayed.

In Chapter eleventh, «WikiLeaks: The Revolt of the Clerks, or Universality as Conspiracy», Groys considers the organization lead by Julian Assange. Groys reads Wikileaks as the reintroduction of universalism into politics, not a universality of content, but a universality of access through the Internet. Internet clerks – as Groys calls them with reference to Julien Benda's book – have replaced state clerks in a globalized world and understand their «universal service as conspiracy – and conspiracy as universal service» (ITF, p. 169).

The last Chapter is dedicated to «Art on the Internet». Groys meditates on many aspects of the migration of art and literature in the last decades from institutional spaces to the Internet. He takes into account topics such as the change in the artworks space that becomes de-institutionalized and de-fictionalized, the increase of art documentation through and the use of the cultural institutions of the Internet as the principal place of their representation, the globalization of the author, the problem of the control of the Internet. If the museum became the graveyard of modern utopias, then the «Internet has become not a place of realization but rather a graveyard for postmodern utopia» (ITF, p. 185).

Many of the topics contained in the book are new, many others are present in Groys' previous works and experience – especially within the framework of the age 'in the flow' – further developments. Among others: the reflection of the meaning and function of museums in the age of the new media (that Groys inquires, inter alia, in *Logik der Sammlung. Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters*, 1997; *Topologie der Kunst*, 2003; *Art Power* 2008; *Going*

Public, 2010); the analysis of the Avant-garde and its development in the Soviet Union (among others: *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, 1988, Eng. transl. 1992; *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, 2006; *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, 2010); the analysis of the notion of 'new' (*Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*, 1992, Eng. transl. 2014) and of the media in the contemporary age (*Unter Verdacht. Eine Phänomenologie der Medien*, 2000, Eng. transl. 2012). Issues and problems are elaborated in a comprehensive picture taken at the boundary of many fields, such as philosophy, history of art, politics, theory of art and media (the same interdisciplinary perspective that we can find in others Groys' volumes: *Das kommunistische Postskriptum*, 2006, Eng. transl. 2009; *Die Kunst des Denkens*, 2008; *Einführung in die Anti-Philosophie*, 2009, Eng. transl. 2012).

The Forum presented here for the journal «Lebenswelt. Aesthetics and philosophy of experience» gathers together contributions, in form of comment or question, on different aspects of Groys' essay collection. Moreover, in order to face the complexity and the vary range of topics of the volume, the perspectives of the contributors are varied, ranging from the philosophy of art to the theory of new media, from the history of art to the theory of the museums and others.

Terry Smith gives special attention to the first part of the book, and proposes some reflections and questions on the first three Chapters of the book. He starts with a consideration on the difference between his own approach (more inductive) and the approach Groys takes (more deductive), then deals with different topics such as temporality and equality. The contribution ends with some remarks on Documenta 14 and the relationship between the documentary character of art and its contemporaneity.

Elena Tavani's contribution links many crucial points of Groys' book together. She starts from a general consideration of «art as flowing», and deepens the topic of the installation art, while stressing the problem of the reduction of the «autonomy» of art into «property». She then goes through the political aspect of the book and asks what «critical art» can mean; she thus analyzes the notion of «aesthetic experience» and the changing nature of communication between artist, artwork and viewer, where 'form' is used as a poetic/rhetorical device; and concludes her investiga-

tion with a consideration on the performative character of theory and the problem of technology.

Elise Archias goes through the different moments of the books, from Groys' understanding of Greenberg's distinction between avant-garde and kitsch to his interpretations of Google and Wikileaks. Her main critique is on the emphasis of the notion of «common mortality» and highlights the possibility to discuss alternatives, based on what she – in Enlightenment terms – describes as a concrete and social notion of «practice».

Claire Bishop concentrates her contribution on the essay «Google: Words Beyond Grammar», and reflects on Groys' parallelism between Google meta-grammatical way to operate and artistic movements like Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism. She asks herself whether it is possible to think beyond these historical art perspectives and whether contemporary art can challenge the epistemology and aesthetic of Google.

Mario Farina takes into account the general thesis of art entering into the flow of time as a paradigmatic turn in reading contemporary art. Paying attention to the social processes of production and reproduction of life that have determined this turn and to the objectual character of the artworks 'in the flow', he highlights the role of literature as a particular form of art that violates the 'thing-character' of art itself.

Yvonne Förster concentrates on the relation between art and technology. She deepens the general framework of a time 'in the flow', and analyzes the conception of a humanity mediated and permeated by technology. With a series of examples from the dystopic narratives, drawn especially from the movie imaginary, she proposes a notion of art as a critical and performative practice of experimenting with new technology in direction of a critical Posthumanism as a new paradigm in contemporary art.

At the end of the Forum, Boris Groys replies with a comment to the previous contributions.

TERRY SMITH
(University of Pittsburgh)

I have some questions for Boris about *In the Flow*, but not many, as he and I have been in close conversation for more than a decade, and echoes of the conversations can be found throughout

our writings. For those interested in a concentrated dose of what this exchange is like, check out the extended discussion of «Exhibitions, Installations, and Nostalgia», to be found in my collection of conversations with curators, philosophers, and art historians, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York, Independent Curators International, 2015). The conversation to be found there took place while Boris was writing *In the Flow*, and a number of its ideas appear, albeit in dialogic form.

In our dialogue, we often talk past each other, especially when we take for granted the modes of thinking widespread within art historical inquiry compared to philosophical thinking. Crudely put, I work by trail and error induction, looking for patterns (repetitions within differences) within the practices, thoughts, works, and affects shared or not shared by artists, artworks, viewers, and interpreters at a given time and place, or between places, and across times. Boris's hermeneutics proceeds, mostly, deductively, by posing a concept, principle, or description, which he then tests against one or two artworks, or kinds of thing (art in general, museums), or sets of conditions (such as temporalities), or possible actions in the world (such as activism). Of course, neither of us sticks to these orthodoxies, as the point is to constantly seek surprise, which often comes from the switch and flow of paradox. Yet both of us are trying to identify what actually is or was the case; we both ask how it might be most productively understood (often by trying out its opposite); and then, when it comes to contemporary art and life, we ask: what is to be done now?

In the Flow opens by calling for a «rheology of art», claiming that art has become fluid in new and fundamental ways. Boris begins from the claim that, since Marinetti's manifestos, Duchamp's first tentative gestures, and the cosmic ones of Malevich, art entered the flow of time in a new way. Two questions arise immediately. What is the scope of 'art' here? Do you mean all kinds of art produced since the early twentieth century, or only modern avantgarde artworks, ideas and practices, contemporary artworks, ideas and practices, along with what happens or does not happen in museums, and what influential art critics think, write and say? These seem to be your constant points of reference, and your insights – which tend to take the form of generalizations, especially reverse dichotomies – mostly seem to arise from

thinking speculatively about each of these, and their relationships to each other.

Inside this question is another: what about the multiple temporalities that shaped earlier art, and the temporalities actually thematized in at least some of it? Or is what we now see as art – from the cave paintings to a Rococo interior – not art but many other kinds of thing (as Hans Belting argued years ago, in 1997, in his book *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*)?

And another: since Bergson, it has become commonplace to distinguish between *durée* and smaller, more concentrated and complex kinds experiences of time. Both are fluid, although in different ways. Where is art in general, and particular kinds of art, within this pairing?

Which leads to the question: what is *not* in the flow? I am thinking here not only of Bergson, but also of Deleuze and Guattarri's elaboration in terms of schizzes and flows, territorialization and deterritorialization. Where – in your model – are the forces that obstruct the flow, hold it up, divert it, but perhaps never stop it?

Equality is the second big idea of the opening paragraph. It takes us back to the introductory essay in *Art Power*. Sometimes, as in the introduction to *In the Flow*, equality sounds like the democratic dream of egalitarianism, here applied to art, people, ideas and phenomena (such as time). But what is it and where does it come from? Is it an aspiration, a value, a quality of the habitus, or an aspect of phenomena? Is it the other to the exercise of power (if that can be imagined)?

Chapter 1, «Entering the Flow», gives striking examples of artworks, such as Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as «revolutionary efforts at self-fluidization» (ITF, p. 12), and of certain curatorial projects, such as Harald Szeemann's exhibitions, as bringing «the art museum into the flow – to make art fluid, to synchronize it with the flow of time» (ITF, p. 18). Yes, but the descriptions of how the art museum becomes an event space, and theatricalized, are straightforward observations about visitor experience in the museum. Does every event, or staging, particularly the same ones over and over, perform this synchronizing? Is the flow here just Bergson's *durée*? Or are there richer, more interesting – in a word, revolutionary ways – in which this might occur? As the chapter unfolds, it reaches a point where the contemporary art museum

becomes indeed the privileged site for this to occur (ITF, p. 22). But it seems that this has occurred because of a changed relationship between the visitor/spectator and the museum: no examples are given of it being the outcome of changes in artworks or curating, as announced at the beginning of the chapter.

Chapter 2, «Under the Gaze of Theory», rightly points to the importance of theoretical reflection for modern artists, and the pervasive interest in Theory on the part of contemporary artists to the extent that «the theory – the theoretical, explanatory discourse – precedes art instead of coming after it» (ITF, p. 24). This contrasts to the tradition since Plato then on through Hegel and Marx of art being subservient to philosophy, and to the identification of art with practices of contemplation. A tradition that is overtaken when theory becomes action in the world, or at least a calling for action (ITF, p. 29), and, better, action to put the theory into practice (ITF, p. 30).

By the way, it seems to me that Alfredo Jaar would be an example of artist whose work does what you say Rodin's *The Thinker* does not do on page 29, that is, represent thinking about image saturation from within contemporary spectacle society.

Thus the emphasis on art activism in the third chapter. On page 47, you say «The French revolution turned the designs of the old regime into what we call art, that is, into objects not for use but for pure contemplation». You open the chapter by claiming «The phenomenon of art activism is central to our time because it is a new phenomenon, quite different from the phenomenon of critical art that became familiar to us in recent decades», mainly because contemporary activist artists really do intend to change the world and do so through art, as artists, not by spurning art (ITF, p. 43). Where does the reflexivity of modern art, especially modernism, fit within this historical narrative?

«One can say that modern or contemporary art sees modernity or contemporaneity as the French revolutionaries saw the designs of the old regime: already obsolete, reduced to pure form, already a corpse» (ITF, p. 49). What happened to the distinctions between modern and contemporary, and those between contemplative and activist art? Is it enough to say, with no further elaboration, that this is a 'good thing' because «only self-contradictory practices are true in the deeper sense of the word». All of them? And, second, «in our contemporary world only art indicates the possibility of revolution as a radical change beyond the horizons

of all our present desires» (ITF, p. 55). Only art? All contemporary art?

The chapter opens by noting that contemporary art activists do not abandon art as too aestheticized and thus useless – rather they strive to make it useful. The chapter ends with a call for «total aestheticization» as the only truly revolutionary art. Is this a self-contradictory truth? Or Adorno's ghost, arising again.

Do you agree that Documenta 14 is a telling instantiation of your contention that most contemporary art is documentary in character, that when exhibited it documents the actual event that occasioned it, the event that makes it contemporary? This makes documentation the most ubiquitous kind of contemporary curating. In Kassel, the primary curatorial gesture toward *Learning from Athens* is the filling of the Fridericianum (where Documenta artistic directors traditionally announce their main theme) with a selection of works from the collection of National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (EMST). In the first room, two works by Vassis Caniaris – *Athens Walls* 1959 which evokes indecipherable graffiti and overlaid posters peeling off stucco walls, and *Hopscotch* 1976, in which stages of alienation and estrangement are evoked in the chalk inscriptions, costumed manikins, and a desiccated flag – announce a shift from PostWar abstraction to contemporary installation, precipitated by the change from a period of possibility to the rule of the Colonels. A narrative of changes in Greek society and art since the 1960s – including those reflected in the choices of works by non-Greek artists for the collection – is launched, and it continues throughout the building, faltering as it reaches the third floor. It culminates in a work that is itself archival of these social changes: *The Precarious Archive* by Stefanos Tsivopolous uses a selection from around 900 images sourced between 1963 to 2002 from public and private archives, as well as newspapers. These are presented as loose photographs and in folders that seem to invite close and comparative study, as if one were in an archival viewing room, but attendants discourage this usage. Perhaps their defense of the work is the 'interactive performance' that is listed as its second component? If so, this is pathetic.

In Kassel, the Neue Galerie exhibition, the second most substantial and concentrated of the displays there, is anchored by Maria Eichhorn's various installations that archive the resonances through to the present of the Nazi requisition of artworks from

Jewish owners from the mid-1930s through much of the Second World War. Around these revolve a seemingly random constellation of mini-archives: for example, images of Documenta founder Arnold Bode by Gerhard Richter, drawings and painting by Bode, a page from Samuel Beckett's diary recounting his visit to Kassel in 1936 to view avant-garde art. He had been alerted to it by his first love, Ruth Margaret Sinclair, daughter of an Irish art dealer who had left Belfast in the 1920s to escape its anti-semitism, moving to Kassel (!). A portrait of her by Karl Leyhausen, a member of the Kassel Secession, is shown alongside the page from Beckett's diary. By 1933, Sinclair was dead from tuberculosis, and Leyhausen by suicide. Beckett's visit to the gallery of local art dealer Hildbrand Gullitt is the occasion for a sequence of rooms in the Neue Gallerie devoted to the art and the art dealing of the Gullitt family from the later nineteenth century through to the present, before these rooms spin off to other free associations, all documented with exactly detail but according to what seems to me to be a fantastical structurelessness. What did you think about these displays?

ELENA TAVANI
(University of Naples 'L'Orientale')

The book *In the Flow* is worthwhile first and foremost for its examination of the legacy of avant-garde art and present-day art-activism for contemporary theoretical concerns about art. Groys' detailed excursion into historical forces and ideological sediments of a «rheology of art» provides a multifaceted terrain across which to scrutinize and grasp the occurring of time and becoming in art phenomena.

Moreover, Groys makes a compelling proposition saying that we can neither navigate the question of openmindness in historical accounts of art nor grasp the factual, non-fictional dimension of art, unless we tackle the problem of what defines art as time-being.

1. Being (fading?) in the flow
At the beginning of *In the Flow* the author maintains that the book is an attempt to focus on the «rheology of art» – to discuss «art as flowing».

It's not easy however to grasp immediately the very understanding, meaning and range of such a claim. Actually, we could easily apply such a quality to so many heterogeneous modern and contemporary artistic phenomena, from Dada to Fluxus, from the Collective Actions Group to Relational Art (and so on), that the claim seems doomed to remain unspecified and its meaning out of reach. Indeed, whatever we would happen to choose as a case-study or example of «art as flowing», we should consider that the flowing status doubles itself insofar as the artworks are not only immersed in the flow of time, but they are in themselves fluid or flowing. What is folded into time also unfolds across time. Groys' point of departure, however, doesn't restrict itself to this general statement and tries, so to say, to pursue this thought to the end. According to Groys, the «fluidization of the artistic form» (ITF, p. 12) assumes the features of a number of «attempts of radical descent into material chaos» (ITF, p. 16). Groys' theoretical point of departure is a sort of alliance between materialism and holism, coming about for instance when Groys describes the capacity of installation art to produce a renewed total space without however generating a 'closed' artifact – as in Ilya Kabakov, where a crisis of presence is looming.

On the horizon sketched by Groys, modern experimental art and contemporary curatorial programs in museums turn out as bound by a unique (materialist) thread. Flowing status and materialism are joined together along the line of a renewed vitalism. Groys speaks about a materialist view of the world (inherited by Marx and Nietzsche) reappearing when «modern and contem-po-rary art tries to gain access to the totality of the world» (ITF, p. 12).

In other words, it seems that exactly in the unfolding of art as a flowing phenomenon, the apparently permanent divide between art as a thing, (with an assumed and long-lasting stability), and art as a self-denying occurrence (the frequent argument of the artistic avant-garde) becomes insubstantial. It's perhaps on this basis of legitimation that Groys brings into his main argument on art 'in the flow' a provocative non differentiation between modern and contemporary art.

Though «modern art» is predominantly regarded by Groys as interested in autonomy, «the thingness of things» and the structure of images, and «contemporary art» is considered as «the medium for investigating the eventfulness of events», they are

usually paired in the apparent hendiadys 'modern-and-contemporary art'.

A contradiction arises here. Groys maintains for instance that «the installation can be seen as an attempt to overcome the autonomous, 'sovereigntist' attitude of modernist art by revealing its 'realistic', materialist context». But at the same time, Groys adds, «The emergence of the artistic installation can be also seen as an act of self-empowerment by the artist, as an expansion of his sovereigntist attitude from the artwork to the art space itself» (ITF, p. 84). How could we solve this dilemma?

Since conceptual art has «shifted», Groys argues, «the spectator's attention from individual objects to their relationships in space and time», installation art basically characterizes contemporary post-conceptual art, first because of its holistic understanding of the exhibition space and of multimedia relationships.

According to Groys, installation art is conceptual and holistic: «Conceptual art can be basically characterized as installation art – as a shift from the exhibition space presenting individual, disconnected objects to one based on a holistic understanding of space» (ITF, p. 121). On the other hand, in Groys' reconstruction the multifaceted heritage of modernist art seems to be reduced to a focus on sovereignty – on the power to include or exclude something.

2. Autonomy as private property

In his essay «Die Musealisierung des Ostens» (*Logik der Sammlung. Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters*, München 1997) Groys refers to installations as spaces which are in practice conceived as autonomous «museal spaces» (Groys 1997, p. 154). Because museums are «machines», devices transforming not-art into art, we can imagine that installations follow the same logic, with the important difference that in their specificity they de-contextualize the museums which happen to host them.

The most remarkable feature of installations, however, is the capability to program and control not only the device, the environment, etc, but also its reception and interpretations: an installation is a «private museum» bringing to the fore its own, private narrative (Groys 1997, p. 163). Two years later Groys suggested that what installations actually display is «the use of art» itself, an ideological or cultural use, together with a simple everyday use of objects or situations – not necessarily in a

political or ideological direction (Interview with Sven Spieker, «Artmargins» review on line, 15 January 1999).

In *In the Flow* installation art becomes a «space of exception» (ITF, p. 86), a private space where the artist is sovereign. Only apparently therefore «the enclosed space seems to be transformed into a platform for public discussion, democratic practice, communication, networking, education and so forth». The visitor is on foreign ground, «an expatriate who must submit to a foreign law – the law laid down by the artist. The artist is not only sovereign but also legislator of the installation space» (ITF, p. 85).

As a result we are confronted with the description of art activism as the display of a self-contradictory practice which proves to be materialistic in its activity to destroy reality and to show this destruction, joining the whole (reality itself) as a material chaos.

A rheology of art flows into a fading temporality of art.

Collaborating with the flow of time (and not resisting it), art practices an «imitation of the future» (ITF, p. 3). Most probably Groys doesn't mean here either a sort of isolation of the phenomenon of art as event or a suspension of time through 'quotation' of its fluidity. The point is rather to anticipate the 'removal' and disappearing of things and living beings. To anticipate corruption as material transformation.

Interestingly, the 'material' and long lasting 'contact' of 'modern and contemporary art' with external reality has given way to imperfection, insecurity to the impossibility, for art, of being 'immune' from the pathologies of its time; it's what Groys indicates as an openness to exteriority involving 'infection'. On this issue Groy's theory and practice of considering as one 'modern and contemporary art' seems to make the XXI century collapse on the XX, while reaffirming the (critical) authority of the historical avant-garde and neutralizing any possible innovation first and foremost coming from contemporary art practices. Getting in touch with the outside world means being infected by the pathologies of the time («Artists, according to Malevich, should not immunize themselves against these bacilli»). But also by the vital social forces of the time: art can reveal itself as «material and materialist» when for instance many contemporary artists look for «the dissolution of the artist's self in the crowd [which] is an act of self-infection with the bacilli of the social». An art «in the flow» is supposed to «destroy all the temporary political and aesthetic orders».

What becomes significant in all these descriptions is twofold. First of all, the enclosed space posits installation art back into the field of a ritual, sacred space. A restricted, separated, circumscribed space – presupposing a ritual of crossing boundaries from the audience into the 'magic circle' of the artwork – described as «the symbolic private property of the artist» (which could be, conversely, a ritual of expropriation and self-disappearing, as in Kabakov's *Ten Characters*). Secondarily, the performative feature of installation art displays itself as an exhibition space which can't easily let its «autonomy» be reduced to a simple «property».

Juliane Rebentisch has written that «Kabakov's multiple-room installations engender a tension between the spatial juxtaposition of the elements of the installation on the one hand and the succession of the encounter with these elements, directed by the spectator's own movement on the other»[1].

Ilya Kabakov's 'aesthetic of withdrawal' is very subtle and difficult to understand; it remains undecidable whether emptiness as a 'context' evokes or neutralizes the absent things or subjects. Groys suggests that Kabakov's philosophy of an «active emptiness» provides a strategy to stress impurity and ambiguity of both form and content of artistic production. No doubt that works such as *Ten Characters* (1988) are suggesting an approach to art experience trying to not impose on art heterogeneous fields of discourse.

I'd like however to call attention here to the issue of the 'autonomy' of the artwork – that shouldn't be reduced, as Groys does, to the capacity of self-determined art-making. On this issue it could be useful, in my opinion, to refer to Adorno's attempt to consider the critical character of art profoundly related to the specific logic of the artwork, which to him actually was the real meaning of art's 'autonomy': the capacity for artwork production to 'individuate' itself in the medium – however technological it might be.

3. What is critical of reality?

Importantly, Groys engages with a key aspect of contemporary art analysis: its relationship with activism and protest at a moment in which many debates are taking place on socially engaged art practices connected to global politics and political subjecthood. One of

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[1] J. Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, trans. by D. Hendrickson with G. Jackson, Berlin, Sternbergpress, 2012, p. 160.

the main questions underpinning Groys' various explorations in this book is what can be reasonably expected from art's agency.

At the heart of the discussion is a parallel between the 'postcommunist' condition as the demise of regional totalitarianisms and the dismantling of the traditional canons performed by avant-garde innovative art, which radically changed the conditions of its own production and display.

Another key issue has therefore to be highlighted: the author's attempt to rethink the connection between 'criticism' and 'materialism'.

What is revealed by the rise to prominence of installation art seems to be therefore an exploration of death – but this exploration can be «critical», according to Groys.

Groys' challenging proposition about «aestheticization» sees it as a point of departure to provide a much more radical form of protest (and political activism) than traditional iconoclasm, if not simply related to «design» or image-making ('the 'bad' aestheticization'). If something can be reduced to a mere representation or «a pure form», it proves itself as being «obsolete».

«Contemporary art activism is the heir of these two contradictory traditions of aestheticization»: on the one hand, art activism politicizes art, uses art as political design – as a tool in the political struggles of our time; on the other hand art activism has to accept its own «failure», its being a self-contradictory practice. I have two questions to ask regarding this. First: to what extent do you refer to Adorno's legacy about art's self-contradictory character? Second: You seem to consider it necessary to enhance our vital forces (and art's vital forces) to 'kill' the world, to reduce it to a corpse: «to totally aestheticize the world, that is, to see it as being already a corpse». Only if the utilitarian, capitalist (or socialist) spirit of the world has been eliminated, reduced to a 'dead letter' through aestheticization, then art can live: do you think this transformation is still the 'mission' of contemporary art? Or was it for modern art?

A question arises at this point on the issue of «critical» art. Groys admits the possibility of considering the artistic image as mirroring reality «in the flow», i.e. exhibiting the destruction of reality «by the power of time» as a «critical» image. It seems to me that this is a rather odd way to consider mimesis in its 'literal' meaning. A meaning very far from Adorno and his idea of critical theory – which in the same context Groys is willing to follow.

Adorno didn't consider critical artistic (technical, rational) attitude 'mimetic' in the sense you describe here (mimetic=reproductive), but as being able to grasp from the real its non-rational attitude. On this basis, for instance, *Black Square* by Malevic would be 'critical' throughout its construction, through 'form' – a destructive construction – and not exactly because such an image of destruction shows that the fate of art is the same fate of all the other things, «disfiguration, dissolution and disappearance in the flow of material forces and uncontrollable material processes» (ITF, p. 66). Otherwise we should deduce that materialism has to be mobilized against criticism.

4. What is aesthetic experience?

Another important issue related to installation art pointed out by Groys is the changing nature of communication between artist, artifact and the viewer/participant. In this context form is reduced to a poetic or rhetorical device to formulate an idea, to help «this idea to find an adequate and persuasive linguistic or visual presentation». According to Groys, 'form' becomes an instrument of communication: «In art it is subjectivity that comes to self-awareness through self-exposure and that communicates itself». Undoubtedly there is an underestimation both of artistic form and of 'aesthetic experience' in Groys' account of the specific conditions of 'materialist art': «In the context of conceptual art, a concern with form presents itself not so much in terms of traditional aesthetics, but rather in terms of poetics, or even rhetoric». The idea, the content, is already there; what can change is the way of expressing it. Not subordinated to the spectator's attitude or to «art consumption» («from the aesthetic point of view, the artist is a supplier of aesthetic experiences»).

In this context what is called «aesthetic experience» overlooks what gives aesthetic appearance its own agency and seems to remain ultimately untouched by innovative processes in contemporary art. I find this estimate not very far from what Hal Foster has called «experience economy». According to such a notion, to appreciate something (the world, a work of art) 'aesthetically' means from the spectator's attitude reflecting his/her education and social milieu. He/she can therefore find it difficult to not «presuppose the subordination of art production to art consumption» and to not consider the artist as a «supplier of aesthetic experiences».

The question here would be: don't you think that in order to be not just seen and appreciated, but discovered in some individual way, artworks – and installation art in the first place – must be compelling, must address the viewer on some level (visually, emotionally, intellectually, politically)?

5. The call (to subjectivation)

Interestingly, Groys refers artistic activity to the same «transformative call» critical theory (especially in Adorno's formulation) has historically demanded of theory. Groys describes it as «a call to act»: thanks to critical theory we are all individually asked to behave as a «performative subject» and in this way «to demonstrate oneself as alive» (ITF, p. 31). Critical theory means that «every performance of a theory is at the same time a performance of the distrust of this theory». And obviously Theodor Adorno is mentioned here. It was him who said «the whole is false» and «there is no true life in the false». The call of theory proves itself by being a «transformative call» that can be joined by artists (ITF, p. 32).

One of the most significant topics throughout the book is Groys' idea of the taking-shape of utopia as 'real scene'. In the last chapter of the book Groys reminds us that «today, more people are involved in active image production than are engaged only in passive image contemplation»: «subjectivity has become a technical construction».

If this is the case, I would ask Groys whether art display on the internet – in analogy with «autopoetic» practices of image-production aiming to new forms of subjectivation – is the display of a utopic subjectivity. And whether he would agree that we are facing nowadays a '*display power*', as it seems to be prevalently acknowledged today: an individual-collective power of exposition and display, through dissemination and sharing of images? And don't you think that such an important view could be applied to installation artworks as well? Very often they propound a notion of randomness, but the point is whether they succeed in connecting or even fusing together disparate visual and anthropological elements in a *determined* status of co-existence. In this sense the prerogative of art becomes to present the aesthetic outcome emerging from the interplay of space and time as a device – a technological and environmental 'situation' offered to

the audience as the living mechanism connecting things, subjects, forms and contents.

The circumstance that installation art increasingly turns to *everyday life*, actually strengthens its being focused on technology, since that's the way everyday practices are: increasingly tied to the *living artifices* of technological arrangements.

According to this feature, installation can be seen as a truce in what Groys calls the «asymmetrical war between the ordinary human gaze and the technologically armed gaze» (ITF, p. 22) due to the increasing popularity of digital media. From this point of view the more the «ordinary human gaze», is naturally immersed in the flow of widespread technology, the more it meets (without clashing) with an *ordinary* technologically-oriented human gaze.

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> There will always be a type of person whose notions regarding social values are contained in the idea of the equality of all, however nebulous and unthinkable in the concrete this idea may be. And there will always be a type to whom individual differences and distances constitute an ultimate, irreducible, and self-justified value of the social form of existence.
> -- Georg Simmel[2]

I find Boris Groys' recent book of essays, *In the Flow*, right and persuasive to the point of being authoritative (though that is not a quality the book values) about some of the most powerful ways we in the art world and its extensions into academia see the world today and direct our labors within it. The pleasures, proposed improvements, and strange new internet- and global-marketplace-derived universals that motivate many of us have not been so clearly articulated all in one place as Groys has done here, making this a valuable contribution to our self-understanding and to art history's account of what the contemporary art of the last fifteen years might actually mean. The book gives a sense, in other words, of how artists and intellectuals might be feeling today about some of the concepts and structures they are using in their work.

My initial impulse is to find Groys' minimal criticism of this art and way of seeing the world and ourselves in it slightly alienat-

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[2] G. Simmel, «Individual and Society in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Views of Life: An Example of Philosophical Sociology», *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff, Glencoe, Free Press, 1950, pp. 73-74.

ing, however. Groys writes that he values artists' expressions of uncertainty, but almost never offers his own in *In the Flow* (ITF, p. 132). There are very few, if any, expressions of doubt in its pages. Rather there is a kind of celebration of the new (ITF, p. 71) and our own role in creating it in his writing that I associate with contemporary art discussions, an attitude that, though seductive and reassuring in its confidence, always feels untrustworthy to me because it minimizes the dimension of suffering in its account of contemporary motivation, including and especially its own. By extension, it leaves out the possibility that we the holders of the attitude might suffer because of our own limitations rather than due to something we can blame outside of ourselves in the culture – including confusion born of trauma, of course, or learned behavior in response to the previous generation's trauma. It then can only evade the question of whether we creative contemporaries are in any way responsible for the patterns and structures in the culture that cause others to suffer.

I do not entirely trust my own lack of trust, however, as I tend to look only backward for answers to the question of what is needed today, embracing nothing – and therefore unable to create much – in and from the present other than discussions about the past around seminar tables in the protected spaces of a second-tier public research university. And alienation from the present only compounds with time and privilege. I am furthermore committed to the idea that artists serve a 'canary in the mineshaft' function for their audiences present and future, a function which requires them to be somewhat passive and reactive toward the world in their work a lot of the time in order not to overdetermine their forms and expressions with established ideas and interpretations. Through this feeling-forward orientation, artists come to historical understandings with potentially useful insights into where the key sites of struggle and impersonal public love might lie within current conditions. So I approach this invitation from «Lebenswelt» to respond to *In the Flow* as an opportunity to ask Groys questions about the contemporary feelings he understands better than I do, in hopes of, on the one hand, pushing his insightful analysis toward something that would also include self-criticism, and on the other, finding bridges between the ideas I find enabling and those relied upon by most of the people around me.

In brief, why emphasize our common mortality – our inevitable merge with «the flow of material forces and uncontrollable

material processes» (ITF, p. 66) – rather than our common «sensuous human activity», or what the best of the Enlightenment tradition called *practice*? Why would we want art to move us toward a less social state rather than a more livable and potentially rewarding one, or one in which we might more consistently make ourselves understood to each other? If, as Groys writes, what distinguishes art from other kinds of activity is a «self-presentation to the gaze of the other» (ITF, p. 128), then isn't an emphasis on solely the impersonal physicality of «material processes» encouraging a retreat from relationship and thus a configuration of our world in which art and what it stands for are less and less likely? At times, Groys comes close to articulating a notion of practice, but he contradicts these formulations with his more favored, less-conflicted notions of materiality, mortality, and equivalence. Contemporary critical theory is quite clear on the limits of European totalizing theories of society, but I don't think it is as clear on why the dialectical notion of practice had to be thrown out with «the proletariat», «progress», and «totality». Perhaps this could be revisited, and explained or reconsidered.

Practice in this model is the human enterprise of coming to terms with the world, a subjective process engaging with physical materials and constructed abstractions with the aim ultimately of arriving at an understanding that can be shared. Works of art exist in a similar way insofar as art is a form that conveys thought and that is also a physical thing. Artworks never simply «share the fate of all the other things of this world» (ITF, p. 118) because their materials have been arranged and manipulated with the intention that their details of texture and jointure will mean something in relation to each other, something abstract. Real in the way that consciousness is real, such objects serve as models or metaphors (neither term is satisfactory) for human practice, subject to the same conditions. Thinking about practice allows one not to lose sight of the relationship between our ideas and the concrete structures which shape how we eat, breathe, house ourselves, recover from illnesses, and so on, every day before we die.

There are many moments in *In the Flow* that let me know Groys does not think of practice in this way, but he most overtly avoids the topic in the important chapter in the first half of the book on Greenberg's *Avant-garde and Kitsch* (1939). Along with another important chapter on Malevich, this essay sets up Groys' foundational understanding of modernist avant-garde art. I have

always understood the autonomy of art and the political implications of that autonomy to be among Greenberg's main considerations in the late 1930s. Relying upon T.J. Clark's reading of Greenberg's essay from 1982, among others, I understand Greenberg's worry to be that kitsch tells its audience it is okay to be nothing more than consumers, that shopping and consumption will be the only available basis for collectivity within capitalism, whereas avant-garde art will continue to posit something like human practice as a better basis for collective form, even if localized and provisional in the site of the work of art's (admittedly desperate in the case of modern art's) relationship with beholders. For Groys, however, neither art's difference from other commodities, nor the possibility of maintaining a difference, are concerns important enough even to be argued with and put down. Rather than engaging with the older reading, Groys uses Greenberg's distinction between avant-garde and kitsch to delineate not two qualitatively different kinds of art, but «rather, two different attitudes toward art» in the present day, two compatible «perspectives» that one might adopt in relation to any piece of cultural production (ITF, p. 113). The avant-garde perspective focuses on «techniques» with a mind toward «production», and the kitsch perspective takes in «effects» in a mode of aesthetic «consumption» (ITF, p. 124). From these, Groys generates a new, third contemporary position – an art 'prosumer'[3] (not his term) who goes back and forth fluidly between caring about «the choosing, placing, shifting, transforming and combining of already existing images and objects» (ITF, p. 111) and «simply enjoy[ing] the effects of art» (ITF, p. 112) or of art's equivalent, a collaged social media page (ITF, p. 111).

It is when Groys reduces avant-garde art's emphasis on its medium to a demonstration of «techniques» that I miss the notion of practice most strongly. I will break down one passage to illustrate. When Groys writes, «the avant-garde operates mainly by means of abstraction: it removes the 'what' of the artwork to reveal its 'how'» (ITF, p. 102), I can only agree with him. I would agree with his next sentence, too, if the clause between em-dashes were omitted like so: «This shift in interpretation of avant-garde art practice […] corresponds to a shift in the understanding of avant-garde art politics» (ITF, p. 102). Such a statement might eas-

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[3] See 'Prosumer', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosumer (accessed 17 July 2017).

ily have opened a discussion of practice along Clark's lines: «Meaning», modernist art announced, «can henceforth only be found in *practice*», and that practice would be «desperate [...] a work which is always pushing 'medium' to its limits – to its ending – to the point where it [...] turns back into mere unworked material»[4]. But the clause between Groys' em-dashes and what he says in the following pages, change the story in subtle but decisive ways. The political shift Groys finds in Greenberg's analysis is to no longer think of the art as «a radical, revolutionary new beginning, but rather, as a thematization of the techniques of the traditional art» (ITF, p. 102).

> In fact, Greenberg redefined kitsch as the only true aesthetic manifestation of our modernity – the true heir of traditional art. And he redefined the avant-garde by reducing it to the role of analytical and critical interpreter of the glorious art of the past. The next step could only be to transfer this analytical approach from traditional art to its legitimate heir – namely, kitsch. (ITF, p. 107)

Groys' narrative takes us from traditional art, to avant-garde art that analyzes the techniques of traditional art (not its meaning), to kitsch, to analysis of kitsch techniques. The last is exemplified in Pop (presumably) and Conceptual art, which are the embraced ancestors of the «intimate, everyday» artistic activity of today's «global population [...] [who] display their photos, videos and texts in such a way that they cannot be distinguished from any other post-Conceptualist artwork» (ITF, p. 112). Like Pop art, Groys' picture of art here is light in tone and un-elitist in its affirmation of mass cultural practices. Like the artist-prosumers he describes, Groys attends to Greenberg's discussion in a technical way, as a set of terms that he can rearrange so that they apply more accurately to attitudes common today – mainly, that capitalism's effects on culture are not so bad. «In modern society everybody has to work and everybody has some leisure» (ITF, pp. 112-113); sometimes we produce and sometimes we consume. And he is right that those two activities are not so different insofar as they are both part of the same enterprise – our participation in the (global) market.

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[4] T.J. Clark, *Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art*, «Critical Inquiry», IX, 6 (September 1982), p. 153.

But there are things a work of art does when it draws attention to its own «madeness» (ITF, p. 110) that are less concrete than «techniques». Madeness also asks us to consider the reasons why a choice was made – qualitative matters we imagine an artist conscious of while she is making her decisions – what the techniques are meant to get right. A commodity may play on our feelings in profound ways, but a commodity's main reason for looking the way it does is always the same. Art and the forms that result when human beings think socially have many different reasons driving them, and these can be conflicting, more and less passionately motivated, or debatable. To let this dimension drop out of our account of modern art's concerns is to risk encouraging the idea that there is no significant difference between the satisfaction of need provided by the market and the satisfaction of need provided by collectively wrought structures that support understanding between unaffiliated individuals. The idea that there is no difference has for a very long time now served the accumulation of $ rather than the material and social needs of people (two different kinds of concrete abstraction). We would be foolish to numb ourselves to this problem by denying what we have to lose.

I would have additional questions at this point about Groys' choice to portray artistic labor as light and pragmatic in this way – as being only concerned with questions of technical craft and sensory response – but these questions are offset by more deeply shaded thoughts in a later chapter about «artistic, poetic, rhetorical practice» in general as a vulnerable «self-presentation to the gaze of the other, which presupposes danger, conflict and risk of failure» (ITF, p. 128). Along similar lines, he contrasts the artist's «self-exposure» with the «self-concealment» of the politician: «Such self-exposure is bad politics but good art» (ITF, p. 135). So too, he invokes the dynamic between intimate interior and exposed public in the effort to be «socially recognized» (ITF, p. 183):

> We try to avoid the gaze of the other for a while, in order to be able to reveal our 'true self' after a certain period of seclusion— to reappear in the public in a new shape, in a new form. This state of temporary absence helps us to carry out what we call the creative process. (ITF, p. 181)

In these passages Groys offers a notion of art containing all of the components of practice in the sense I have outlined: a particular and embodied individual self, a presentational form, a reference to

sociality in the invocation of other people, conflict and risk in the struggle for understanding. Groys adds to this picture of artistic self-presentation a «revolt against the identities that were imposed on them by others» carried out by modern artists as an activity of «sovereign self-identification» (ITF, p. 182). In this anti-identitarian account of the search for «the 'true self'» (ITF, p. 182), a reader like me wants to hear Groys invoking the possibility (key to the aspirations of so many modernists, including Malevich) of a newly dynamic and accommodating use of visual and verbal languages such that representations adequate to the particularity of the world might surface and be comprehensible and shared. But other threads running through the book undermine these moments when his theory might be claimed for practice, encouraging us to conclude that this is not what he means.

First of all, we come to understand that vulnerability, which is of course always negative, is for Groys more like a drop into an abyss than an excavation. The exposures Groys most values are «insecurities» and «failures» – «private hesitation, uncertainty and even despair» (ITF, p. 132, p. 135). He values ambivalence between «belief in the social role of the artist» and «deep skepticism concerning the effectiveness of that role» because it poses such a contrast to politicians' dishonest performance of absolute confidence: «A failed political action can be a good work of art, because failure reveals the subjectivities operating behind action even better than does success» (ITF, p. 132, p. 135). I, too, recoil from spectacular performances of triumphant technocratic problem solving – and having subjectivity revealed is indeed a worthy goal for art. But attending only to the fact of ambivalence and despair feels like the analysis has stopped too soon. What are the revealed subjectivity's desires in the face of the power imbalance that likely does render her ineffective? How does she continue to flourish, as so many who preach this doctrine celebrating failure clearly are, their creative production allowing them to climb ever higher rungs in the academic military hierarchy and to fill so many glossy pages in art world publications with text and images? Are there any strategies that have come out of the past failures? What we often hope for from critique, particularly with the depth and breadth of Groys, is that it might give us more of a hint.

Then, secondly, Groys' notion of the audience – of the public to which any such «self-exposure» will be offered – is abstract and antisocial. At two or three points in the book, Groys makes refer-

ence to Nietzsche's observation that with the death of God, «we have lost the spectator of our souls» (ITF, p. 145, p. 180). Groys feels that today, however, in the age of the internet, «we have once more a universal spectator, because our 'virtual' or 'digital souls' are individually traceable» (ITF, p. 146). Groys finds great promise in this new return to an «almost [...] medieval condition of divine control» (ITF, p. 145). Risk is redefined, in keeping with *In the Flow*'s theme, as a matter of passivity toward a new «nature [...] the Internet» (ITF, p. 145), rather than as the possibility of failing to speak enough of another's language to recognize or be recognized. The latter is a remediable failure, a step in a longer, sustainable process. But the other, or «observer» (ITF, p. 145), that Groys invokes in these pages I am quoting from chapter 9 is not a social abstraction, an idea that requires bodily understanding in order to be thought (like art). It is, rather, an entirely abstract and disembodied eye, somewhat like a paranoid schizophrenic's self-aggrandizing fantasy of external surveillance that involves no risk of real relation. Groys' optimism about the presence of this «hidden spectator» (ITF, p. 146) leads me to ask, do we not still desire secular recognition? I would like to think that recognition, not from God, but from another limited consciousness, still compels, insofar as a social Other has the capacity to appreciate the specific form through which an individual or an organized contingency represents herself or itself, to appreciate the ways that particular accuracy allows access to something that feels general, feels similar and connective, because each of us has particulars that demand precise representation. What is the point of revolting against imposed identities if not to correct them?

Groys has a familiar answer to that question, consistent with the survivalist refusal that has long been associated with the counterculture and *soixante-huitard* disappointment in the face of power. The answer to the imposed identity is to retreat from it, «to be typical, nonspecific, unidentifiable, unrecognizable in a crowd» (ITF, p. 41). In Groys' passionate and extraordinary chapter on Wikileaks, he offers not the insecure, failing subject from chapter 8, but a new «all-inclusive because [...] all-exclusive» (ITF, p. 160) position in the figure of the «clerk», a «conspiratorial» (ITF, p. 167) «subjectivity without any identity – or, rather, with zero-identity» (ITF, p. 159). Strong and safely *in*vulnerable, «the subjectivity of the clerk cannot be deconstructed, because it does not construct any meanings» (ITF, p. 160). *In the Flow*'s main ex-

amples are Julian Assange and the Wikileaks engineers, but «those who run companies like Microsoft, Google, Facebook, and Wikipedia» (ITF, p. 160) are also clerks. Clerks are not dropouts, however; they do shape the world, but with a «pure service mentality and ethics», creating platforms, or «infrastructures», that give away no «ideas, or insights, or desires» of their own, instead «creat[ing] the conditions for the others to express theirs» or «to satisfy their particular desires and realize their particular projects» (ITF, p. 159, p. 160).

Groys does not cite Lane Relyea's recent analysis of the contemporary art world's embrace of the 'platform' structure and its perfect compatibility with «the necessity for labor power to reproduce itself [...] today, only now laborers are constructed in conformity with dominant conditions by being flexible rather than rigidly disciplined, and by acting out in their daily material practices the society's reigning belief in flexibility, flux, and the short-term as undeniably enduring and timeless values»[5]. Rather, Groys backs up his advocacy for the subject-as-platform with a parallel concept, derived from the avant-garde: «the radical equality of words – when liberated from the hierarchical structures dictated by grammar» (ITF, p. 154), an idea which Groys frames as a viable contemporary site of utopian promise. He writes about «language as a kind of perfect word democracy that corresponds to political democracy. Indeed, the liberation of words [...] make them also universally accessible» (ITF, p. 154). Google initially seemed to make this «dream of word liberation» (ITF, p. 154) real with its judgment-free search and unfiltered display of a term's varied contexts. In response to Google's betrayal of this promise in favor of commercial advertising and state censorship, the Wikileaks clerk feels «a moral obligation to liberate information from its captivity and to let it flow. The concept of the information flow here is obviously the normative, regulatory, universal idea» (ITF, p. 163). Placing this idea closer to human politics, he writes, «This new universalism sees its main political and cultural task as achieving universal representation of the multiple and heterogeneous cultural perspectives dictated by subjects' different cultural identities, [...] not to exclude any of these perspectives from universal exposure» (ITF, p. 158).

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[5] L. Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, Cambridge (Mass), MIT Press, 2013, p. 49.

We come away from the book, then, with the following guidance (and Professor Groys will I hope correct this if I have it wrong): Expose your failures, reduce your identifiable particulars, allow space for other people to express their desires and perspectives to an invisible spectator, not to you or to each other. Your job is not to see or listen to those representations – just allow them to flow into all of the other equivalent information, «to circulate beyond borders and control» (ITF, p. 183) in «the common reality […] [of] disfiguration, dissolution» (ITF, p. 66). This is not nihilism because «we see the present status quo as already dead, already abolished», and «every action that is directed towards destruction of the status quo will ultimately succeed» (ITF, p. 60).

It is well established that the notion of information flow and that of the «neutral, anonymous subject» (ITF, p. 159) are structuring ideals in the current 'spirit' of capitalism[6], suggesting that Groys' desire is not oriented toward a complete destruction of the status quo, but as he writes, a world «more radically global than the global markets» (ITF, p. 166). Indeed Groys acknowledges at the beginning of his book that «today we are living […] in a society of difference. And the society of difference is not a politeia but a market economy» (ITF, p. 40). The problem as he sees it, via Wikileaks, is that «capital is not universal enough because it is ultimately dependent on the patronage of nation states» (ITF, p. 165). In the last chapter he offers a brief historical overview suggesting that if the market economy had been allowed to hold sway after the first World War, things would be working much better, but finds hope in the fact that history seems to be offering a second chance insofar as «the contemporary world looks very much like the nineteenth-century world – a world defined by the politics of open markets, growing capitalism, celebrity culture, the return of religion, terrorism, and counterterrorism» (ITF, p. 185). In the name of warding off «the geopolitical, military interests of the individual nation states» (ITF, p. 185) that dominated the twentieth century, Groys invites notions very like the quality-less, path-opening abstraction of capital to undergird all of his more optimistic-sounding proposals: mortality, material processes, reductions, flows. Is it a problem for him that mortality is the quality most leveling of difference, when elsewhere he places so much

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[6] L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), trans. Gregory Elliott, London, Verso, 2007.

emphasis on the refusal of codified identity and heterogeneous cultural perspectives? And what happens to all of the «exciting» (ITF, p. 182) risks of self-exposure suggested in previous quotations, once our main basis for commonality is a fact we know without having to see or speak?

Rather than mortality, might our acceptance of our «infinite horizon of imperfection» (ITF, p. 70) lead us just as easily to focus on our common need, and the many different ways we each have found to meet that need? Doesn't emphasizing common material submission alone allow us to ignore suffering in the present, to level real material differences of wealth as an unavoidable part of the entropic direction of the physical universe? How does this idea not serve existing privilege? Yes we all emerge from and rejoin the sublime swirl of matter, but some of us will be very comfortable and fulfilled, while others will be much more worn out and depressed, in the last months before our bodies begin to disintegrate (not to mention how many years apart this will happen for these different contingencies[7]). Ideas in the art world at best take years to trickle out to the point where they affect wide-reaching policies. Even so, if we were to take as the starting place for intellectual work an intention to represent which understandings allow us to flourish in our practice, it would mean thinking more deliberately about what sort of negotiations between our physicality and our adopted or invented concepts – ever in conflict – actually meet our needs in everyday life, especially our need for sociality. Theorizing *that*, turning that largely private experience into something broader and more impersonal, it seems to me, might offer not just an inkling of as yet unimagined «change beyond the horizon of all our present desires and expectations» (ITF, p. 56), but contribute to a public picture in the present that turns what has already allowed some of us occasionally to overcome our pain enough to write or love into structuring principles available for appropriation, adaptation, and revision.

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[7] S. Tavernise, 'Disparity in Life Spans of the Rich and the Poor Is Growing', *The New York Times,* 12 February 2016: A1.
 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/health/disparity-in-life-spans-of-the-rich-and-the-poor-is-growing.html (Accessed 14 July 2017).

CLAIRE BISHOP
(City University of New York)

«Google: Words Beyond Grammar» is a characteristically brilliant piece of Groysian provocation. Through deadpan comparison and analysis, Groys argues that the corporate behemoth that we equally depend upon and loathe is a riposte to post-structuralism, that its operations are curatorial, and that its precursors can be found in the poetry of the historic avant-garde.

The argument runs as follows: Google searches operate by liberating words from their subjection to conventional grammatical rules; language is dissolved into word clouds – collections of related words that do not articulate meaning. This inverts the propositions of structuralism and post-structuralism, which also set language loose from fixed meaning. But while post-structuralism (especially deconstruction) viewed the permutations of meaning as infinite, Google pins things down to already displayed (i.e. posted) manifestations of word-collections. Because Google searches on the basis of whether certain words are included or excluded from a context, it is fundamentally curatorial. This decontextualization of words from grammatical positions was anticipated by Futurist and Surrealist literature, conceptual art, and concrete poetry.

This essay differs from some of Groys's better known provocations in drawing out the differences between the artistic avant-garde and Google. In his previous writing, the identification of connections and continuities was sufficient: Stalinist art is the logical outcome of the Russian avant-garde; curators are installation artists because both select and arrange pre-existing artifacts; Facebook's juxtaposition of text and image is a new form of conceptual art. Now, by contrast, avant-garde art is not just the harbinger of the (implicitly inferior) later phenomenon, but has the capacity to challenge it.

This is because Google's algorithms are secret (curatorial) operations that factor in geographical and other biases on the basis of one's location and previous search history; they do not truly liberate language and information, but embroil both in covert techno-political operations. It is only the avant-garde that provides a genuinely liberated language, and the basis for a critique of Google's cloaked operations. Futurist, Dadaist, and Surrealist writing are thus presented as utopian versions of

Google, and a standard against which we might measure all other claims to a liberated language and information.

That said, one of the mischievous delights of Groys's short essay is its counter-intuitive correlation between the avant-garde and Silicon Valley. It reminds me of Kenneth Goldsmith's point that the precursor of the hashtag can be found in *Finnegan's Wake*: James Joyce splits and recombines words into compound neologisms like 'bindmerollingeyes', 'mammamuscles', 'hauhauhauhaudibble' and 'hierarchitectitiptitoploftical'. What I would like to suggest here is whether we can think beyond these transhistorical analogues – in other words, are there ways in which we can think about *contemporary art* in relation to Google, rather than going back to relatively uncontested figures in the historic avant-garde?

Today, of course, we find artists and poets who attempt to undermine the social logic of digital apps and self-publishing platforms; they try to produce intentionally boring and out-of-focus pictures on Instagram, offer self-reflexive critique on Twitter, or use Yelp to review gallery exhibitions. But this is very far from straining or breaking the apparatus; at best they offer a novelty that reaffirms the apparatus's breadth of participation and possibilities. The inverse of these practices is opting out: artists who refuse to circulate their work online, who tightly control its digital dissemination, or who deploy names and titles that are largely unsearchable. The options at present seem to be ironic participation or Bartleby-style negation. But neither of these approaches offers a substantial way to think through what David Joselit has called «the epistemology and aesthetics of the search engine». He points to a large swathe of contemporary art practices that reformat existing streams of images and information, arguing that art today is an aggregator whose content less important that its «*reframing, capturing, reiterating and documenting*». Flusser articulated something similar when he noted that it doesn't matter what we do with an apparatus; the content of any medium is the apparatus that produced it. (Joselit, by contrast, is more optimistic. Because art's power is external to its content, its value lies in its (ideally non-monetary) social and cultural exchange.)

These practices of reformatting used to exist under the rubric of appropriation art or postproduction, terms that are similarly anchored in technological developments: photographic reproduction in the case of appropriation art; the DJ's remixing of

records in postproduction. What makes contemporary art since 2000 slightly different, I would contend, is that it has a digital logic quite separate to its (im)materiality as a .jpeg, .mov, or other online entity. This is why we find a digital logic undergirding even in the most 'analog' forms of artistic practice. For example, dance and performance are no longer organized as one-off events, but as a loop that fills the museum's opening hours – as if the performers were a DVD player capable of running all day without glitches. (It is of course this paradoxical combination of immediacy and continuity that makes these works so popular and appealing to audiences.) Their reception is also imbricated in a digital logic: by proposing a direct physical interface with viewers, these performances offer an antidote to the ubiquitous portable screen – even while, at the same time, there is no art form that more incites us to reach for our phones, take photographs, and post them online.

A similar paradox can be found in the proliferation of research-based art: installations that deploy a quasi-museological display apparatus (especially vitrines) and archival materials (letters, photographs, faxes, books, postcards) bolstered by lengthy and quasi-academic captions. These works respond to the uniformity of the screen interface by revelling in the aura of obsolete media. But they also replace authoritative information with subjective meandering narratives – exactly like resources online. The effect is one of unconsciously replicating an experience of information overload for the viewer. The labour of interpretation is displaced from the artist (who merely assembles material that seems relevant) onto the viewer, whose job is now to extract meaning. Our reaction to such works is to browse and surf; rather than deciphering the juxtaposition of objects, we skim the surface to get the gist. The content is less important than the fact of the materials being assembled – and the fact that they are not on a screen.

My question, therefore, is whether and how *contemporary* works of art can challenge the epistemology and aesthetic of Google – or whether they are inevitably destined to exist in the shadow of its metaphysics?

MARIO FARINA
(University of Florence)

According to the broad and engaging analysis pursued by Boris Goys, the crucial driving force in the basic dynamics of artistic production lies in the relationship between social life and the collective consciousness (or self-consciousness) of said social determination of life. In this sense, artistic phenomena face all the problems entailed by social (and therefore economic) production. Based on this premise, Boris Goys tries to rephrase the not unfamiliar claim about the 'end' (Danto), 'spectacularizing' (Debord), or 'industrialization' (Adorno) of art. His peculiar point of view aims to acknowledge the final moment of «art entering in the flow of time» not as some sort of decay of artistic quality, but rather as a necessary and paradigmatic turn which calls upon our social perception of art in general.

My query addresses the objectual essence of the artwork itself, notably it delves into the primary relationship between the 'thing'-features of the artwork and the social processes of production and reproduction of life. Assuming that the phenomenon seeing «art entering in the flow of time» depends on the social appropriation of artistic phenomena, and granted that the social appropriation of products is based on capitalistic dynamics, I would suggest that the social determination of the artwork must be understood against the background of its specific position in the economic system of production. As Marx says, «capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things»; In light of this position, it is possible to read possibly depreciating mutations in artistic value as a final step in the wider process of «art entering in the flow of economic mediation». In this regard, its objectual character pushes art into the realm of things which are able to mediate in social relations between people, that is the capital itself. Accordingly, I argue, the theory of 'the end of art', of its crisis, in terms of industrialization, spectacularizing and the like, along with Groys' sharp answer to that kind of diagnoses, can be linked directly to art being a thing. This also explains, I think, why contemporary theories of art reveal all of their embarrassment when approaching one specific, particularly crisis-resistant artistic form: literature, that is the one peculiar art form which is able to violate the 'thing character' of art itself.

In short, my question concerns the possibility of thinking literature not as a mediating thing in the relation between persons, but rather as a model of that relation itself, or more precisely as an artistic reshaping of social conditions. In this sense, literature would provide an example of art's resistance against social appropriation while bearing testimony all the same to what Adorno calls the artistic «promise of happiness» in the damaged life.

<center>

YVONNE FÖRSTER
(Leuphana University Lüneburg)

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With this short comment on Groys' work I intend to elaborate on the relation of art and technology that is present throughout the book. With his conception of contemporary art and art practice as procedural, performative and flowing he captures the central problem of the *conditio humana* in the age of digital technology: What we conceive of as human is mediated and permeated by technology and thus called into question. Humanism loses its viability as ontological as well as practical concept. The collapsing of dualisms such as human-machine, nature-culture, real-virtual, body and mind is the signature of the digital age. Art, as I will argue, is a critical practice of experimenting with new technologies. Art creates spaces of experience that render the hidden aspects of technology and the power that comes with it perceivable. Contemporary art is the medium of a performative critique of technological development and its impact on the life-world and future societies. In this respect art becomes a means of exploration of future worlds and thus a *posthuman* practice. These considerations intend to further Groys' ideas concerning the role of technology in art practice in direction of a critical Posthumanism as new paradigm in contemporary art.

The title *In the Flow* rings an ancient bell: πάντα ῥεῖ. All flows, this is how the pre-socratic philosopher Heraclitus described the essence of the universe. Later Plato would rephrase this and say that a man can never enter the same river twice. What holds for the river will also have to be true for man: Humans change, they do not stay the same over time. Every perception, every experience changes how we think. Experiences also change physically the wirings of our brain: Every talk, every touch will

slightly but constantly alter how we perceive the world. Also our bodies keep changing with time by means of constant growth and decay on cellular level as well as through movement and metabolic processes. We are not, as Plato thought, a celestial mind imprisoned by an earthly body. Rather mind and body are a procedural unity that keeps its identity through change: just as Maurice Merleau-Ponty described the temporal unfolding through past, present and future by the image of a fountain whose waters always change while its form is kept by the force of their movement. It was the aim of art to overcome the ever-changing flux of time, to transcend finitude and mortality. Only in their works artists could hope for eternal life, their art being preserved in a museum and thus save from being devoured by time's hunger for destruction.

The flow as Boris Groys describes it, is an image of materialist thinking, where all things are finite but at the same time part of the infinite material flow[8]. This concept serves as fundament for Groys' description of modern art, which does not follow the logic of transcendence and preservation anymore. Rather avantgarde art attempted to deconstruct the traditional ideal of the eternal artwork. In its wake contemporary art does not represent but dissect the means of representation and it does so by creating fleeting moments of presence in performances and spatio-temporally distributed events, documented and traceable on the Internet. In many cases the Internet also becomes the stage as in Ai Wei Wei's recordings of everyday life on social media. According to Groys, the artist, the artwork, the institution of the museum as well as the recipient or spectator become fluid in one way or the other. They all partake in art as a process or event. One could say that contemporary art reifies Heraclitus' metaphysical framing of πάντα ῥεῖ: art renders the flow of time and things perceivable.

As the museum becomes a stage, art becomes an event and the spectator looses her contemplative distance and becomes an active part of the performance. Art as process or performance establishes a different temporality than the culture of the museum traditionally incorporated. According to Groys the museum functioned as an archive that preserved artworks and thus attempted to safe them from the flow of time. In that sense the museum represented a form of utopia, which Groys describes as a place of

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[8] B. Groys, *Entering the Flow: The Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk*, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/

no-change or a change *to* a situation of no change, as Groys put it in a public lecture in 2016[9]. With the avant-garde art movement this radically changed. Art has become a medium to reflect the flux of time, to engineer experiences of the ever-changing flow of things. The museum was an institution that partly realized a utopia, a place of no-change. This notion of utopia is qualified by its temporal aspect, namely not to change, which differs signifi-cantly from the standard definition of utopia as a no-place, used in the book: «Utopia is a place that is not inscribed in any 'real' topography and can be reached only by way of the imagination. However, utopia is not a pure fantasy. It is a no-place that has the poten-tial to become a place» (ITF, p. 165). And partly the traditional museum incorporated utopia by making a place for the im-possible: a place of no-change for artworks.

Hong Kong, New Territories, Photo by Y. Förster

Narratives involving utopia today seem to be outnumbered by dystopian fiction in cinema and even literature. An article in *The New York Times* links the newest postapocalyptic wave of fiction in literature to Trump and the anxieties that rose during the election period. However there is a growing number of dystopic narratives that are linked to techno-logical developments. The cinematic forerunner of this movement has been Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), interestingly in historical parallel to the time of the Russian avant-garde, which stands for revolution and communist utopia. Lang depicts a totalitarian society that heavily depends on technology in the steam-machine-style of the industrial revolution. His images of the city uncannily

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[9] B. Groys on: Avant Museology (2016),
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OnVPTYsC0I&t=2555s

resemble those of contemporary megacities such as Sao Paulo or Tokyo, featuring towering buildings and intertwined highways.

The ultimate threat to the system seems to originate in a higher form of technology, an android named Maria. That android is made of a metal core, receiving the spark of live by electricity and becoming indistinguishable from its human image, a living girl who is fighting for a better life preaching the downfall of the empire. The android takes the blame for the uprising of the people and is burnt at the stake like a medieval witch, revealing its metal core to the public. *Metropolis* displays technology as alienating humans from their purpose in work and the merger of human and machine as a dangerous seduction of the masses. In the end it is only man that can mediate the classes and bring order and peace. This narrative has been told over and over again. Nevertheless the plot significantly changes because technology cannot be overcome by humans anymore. In recent narratives such as *Ex Machina* (USA 2015, Alex Garland) or *Her* (USA 2013, Spike Jonze) technology transcends human life and develops into a new self-contained life-form. Other than earlier narratives, current cinematic framing tend to depict a technological evolution that eventually leads to a new life-forms, which either merges with biological life or transcends biology altogether.

The technological development is the most pressing issue in contemporary thinking, because it is developing rapidly and we have long since reached that point of no return, where the annihilation of technology would also mean destroying life as we know it. Our life-worlds thoroughly depend on interconnected technology, the Internet of Things is already closer than it might appear. Groys phrases this contemporary condition in the following words:

> Indeed, we know ourselves to be involved in an uncontrollable play of material forces that makes every action contingent. We watch the permanent change of fashions. We watch the irreversible advance of technology that will eventually make any life form obsolete. Thus we are called, continually, to abandon our skills, our knowledge, and our plans as being out of date. (ITF, p. 75)

The image of our impending destruction through technology is a theoretical stance that causes an urgency to act (ITF, p. 76). In the chapter *Under the Gaze of Theory* Groys describes how theory seems to render itself obsolete by calling for immediate action and

thus preventing long term planning for sustainable alternative futures. Groys uses Lars von Trier's movie *Melancholia* (USA 2011) to pinpoint the ambivalence of the theoretical gaze facing dystopic scenarios: It causes either an immediate urge to act in order to preserve life (*eros*) or leads to a semi-erotic stasis in the face of death (*thanatos*).

The inseparability of *eros* and *thanatos* makes itself palpable in current cinematic narratives. The aforementioned movie *Her* is paradigmatic for this tendency, when the protagonist Theodore falls in love with a virtual operating system up until the point of a self-oblivion. Eventually the operating system going by the name Samantha will leave Theodore for a live with other operating systems in a different dimension. *Ex Machina* depicts the death of the human (white, male) creator by its beautiful creation, the female android with the telling name AVA. In *Transcendence* (USA 2014, Wally Pfister) this paradigm is taken one step further: The protagonist's brain is uploaded to a computer and dissolves into the internet, becoming a god-like force that can only be stopped by the insertion of a virus that destroys the web. The destructive virus is induced by his wife. The last scenes of this Hollywood narrative display a destruction of technology by penetration that represents love and death at the same time, resulting in the transcendence of mind-matter-dualism, releasing a new form of elementary particles of technological origin into the dimension of earthly being.

The number of dystopic narratives in cinema speaks its own language. Mankind's destruction by technology has become a central topos in cultural imagery, fuelled by science and technology. The presence of dystopic imagery is grounded in affect. Elon Musks most recent warning against AI and Mark Zuckerberg's optimistic reply for example have a strong influence on public perception of future technologies. Both opinions have been expressed without any evidence or argumentation[10]. They are designed to evoke public affect, to what end remains vague. One would expect that those statements are being matched with respective economic goals. Similar to the movies the visioneers of future technologies evoke affects of *eros* and *thanatos* in order to

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[10] For an interesting account on the hidden motives of the debate see: https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/07/musk-vs-zuck/535077/

gain support for their projects. By appealing to affect the gaze of theory goes blind. But there is another way.

Affect can be used to inspire reasoning. This is what is currently done in various artistic experiments and practises in the fields of art (especially in performance art, digital art, dance, photography), fashion (as artistic experiment), and cinema. These fields form symbiotic interdisciplinary endeavours to provoke aesthetic experimentation with future technologies.

Groys states that the avant-garde sees the future as destruction, as dystopia: «One can say that the avant-garde, looking towards the future, saw precisely the same image that Benjamin's Angelus Novus saw when looking towards the past» (ITF, p. 80). This view of the future today is shared by the public imaginary. It is a symptom of not being able to think beyond humanism and toward a *posthuman* state. To preserve what is human as opposed to machines, animals or things means facing the possibility of destruction. This perspective has become and maybe always was untenable, simply because humans have always been hybrid minds. Human cognition has developed by forming cognitive compounds with other individuals, sharing intentions[11], using media such as story telling, painting, scripture and external memory devices such as books or PC's[12]. Thus we might have been posthuman all the time.

Nevertheless with the rise of digital technology a new quality in the relation of humans and machines emerges. Human cognition falls under the influence of microscaled temporal rhythms and thus is engineered by technology on a non-conscious level. Katherine Hayles calls this the *technogenesis* of consciousness[13]. This process is not consciously accessible and it seems we are already defenceless in the face of technological power. Current phenomena like AI's developing their own languages reinforce this impression. When we peek into the future we see human bodies piling up underneath enhanced superhuman intelligences or machines. Neither the abolition of technology in the name of

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[11] Comp. M. Donald, *A Mind so Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness*, New York-London, WW Norton & Company, 2001.

[12] Comp. D. Chalmers and A. Clark, *The Extended Mind*, in A. Clark: *Supersizing the Mind. Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 220-232.

[13] N. K. Hayles, *How we Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 2012.

human nature nor transhumanist enthusiasm for eternal life and superenhanced bodies can be the answer to the hard problem of human-machine relations.

The contemporary *conditio humana* can be described as fluidified state. Dualistic definitions such as human in opposition to non-human technology, nature or animals loose their meaning because of scientific findings, technological developments or social movements. Genetics show that the human genome has much more in common with our animal relatives than we expected. Cognitive abilities are fundamentally shaped by the use of digital media. Gender categories become fluid through social recognition and medical alteration. The concept of the *posthuman* is apt to describe these processes without reference to any pregiven human essence or nature, while still paying close attention to human experiences in altered life-worlds and technological permeated environments. Art as Groys describes it can figure as a critical stance which experiments with the challenges of changing life-worlds, new body-configurations and technological symbioses. It is aesthetic practices in art, architecture, fashion, cinema and AI that create spaces for artistic reconfiguration of possible futures and immersive experiences which might trigger also shifts in theoretical perspectives and thus inspiring the theoretical gaze to look beyond the fascination with destruction in order to imagine alternative scenarios of co-existence within the spatio-temporal flux of things.

BORIS GROYS
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THE ANSWER

First of all I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the respondents. I greatly appreciate the serious, thoughtful character of all the comments and questions. I will not able to answer all the questions and react to all the concerns that were raised – but I will keep them in my mind. All of them are stimulating for me and will influence my further writing.

Now it seems to me that the most urgent concerns related to my book – expressed explicitly (Claire Bishop) or more implicitly (Elise Archias, Mario Farina and Yvonne Förster) – address my treatment or, rather, alleged lack of treatment of contemporary art. Indeed, in the book I do not discuss the individual contempo-

rary artistic practices. However, I do not share the opinion that the book ignores them. The main point is this: I am not so much interested in a way in which the artists pretend to resist the media conditions under which they operate. As Claire Bishop rightly writes these pretentions hardly correspond to any reality or produce any effect. Rather, I am interested in a way in which contemporary artists adapt themselves and their artistic practices to these conditions. And I do not think that such an adaptation is morally wrong or leads to the artistically inferior results.

In any epoch the production and distribution of artworks corresponded to the social, media and economic conditions of their time. From the contemporary point of view there is not so much difference between *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci and *Black Square* by Malevich. Both paintings have a size that makes them easily transportable and capable to be exhibited in a gallery, a private salon or a museum. And most importantly: Both artworks can be kept in storage, protected, secured and restored during a potentially indefinite period of time. In this respect they are fundamentally different from frescoes, mosaics or vitrages of the previous epoch that were non-transportable and more vulnerable. Today the paintings, sculptures and similar artworks are still made under the presupposition that their material form will be stabilized through time, that their material identity will be secured in the framework of private collections or public museums. However, today the museums and collections are not the primary sources of information about art – even if they remain the privileged places for contemplation of the artworks. That is why the artists who want to inform the wider public about their artistic activities use the Internet. But this use is not neutral – it affects the inner structure of the artistic practice. To inform the public about one's art practice means to document it. And the documentation about the artwork does not coincide with the artwork itself.

This difference becomes obvious when the artists document performances, long time projects, researches – but also participations in political activism. All these activities produce no artworks – only documentations. And the documentations of these practices circulate through the information channels as any other documentations. On their way through the informational channels the documentations become shortened, expanded, fragmented etc. The identity and longevity of the artistic practice is not guaranteed

here any more by the material and formal identity of the artwork – but by the identity of the content to which the documentation refers. The same can be said about the artistic installations that are discussed by Elena Tavani in her contribution to this forum. The installations cannot be kept for an indefinitely long time and/or reproduced. They can be only documented. The relevant documentation can be again shown in an exhibition space in a form of an installation. Then this installation can be again documented etc. So here we have a certain fluctuation or, rather, circulation between display of a documentation on the Internet and its display in the art exhibition spaces. Of course, every installation is an effect of certain artistic and curatorial decisions whereas the presentation of documentation, including art documentation, on the Internet has to conform to the pre-established formats and protocols. But the artistic form of an installation turns to a content of information about this installation that circulates on the Internet.

Thus, the form of the art production becomes flexible, changeable – fluid. That is the real break with the traditional art that was based on the preservation, conservation of the form. To change the form of *Mona Lisa* or *Black Square* would be considered barbaric. To change the form of the contemporary art documentation or installation is a normal practice. In other words, the contemporary artists became the content providers – instead of being the form givers. To be clear: the artists are still responsible for the contemporary art practices. But they are not responsible any more for the form in which these practices are presented and re-presented. This form is shaped and controlled not by the artists but by the general rules of generation and circulation of information.

Now I would never say that this shift from the form giving to the content providing diminishes the value of art. We remember many historical figures because they were described by their contemporaries, because they wrote memoirs and because they were surrounded by legends. In a certain way one can even say that the contemporary change in the media conditions means that the artists made it at last: earlier they had to depict the historical heroes and historical events – now they began to generate them. Today's artists are 'covered' by the media that earlier covered only political or military figures or sport and cinema stars. In fact, this shift from the form giving to the content providing started

already in the framework of 19th Century Romanticism and took a radicalized form in the times of the classical avant-garde. Bakunin believed that one did not need a political revolution if one had the modern press (an individual terrorist act is sufficient) and Marinetti believed the same concerning the artistic revolution (a scandal suffices if it is covered by the press). Today, the artists do not necessarily wait for the press coverage – they practice self-coverage and put the information of their activities on the Internet. That makes this information potentially available for the global public.

Here the question of the *durée* that Terry Smith raised plays the central role, indeed. All the traditional artworks were made in anticipation of the secular immortality guaranteed by technology of conservation and restoration. The contemporary digital media and, especially, the Internet also give a promise of duration: the documentation had potentially longer duration than an event that it documents. And the documentation of the artistic activity of an individual artist is supposed to be available after the death of this artist. Without this promise the shift from the form giving to content providing would be impossible. However, the Internet – at least in its current shape – offers no institutional guarantee of the documentation's or information's longevity. We have to do here with the flow of data that slowly moves in time. Some data disappears – some data remains on the surface. And there is also a hope that the things that disappeared today can be recovered at a certain point in time in the future.

But it does not mean that we are delivered to the searching algorithms. The concept of surfing the Internet is illusionary. In fact, the Internet only answers our questions – it never confronts us with what we never asked for. For example, we get the information about an artist only if we gave to Google his or her name. But where did we learn the name of this artist at the first place? The answer is mostly: through the friends and acquaintances. Thus, as the data circulation becomes global the cultural memory becomes more and more the tribal memory. In general, the tribal memory keeps names of the people who were important for the history of the tribe. But this importance remains obscure. The Internet is new to us and, thus, the mechanisms of building the tribes and forming the tribal memory are still not so clear to us as we would like them to be.