

July 2013

What is The Time of Contemporary Art?

Rancière Jacques

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Recommended Citation

Jacques, Rancière. 2013. "What is The Time of Contemporary Art?." *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 33, (4): pp.173-179. <https://tsla.researchcommons.org/journal/vol33/iss4/25>

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何谓当代艺术的时间？

雅克·朗西埃

摘要:与其拒斥艺术及政治的现代主义辉煌时代或说乌托邦时代,而拥抱当下这个后现代主义的放逐时代及其形形色色的拙劣模仿,似乎还不如区分当代性与它自身时间之关系的两种不同方式更有意义。在塔特林或维尔托夫的时代,艺术的当代性到底是什么意思?这对身处二十一世纪之初的艺术家们意味着什么?“当代艺术”的这两种形式如何处置时间,如何处置时间与空间的关系?时间-空间关系如何与艺术-人生关系交结在一起?本文借以集中讨论这些论题的当代艺术作品,再现了当代这个录像时代或摄影空间里的资本主义过程。最后,本文对工业化的荒漠化与艺术新空间的创立之间的关系提出质疑。

关键词:艺术 现代性 当代性 时间 空间

作者简介:雅克·朗西埃,1969年起在巴黎第八大学执教,至2000年作为哲学教授荣退,并任多所美国大学访问教授。他的研究领域包括解放政治学,美学,以及美学与政治之关系;朗西埃教授著作等身,包括《美学政治学》,《图像的未来》,《文学政治学》,《解放了的观者》以及《感性审美:艺术之美学体制的场景》等。电子邮箱:ranciere@gmail.com

Title: What is the Time of Contemporary Art?

Abstract: Instead of opposing the glorious - or utopian - age of artistic and political modernism to the disenchanted age and the parodic forms of contemporary postmodernism, it seems more fruitful to distinguish between two ways of being contemporary to its own time. What did it mean for art to be contemporary in the age of Tatlin or Vertov? What does it mean for the artists of the beginning of the 21st century? How does each of those two forms of “contemporary art” deal with time and with the relation of time to space? How does that relation between time and space tie up with a different form of relation between art and life? This text addresses those issues by focusing on some contemporary works that restage the contemporary process of capitalism in the time of the video or the space of the photographic exhibition. It ends with an interrogation about the relation between the industrial desertification and the creation of new spaces for art.

Key words: art modernity contemporariness time space.

Author: Jacques Rancière is Emeritus Professor at the University of Paris VIII, where he taught philosophy from 1969 to 2000, and visiting professor in several American universities. His work deals with emancipatory politics, aesthetics and the relationship between aesthetics and politics. He is the author of numerous books, including notably: *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *The Future of The Image*, *The Politics of Literature*, *The Emancipated Spectator* and *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Email: ranciere@gmail.com

The title of my talk tries to link two questions about time. What is the time of contemporary art? This means: how can we characterize the time within which contemporary art is produced and exhibited? How does contemporary art take place in this time? How far does it adhere to it, follow it or reflect it? But it also means: how does contemporary art deal with time as both a component of the work of art itself and a form of its exhibition? At the meeting point of those two issues, a third question pops up: what does “contemporary” mean in general? And what does it mean in the case of art? I will illustrate my investigation with some works produced

during the last ten years. It should be clear that I chose them for their relevance to my questions, and not all to make them models of good art.

I'll start with a work that was presented six years ago at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool within the framework of an exhibition called *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (Image 1). As is well known, this work by Ai Wei Wei is a replica of the famous Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. Tatlin's tower was conceived both as a functional building and as a monument raised high in the sky, an act of faith in the socialist future. It actually remained an act of faith since it was never built (Image 2). Ai Wei Wei's work *Working Progress* turns it into a candlelight standing on a platform on the water. It is easy then to see it as a parody, showing us what the great anticipations of the future have become in a time when everything has become as liquid as the water on which it is floating. This work may thus seem to illustrate the contrast of two times: modern time, animated by the belief in a new world carried by the development of the old world itself; postmodern time, characterized as a time which is no more oriented by any anticipated future, a time of disenchantment and derision regarding the great endeavours and expectations of yesteryear. But this way of thinking about the contemporary, the modern and the postmodern is a bit too simplistic. If we want to go further, we have to leave aside for a moment the designations "modern" and "postmodern" to ask the question: how is each of these works contemporary with its own time? What is, for each of them, the relation between their being – artistic and their being – contemporary?

As regards Tatlin's monument, it is clear that its ambition was not to be "modern art". It was to both express and construct a new age, an age in which art was no more the production of artworks destined to a specific kind of enjoyment but the creation of new forms of collective life. Being "contemporary" thus meant much more than adhering to the spirit of its time. It meant a twofold move in the very idea of art. One has easily characterized one aspect: art had to get out of its specific space, to become a form of life. But this becoming – life had another condition: art must stop to be a definite kind of art – painting, sculpture, theatre, etc. It had to become art in general. This move, however, was still thought within the paradigm given by a specific art: architecture, seen as the art absorbing all the arts and giving them the twofold function, which had been summed up in two words by the thinkers of the Arts and Crafts movement: sheltering life and expressing it. Now in the case of Tatlin's art, this architecture is supposed to be more than the construction of buildings in space. It is an architecture of time, or the architecture of a world in which time and space are one and the same reality of the "new." This unity was expressed by the oblique lines of the Monument. As is well known, obliqueness was the main characteristic of Soviet avant – garde art at that time. We find it as well in a functional project such as the *Lenin's tribune* (Image 3), in abstract forms like El Lissitzky's *prouns* ^① (Image 4) or in representations of ordinary life such as Rodtchenko's photographs (Image 5). The oblique line symbolized a world in which the spatial metaphor of the high and the low should disappear along with social hierarchy. But it also expressed a space that had become time – a space of socialism identical with the space of aeroplanes and skyscrapers – a space driven by the forward movement of time, of a time, so to say, ahead of itself.

We can now understand a little more clearly what is at issue in the "contemporary" replication of Tatlin's monument. It is not merely a matter of derision of lost ideals. It is a redistribution of the relations between art and life, new and old, time and space. Contemporary artists may make fun of modernist illusions, but contemporary art had retained and consolidated one main feature of the art – become – life of the 1920s. It is art in general. Contemporary art to – day is not the generic name under which would be gathered diverse arts such as painting, sculpture, music or cinema. Contemporary art is the art of the indistinction of arts. Pan Gongkai's work presented in the Chinese pavilion at the last biennale in Venice took up the old tradition of Chinese

painting, based not only on its subjects and techniques but on its philosophical principles (Image 6). Nevertheless this “traditional painting” was turned into a contemporary installation that the spectators saw by walking inside a specific architectural space, a tunnel when they could see the snow “fall” onto the lotus and feel the dampness of the atmosphere. Our “contemporary art” is faithful to the time of the revolutionary avant-gardes at least on this crucial point of the indistinction of arts. What makes the difference then is not a matter of belief or unbelief. It is a question of distribution of times and spaces. Our contemporary art has retained from the art of the 1920s the model of the architectural fusion of arts, as it creates specific spaces by combining the techniques and resources of architecture, painting, photography, sculpture, film, video, new media and so on. But this “architecture” is no more destined to construct a new age and a new form of temporality; it is not destined to shelter or symbolize life. It is destined to be walked through and seen in spaces specifically devoted to art. The art of the fusion of the arts is no more an art destined to its own disappearance, to its transformation into forms of life. It has become a specific art. But the form and space of exhibition of this new art cannot be simply equated with the old forms and spaces of exhibition of art. On the one hand the “new” Tatlin’s tower occupies a space which is the negation of its original. On the other hand it makes this space a historical space, a space where art both questions and retains its own past, a space of conflation of times and spaces, which also means a form of questioning of our present.

To understand this characteristic of “our” contemporary art, in contrast with that of Tatlin’s time, I propose that we look at some images whose relation to time and to the historical evolution is less obvious. Here are some photographs from a series made by the German artist Frank Breuer (Images 7 and 8). I show them as individual works. But they normally take on the form of a photographic installation occupying a whole space. Our “contemporary art” is faithful to that of yesterday on this point: space is not the place where artworks are exhibited but the place that they construct as a process. The first time I saw them, in the context of a photographic festival, those coloured rectangles were hung in an old chapel and at first sight they seemed to be mere abstract forms. But when you got closer, their identity became clear: they are containers, photographed in one of the European harbours which are at the centre of globalised trade, namely Rotterdam. If Ai’s *Working Progress* reminded us of the past of the Russian communist project, those containers offer the contemporary illustration of the Marxist statement about the disappearance of work in its product. In that sense they are filled with time, with the time of exploited work made invisible. This demonstration of invisibility was completed by two other series: a series of smooth and blind surfaces of warehouses and a series of logos. Tatlin’s contemporaries tried to project space into time. Here, on the contrary, time is shown to be sealed again in space. This arrangement of blind fragments of time can itself be seen from two perspectives: it may appear as mere melancholy. But it may also appear as a dialogical construction, using the space of the solitude of those rectangles, to question the distribution of times and spaces, and the distribution of forms of visibility and invisibility that constitute the present of our world.

This way of using the spatial distribution of images as a form a dialogical construction which is characteristic of contemporary art often meets the objection that those demonstrations don’t demonstrate anything and must call words to achieve the task that they pretend to achieve. I think it is more fruitful to think of this relation between the spatial, the visual and the verbal with respect to the “contemporary art” of Tatlin’s time. In that time, the artists wanted to reduce words, images and movements to one and the same dynamic reality. This is what appears on these two posters made in 1928 by two Soviet artists, the Stenberg brothers, for Dziga Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera* (Image 9). The artists treat words as graphic forms and those graphic forms as spirals in movement. And Vertov himself proudly announced that his film was a new experiment, a film made of pure visual movements, without any word. Art then was considered as the creation of a global

new sensorium. It is that pretension that has been abandoned by the art of to – day. Its spaces and times, its words, forms and movements may still work as experimental dispositifs but those experimental dispositifs are not the sensory forms of a new world, they are dispositifs destined to investigate, analyze and possibly criticize the forms of relations that constitute the “normal” or the “consensual” landscape of our world, the normal way of our time.

To make this point, I wish to spell out what consensus means for me. The word consensus became prominent in Europe at the end of The XXth century to express the idea that conservatives and socialists were drawing closer to each other as they agreed on the main point of the political agenda: adapting the economies and the social structures of their countries to the reality of global capitalism. Now this agreement on the measures to be taken was itself predicated on a more radical agreement; an agreement on the very idea of an inescapable historical necessity; the idea that there is only one time and that this time is oriented by an inner necessity. The agreement then is an agreement on a “sense of history”: a *sense*, this means three things at once. It is a direction, an orientation of time; but it is also the meaning of that orientation, a form of intelligibility; but it is also a feeling, something that imposes itself in our concrete experience. This is what *consensus* means: what you feel is in accordance with the way things are and the way they can be thought as a rational sequence of causes and effects. This is the way domination functions: by making us feel and think that there is a unique reality, a unique direction of time, by enclosing our experience in a framework that makes everything appear evident and inescapable. From that idea of consensus, we can deduce what a dissensus means. Dissensus is the operation that breaks through that evidence by altering that relation between what we feel and the sense that can be made of it, by inventing new forms of presentation of things, new modes of relations between the ways of showing the given, of naming it and of making sense of it, and finally by splitting time, by introducing several times in the same time.

This can be illustrated by the work of an artist who also spent a lot of time photographing or filming containers, but set out, so to say, to open those containers and disclose the time sealed in them by following their journey. The American artist Allan Sekula used photographic installations, books and films to trace that journey. His work can be called dissensual as it precisely upsets the forms of construction of space and time within which we perceive the materiality of our world to – day. Two main words structure that perception: globalisation and dematerialisation. Globalisation conveys the perception of a world entirely homogeneous and governed by an inescapable historical necessity. Dematerialisation conveys the idea that the products and the forces of capitalist production are getting more and more immaterial, that time is now reduced to a present of overall and immediate immaterial connection, and that the social relations and the forms of our lived world themselves are becoming more and more aerial or liquid. This description of our world has become dominant not only in the official discourse but also in the view of critical sociologists or revolutionary political philosophers and activists who equate this dematerialisation with the destruction of capitalist property and the construction of the new communist world of collective intelligence. Allan Sekula’s films or photographic installations work as a material refutation of this construction of the time and space of contemporary capitalism and contemporary life. They show us that the abstract coloured volumes of the containers enclose the reality of capitalist production to – day: solid objects, machines and even sometimes factories which go from one point of the world to another not in the instantaneous time of Internet connection but in the long time of sea travel. Here are for instance images taken in the harbour of Los Angeles (Images 10 and 11): what the cranes are putting into the containers are the elements of a factory that has been dismantled in California and will cross the sea before being rebuilt in China (Image 12). Dissensus there does not only consist in revealing the reality hidden by the dominant discourse. It consists in reframing the visibility of our physical world: reframing the temporality and the visibility

of the sea – making it no more the place of yesteryear business or adventures and of contemporary tourism but the modern way of modern business. It consists in pitting against the overwhelming metaphor of a “liquid” world the artistic device that consists in materializing the metaphorical, treating it at face value.^② This is, I think, an interesting feature in the development of contemporary art. Forty years ago, conceptual artists showed their opposition to the law of the market by producing immaterial works, works that could not be sold on the Art market. It transpires as though art now inverted its tactic and used its material power to refute the dominant fantasy of a world that would have become entirely immaterial.

Again it is not a question of simply opposing material reality to fantasies. Instead, it is a question of contesting the border that the consensual order tends to trace by constantly opposing the hard constraints of reality to the wishes and fictions of happier worlds. The problem is not to oppose reality to fiction. Fiction is not the dream of imaginary worlds. Fiction in general is the operation that connects modes of presentation of things, forms of linkage of events and modes of intelligibility that make sense of those things and events. In that sense, there is fiction wherever a sense of reality has to be produced, so that the contradiction does not take place between reality and fiction; it takes place between several senses of reality. From that point of view, we can distinguish three ways of thinking the “sense of reality” characterizing art. There is the representative tradition in which the rules of fiction define a specific realm different from the usual ways of producing reality; there is the modernist practice of the time of Tatlin when the very opposition of fiction and reality vanishes, along with the separation of art and life, in the reign of form and movement; and there is the contemporary practice which tends to institute a confrontation between several senses of reality. This is the reason why two artistic practices have become prominent in contemporary art: installation and video art – the spatial practice of confrontation of visual forms which can be differently assembled to make diverse senses of reality and the temporal form staging the multiplicity of temporalities, the multiple forms of presence of time belonging to a time. The case of video art and video installations is peculiarly significant in this respect. The point is that the space of exhibition which was “normally” devoted to the presentation of the art of space has increasingly been invaded for the last decades by a new form of the art of time, as though the visible to – day could only be perceived by being temporalized, by becoming an object of narration and conflation of narrations.

To analyze this aspect, I would like us to look at a video film that was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2003 by the Taiwanese artist Chen Chieh – Jen, and this film called *Factory* also deals with the time of work and with the erasing of that time (Projection). The film is constructed as the conflation of several times and several ways of showing time. It starts with the silence of the deserted garment factory brutally closed several years ago but still cluttered by the chaos of a lot of equipment and furniture left on the spot, frozen in time. In that space the artist has mixed three times. There is the time of the concrete sewing process as it is performed by two former workers that the artist has hired and to whom he has asked to take up their work amidst a setting of hired sewing – machines. And there is the time of Capital which is itself a dual time: the time of the deserted factory in which the two women stand as silent statues and the time of the living factory, showed by an old propaganda documentary. Now what is interesting is that those three different times are expressed by three different forms of visibility: the black and white propaganda film used the old documentary fashion of the overview of a non – problematic reality (Image 13) ; in contrast, the workers taking up the sewing process are deliberately showed as playing their role, in the style of a fiction film, with many close – ups, destined to emphasize their gestures and their attention to what they are doing (Image 14) . This over – expressivity makes another contrast with the theatrical filming of the deserted stage, of the two silent and solemn women and of those forms bent on the sewing – machines, looking like the sleeping servants of the castle of a princess struck by the magic wand of a fairy. In this way, what was proposed to the eyes of the spectators in the biennale was a conflation

of times which was also a conflation of fictions. The consensual way of dealing with globalisation and its effects is to separate the present from the past – whether it be on the side of progress or on the side of nostalgia. The dissensual way makes the past exist in the present, haunt the present as both the abstract law of a system and the scar of concrete experience.

But there is something more about such conflations of times and spaces: those works about unachieved monuments, smooth containers or warehouses, closed factories used for films or dismantled factories shipping across the oceans are increasingly presented in disused arsenals, rope – making factories, warehouses, spinning – mills, flour – mills or breweries. Moreover they are increasingly made in such places deserted by industry. “The Real Thing” took place in a prestigious contemporary art museum, built in one of those historical centres of shipping that went into decline with the process of containerisation. In the same way, many industrial wastelands became museums or art places in the last decades. The desertification of workplaces then is not simply an object for the fictions and the dispositifs of contemporary art; it also becomes a condition of the development of this art itself. As this art set out to directly create spatial environments and devices instead of works to be hung on gallery walls, it has had more and more need of space. Now, space is something our world is continually freeing up as it makes disused factories, warehouses and yards available for art to deploy its devices questioning, among other things, the disappearance or rather the exile of industrial labor. There was a time when it was said that industry was taking the place of art. But now we witness the opposite: art thrives on the ruins of industry, and industrial wastelands are turned into cultural areas.

Now this complex relation between the content of contemporary artistic fictions and the space of their deployment is made even more intricate if we consider the temporal mode of its exhibition. It has often been noted that contemporary art had been “biennalized” during the last twenty years. But as there are now biennials, succeeding one another all around the world, it is clear that a biennial designates not so much a form of periodicity as it designates a way of occupying the free spaces of contemporary art. A biennial is not only a huge space where it is impossible to see all the works occupying the disused factories or warehouses. It is also a space in which time is distorted in two ways: on the one hand it is distorted by the loops of so many video works which oppose their repetitive time, a time of *hantise*,^③ to the normal flood of time and to the usual chains of causes and effects. On the other hand, the time needed to see all those video works by far exceeds the time of opening the exhibition. It transpires as though this excess were not only contingent, as if it marked the heterogeneity of the time of art with respect to the time of work and business. It would be interesting to consider from that point of view the video installation of Christian Marclay presented at the last Venice biennial. *The Clock* is a twenty – four – hour – long compilation of 3000 movie clips that feature the time of day, edited so that they match up with real time. This work not only is homage to cinema and to the capacity of cinema of making the time of fiction coincide with the unrolling of the time of the clocks but also can work as the new utopia of art. Art does not pretend any more to construct the forms of the future. Rather, it pretends to construct a different present, a time radically at odds with the time of the market as it surpasses the measure of any working day.

Notes

①The word “proun” is an untranslatable Russian abbreviation, which means “Projects for the Confirmation of the New”. El Lissitzky’s *prouns* are abstract forms that are destined to frame a new sensory world instead of being seen as artworks.

②The metaphor that describes our world as a “liquid world” is notably in the influential texts of Zygmunt Bauman.

③Here the French word “*hantise*” means the fact of being haunted, originally by a ghost, then by a feeling, a memory, an obsession, etc.

图例 [Images]



Image 1
Ai Wei Wei: *Working Progress*



Image 2
Tatlin: *Tower*

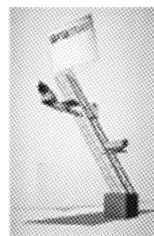


Image 3
Lenin's Tribune

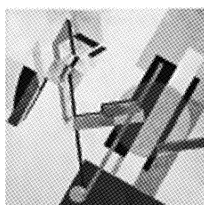


Image 4
Lissitzky: *Prouns*



Image 5
photo by Rodchenko



Image 6
work by Pan Gongkai



Image 7
Frank Brueyer: *Containers 1*

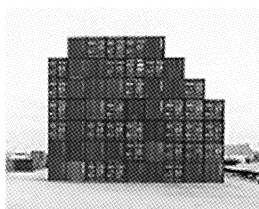


Image 8
Frank Brueyer: *Containers 2*



Image 9
Vertov: *Man with a Movie Camera*

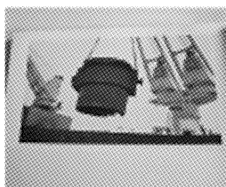


Image 10
work by Allan Sekula 1

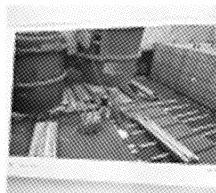


Image 11
work by Allan Sekula 2

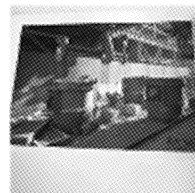


Image 12
work by Allan Sekula 3



Image 13
Chen Chieh-Jen: *Factory 1*

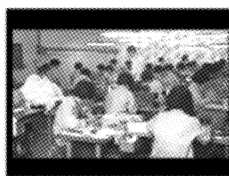


Image 14
Chen Chieh-Jen: *Factory 2*