

# Where is Art?

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From a premodern European vantage point, questions concerning the ontology or location of art were empty and unnecessary. Art was largely configured for prescriptive orders of power. These orders—the religion and the state reciprocally—provided meaning, value, and access to art. They also helped to shape and define the content of works of art. Although there were always spaces of equivocation and contestation, the extent to which even these were determined is clearer in retrospect. In time, Western art would begin to transform in tandem with a series of radical recalibrations of the nature of relationships between the individual and society. From an Enlightenment perspective, such contours are constraints. From a contemporary perspective, the situation is however considerably more complex.

Today, an experience of a work of art is not necessarily tied to a single object, location, time, or event. Indeed, some works of art can be accessed in multiple ways—in person, online, across multiple versions, or as a complex aggregate of very different materializations and modes of delivery. Even the word *accessed* is contentious, a noun-to-verb term that in the digital age has usurped the more amenable and still anthropomorphic *experienced*. Although the material and spatial expansion of art is far from a novel idea, the nature and implications of this expansion for twenty-first century artists are exigent if only for the velocity and extent to which they have been exerted. Setting aside the clichéd use of the word *unprecedented* across our present moment as a descriptor for everything from pandemics to populism to left- and right-wing radicalism, it is well to remember that the significance of exceptional circumstances is found in ways in which they reveal and extend upon pre-existing structures and conditions. What then, are the new, renewed, and emerging conceptions of artistic production, reception, and circulation? How are they to be understood and experienced in relation to multiple and intersecting temporalities, distributed materializations, digital reproducibility, and the dissolution of physical space?

At a time in which radically divergent world views are feeding progressively unstable political and social realities, contemporary art is also undergoing a number of long overdue

re-evaluations. For its detractors, the contemporary artworld is underscored by an unsustainable addiction to speculative capital, ever-tightening hype cycles (aka fashion), precarious labor, and an insatiable appetite for freshly-minted-emerging talent with requisite institutional or culturally sanctioned credentials. For others, contemporary art remains an exciting and dynamic realm within which to creatively speculate upon the conditions of our present moment, to imagine new futures, or to rethink the past. Against a highly contested political backdrop, the gravity of the precarity and unsustainability of the contemporary artworld has been laid bare for many artists by the effects of a global pandemic, a sense of climate emergency, and a series of backlashes and reckonings centered on race, gender, and power. Although such frenetic and confusing conditions render many powerless and dazed, there are still artists who feel it is possible to imagine the world anew. It is in this spirit that we seek to repurpose the twentieth century problem “what is art?” to consider *where* and *when* art is understood, situated in the twenty-first century.

### **So, how did we get here?**

From the late twentieth century onward—if we momentarily set aside a series of historical precedents beyond the scope of this book—many artists began to trade medium-specific categorizations and the production of discrete distributable objects for a reactionary emphasis upon the significance of site, event, performance, porosity, and relationality. A work of art was now less likely to be regarded as materially fixed in space and time or in an idealized sequestration from the outside world. Since at least the early twenty-first century, works of art have become increasingly accepted as open to continual transformation and recoding across multiple versions, locations, times, and even hypothetically infinite materializations. The condition of the proliferation of the work of art is no longer just an act of destabilization to escape its commodity status, it is a natural consequence of the iterative nature of digital technologies. Unsurprisingly, these marked shifts have also introduced a series of challenges for the interpretation, critique, and evaluation of art. These challenges require new ways—be they expanded, qualitative, paradigmatically shifted, or a combination of these—to rethink aesthetics, historical malleability, and the distributive relationships that collectively sustain but do not delimit or define contemporary art.

Beginning with Dada and developing in earnest since the Protest Era of the 1960s and '70s, artists and curators have been skeptical of the presumed objectivity and neutrality of the

gallery space—metonymically (and with mild sarcasm) referred to as the “white cube.” This assumption is traceable to the late nineteenth-century, the rise of the one-person exhibition with artists such as Claude Monet, and to innovations in exhibition installation advanced by James McNeill Whistler, who is credited with the spaced, single-line hang (in his day sniffed at as aestheticist preciousness). The gallery environment began to be read as a site of unity and contemplation, as opposed to the stacked visual rowdiness of the salon and the Royal Academy. It is no surprise that this pristine gallery schema coalesced with the open commodity market, the sanctity of the modernist art object, and the entrenchment of the artist as celebrity that evolved out of early nineteenth century Romanticism. Other contributing factors included the catalogue raisonné and collecting culture of art books, together with the rise of magazines, journals, broadsheets, and feuilletons. Thus, white walls also implicitly echoed the white space surrounding the reproduction of works on a printed page. Such developments were seconded by parallel developments in twentieth century modernist architecture and design that would transform museums and galleries. Modernist architecture, considered in its most Miesian or Corbusian modality, was deliberate and pan-temporal. Correspondingly, the modernist art object transcended time and language to portend an altogether elevated experience analogous to religion but for a secular society.

In 1976, Brian O’Doherty wrote a series of essays for *Artforum*, later turned into a book called *Inside the White Cube* (1986), in which he argued that this obsession with the white cube tended to sanctify the art object to a point of imperviousness and impermeability.<sup>1</sup> For critics such as O’Doherty, the white cube had become a veiled ideology that foreclosed discourse (but very much benefited the commodity market). Doherty was writing at a time when any number of artists were subjecting the inviolability of these standards to dramatic scrutiny. In 1973, to cite just one of many historical examples, Michael Asher—now named within a rather loose grouping of conceptualist tendencies known as “institutional critique” (more later)—completely sanded the walls and ceiling of the Franco Toselli gallery in Milan to expose the assumed neutrality of the white paint.

A generation earlier, a group of self-declared Marxist agitators that called themselves the Situationist International, who were in turn influenced by early twentieth century avant-garde art movements such Dada and surrealism, were already intent on dismantling the expression

and mediation of social relations through objects. The salient legacy of this period was to stress that the museum is a provisional, historical, cultural, and ideologically inscribed idea and institution. However, its perdurance to this day is more than one of expediency. It speaks to the tenacity of institutional models complicit within capitalism, and the skill with which radical critiques of the institution have become absorbed by and dissolved into it. It is against the backdrop of capitalism's co-option of forces inimical to it—that only enforce the need to stress and explore, both theoretically as critics, and practically as artists—that the myriad conditions that have rendered the museum and gallery circuit would appear increasingly anachronistic.

Notwithstanding the enduring presence of the white cube, new exhibition formats and programming schedules that seek to actively problematize the limits of traditional exhibition spaces and circuits have become increasingly common in recent decades. Even major museums and established galleries now routinely schedule off-site and supposedly institutionally-critical projects as part of their regular programming. Meanwhile, every “serious” contemporary art festival or biennale seems to want to include supplementary events or activities at unexpected times and locations. These tendencies—together with a renewed political engagement with issues such as climate, social justice, globalization, racialized injustice, economic precarity, digital surveillance, and algorithmically accelerated challenges to democracy—all reaching fever-pitch, see the artworld staring down questions of sustainability, relevance, divisions of power and labor, and modes of circulation. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21, with national and international travel curtailed, global economies facing once-in-a-century challenges, and screen-based interaction substantially increased for much of the global population, artists and audiences alike were only further incentivized to reimagine the future, and in particular, the nature of relationships between images and objects within the progressively porous interchangeability of digital and non-digital aspects of art and life.

This particular alignment of circumstances has only added further complexity to the pre-existing problem of where a work of art is understood to be situated. With much art already consumed as a mediated and spatially diffused distribution of elements, the mutual insufficiency of art's material and conceptual dimensions was further exacerbated by this

rapid increase in screen-based cultural consumption and communication.<sup>2</sup> With that which was once considered documentation or reproduction now often regarded as simply an alternative point of entry into a work, the most dynamic and “visited” places for art today are often found in the communal spaces of screen-based cultures. At the same time (as we will argue later), art is no longer necessarily found in the prescribed beds that the artworld prepares for it. Instead, art might actually be found in other realms and sites of activity altogether, such as the many arms of popular culture—many of which are either indifferent to art or have long been blindly considered unequal to art’s august task and status (more on that shortly).

### **From what is art? ... to where is art?**

Locating art only begins as a problem with the rise of the modern individual and the free market in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here, two critically connected factors develop apace with these changes: popular culture and reproducibility. Even before the mainstream deployment of photography in the 1850s (following its joint birth by the Niepce brothers and Louis Daguerre in France, and Fox Talbot in the US in the 1830s), engravings were not only a way of making “fine” artworks accessible and cheap, they were also central to the development of mass culture, including sedition and pornography. Many artists contributed to one or both, and consequentially, we now think nothing of viewing Fragonard’s erotic engravings in a museum. Meanwhile, Honoré Daumier’s caricatures, including his clay maquettes, enjoy their own discrete gallery space in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris. Then there is the slow and grinding struggle of photography to be seen as a legitimate artistic medium, which only became uncontested in the 1970s. Ironically, photography was only accepted as a serious artistic medium after it had played a significant role in the disintegration of traditional medium categories—largely as a consequence of its documentary role in intermedial expansion during the 1960s. (As we write, certain exponents in areas deemed popular and transient such as street art, fashion, and comics are now offered up for serious critical attention, with a discrete, and growing following of apologists and adherents.)

Copies of works of art have been prevalent since antiquity. An engraving was unambiguously an interpretation, and an avowedly degraded version of the original work (painting usually), while sculptures could be replicated from casts of the original. Yet it was the proliferation and growing ubiquity of photographic reproduction that caused the greatest philosophical

consternation as to the specific location of art. The most famous theoretical confrontation of photographic reproducibility is Walter Benjamin's heavily cited essay, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction). Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction—photography, but also film—divested the unique object of what he called its “aura,” through a process of deracination (from where it is physically situated), demystification, and, ultimately, trivialization. Repetition has the function of reducing the object (or word) to a material simplicity and ultimately to meaninglessness. But, and a very big *but*, Benjamin also conceded that while this was the case, the weight of reproduction could also have the opposite effect, that is to re-sanctify the art object by dint of the level of ratification that so much attention garners.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, we now recognize that reproduction can reassert the located singularity of the work of art. Tourism is, after all, built on the cult of pilgrimage, and art has a cardinal role to play in it. Is the *Mona Lisa* invisible or has it reached a meta-status through its extraordinary iconicity? The flows of reproduction operate like drumbeats, hammering each time into the consumer-observer the need to believe and to revere—with each manifestation comes tacit approbation.

New technologies continually place the uniqueness of the work in limbo. A three-dimensional printed copy, for example, despite potentially being literally indiscernible from its prototype, is, once recognized as a copy, perceived as philosophically distinct. Most recently, the rise of the non-fungible token (NFT) represents yet another attempt to reintroduce uniqueness into our perception of an otherwise easily reproducible work. Ultimately, although artists of every generation for well over a century have broadcast high-minded claims related to the purported democratization of art through its reproducibility, the fact that most artists want their name associated with their work invariably demands that some kind of authentication is required. Any work that is not unique, insofar as it is not understood to be embedded in a singular object, requires allographic attribution to be commodified.<sup>4</sup> Just as the emergence of photography radically altered the way we think about representation, and just as the readymade displaced the primacy of artistic indexicality and all that implies (artisanry, the signature, and so on), the rise of the internet and digital reproducibility extends the ontological limits of the question of what art is even further. Consequently, following the emergence of radical intermediality<sup>5</sup> and transcategoriality<sup>6</sup> in art due to a series of conceptual and performative developments during the second half of the

twentieth century, the early twenty-first century has borne witness to yet more speculation about how art is defined and what it fundamentally is and does.

Another key issue emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, and further realized in the early twenty-first century, is the accelerated encroachment of both popular cultural and broader socio-political concerns. Consideration of these developments is also critical to addressing our “where is art?” conundrum—especially given the erosion of the established mediums, genres, platforms, and frameworks that were once subject to relatively consistent standards of quality and modes of aesthetic evaluation. The multiple worlds that we now routinely inhabit, the online identities that we now assume, and so on, have only further implicated an ontic realm that is no longer reducible to the physical. Accordingly, the space of affect has been re-oriented in a dizzyingly short space of time. Although a digitally mediated experience is often regarded as a more convenient point of entry, a corresponding nostalgic longing for the artisanal or handmade is also keenly apparent (and often paradoxically shared and discussed in the digital realm). It is a longing that has crept up on us with alarming rapidity, suggesting that it is a reflex more than anything osmotic or organic. Unfortunately, it is a discourse that is its own quick dead-end.

This dialectic, while ubiquitous, is, unfortunately, for contemporary art, an anachronism. Thus, the key problem underpinning our key question “where is art?” is that our experience of the art “object” is now multi-form. In other words, not only does the art object, from the very outset, exist across multiple incarnations and platforms, it is also cognitively apprehended and appreciated as such. Indeed, perhaps the most frequented encounters with art are no longer physical galleries or museums but rather social media platforms and other websites. Yet conversely, the idea that a website might constitute the primary or only site for an exhibition is surprisingly rare. Despite this rapid increase in online artistic activity, art is still more likely to operate online in an interpretative context or documentary form, rather than as a primary medium for exhibition. (The still niche realm of “net art,” such as it is, offers one alternative to this interpretative or documentary tendency—but more on that shortly.) Ultimately, online representations of art are still almost ubiquitously used as vehicles for illuminating the existence of works understood as located eternally elsewhere.

### **The necessity of materiality and the folly of immateriality**

As we have already established, some works of art are no longer experienced as a single or primary object, location, or event. Instead, when we apprehend certain works of art, we might behold a constellation of materially, spatially, and contextually distributed elements that we accept as a unified work.<sup>7</sup> (One significant progenitor to this trend is the now accepted mode of video performance which displaces but still residually retains the element of live presence.) Complicating this situation further, we can become aware of the existence of this unified constellation of distributed elements in various ways. We might, for example, initially encounter a work through direct sense perception of a physical object. Alternatively, we might encounter it through an online document or archive, a report or published article, a presentation or witness account, a podcast discussion or video, and even as a remix or intermedial combination of any of the above.

But how do we perceive such complex, overlapping, and dynamic aggregates of different materializations, versions, and modes of delivery as a cohesive and singularly recognizable work of art? Clearly, at an absolute minimum, we require *something* to be made materially manifest to us in order for the experience of the work to be transmitted from one mind to another. (Importantly, even a digital artifact must ultimately conform to the laws of physics and requires both electricity and hardware to be transmitted and perceived.) Moreover, it is also strangely apparent that although this *something* materialized as art could (at least hypothetically) be *anything*, it is nevertheless not *everything*. For us to apprehend a work of art, *something* needs to be meaningfully delineated or marked off from *everything else* in the world. But how did we arrive at a consensual recognition of this fictionalized phenomenon that we call art? Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are many different ways that we might map the genealogies underpinning this development. When we deploy Wittgenstein's dictum that the meaning of a word is its use, we encounter such a plurality of usages that the work *itself* is understood as existing according to a plural state of being. A good example of this phenomenon is found in the work of Hito Steyerl, whose practice consists of a multiplicity, like planets orbiting not around a coruscating core but a pregnant void.

We might begin by asking: what kind of an entity is a work of art? Is it a physical thing or an imaginary thing? Or necessarily both? How do works of art relate to the minds of artists and viewers? Do all works of art belong to a single ontological category? Under what kind of

conditions are works of art understood to come into existence, or indeed, cease to exist? If a work of art is, at least in part, an imagined object—that is, something first experienced by an artist and hopefully later by an audience—what happens to that imagined object when nobody is experiencing it, or indeed, remembers that it ever existed? Does a work cease to exist along with the individual or collective memories of a society that first bore its existence? At a bare minimum, as we will demonstrate, the consensually recognized existence of any work of art requires at least one object, one subject, and a subject's consciousness of that subject/object relationship.<sup>8</sup> But before we continue any further, we need to briefly attend to a few assumptions.

It is relatively common to assume that a work of art is a stable and discrete entity, created by a particular individual or group, in a particular cultural and historical context. According to this assumption, works of art are physical objects. Notwithstanding the logic of this common-sense assumption, it nevertheless began to unravel in various ways, as we have seen, during the twentieth century. As a result of these developments, artists are now more aware than before of the logical necessity that a work of art must also be more than its material presentation. This inevitability, as we will discover, results from its necessary collective fictionalization as a socially constructed object in order to be recognized as art. It is for this reason, for example, that we might assume that a thirteenth century audience would be incapable of recognizing a color field abstract painting as a painting, or indeed an album of industrial drones as music. Yet, as we will also discover, any suggestion that a work of art might somehow be capable of existing *only* immaterially—is ultimately folly.

The false suggestion that a work of art is immaterial was presented by Benedetto Croce in his 1912 book *Breviario di estetica (The Essence of Aesthetic)*, who argued that imaginative thought precedes all other thought. This suggestion was taken up a few decades later by R. G. Collingwood, who rejected any suggestion that a work of art is a physical object at all.<sup>9</sup> The main problem with this suggestion is that it belies the basic requirement for some kind of material object, gesture, or form to actually transmit this imagined work from one mind to another. Yet as any student of conceptualism and intermedial expansion in twentieth century art now knows, such a materialization might assume the form of anything, from a traditional art object to a text, performed gesture, or even a delineated absence marked in physical space. The irrefutable nature of this requirement is perhaps most apparent whenever artists test its

limits. Robert Barry's *All the Things I Know but of Which I Am Not at the Moment Thinking* (1969), for example, employed the minimal vehicular medium of a sentence to imaginatively conjure the existence of inactivated memories in the artist's own mind. Another good example is Piero Manzoni's mischievous 1961 work *Base of the World no. 3, Homage to Galileo*, which is paradoxically dependent upon an inverted sculptural plinth to transmit the idea that everything else in the world that is not the physical object before us is actually the work. Looking to a more recent example, we can see that despite the extent to which Tino Seghal's conspicuously undocumented performance works might aim to be radically immaterial, they still invariably require material elements such as choreographed bodies, host architectures, or voiced witness accounts in order to be transmitted as art from one mind to another. For another recent example, we could turn to Salvatore Garau's 2021 sculpture *I am*—a work which although “invisible,” still sits in a specifically demarcated physical space. Notwithstanding the fact that the delivery mechanism itself in all of these examples is understood as not constituting the work itself, there is no escaping the fact that a minimal material delivery mechanism is required to actually transmit the work from one mind to another.

The appeal of ideas such as these were infectious for many artists in the 1960s and '70s. In 1969, for example, Douglas Huebler declared, “the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.”<sup>10</sup> Soon, an avalanche of theoretical discourse would emerge to support such attitudes. The term *dematerialization*, for example, was coined by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in 1968 to describe art that stressed concept over material form.<sup>11</sup> Although it was hoped by some at the time that this tendency might somehow thwart the fetishization and commodification of the material art object, it was soon apparent that capitalism is extraordinarily adept at translating that which is literally “next to nothing” into symbolic market value. Despite Lippard stressing that art could not be dematerialized as unmediated information or experience, the term nevertheless endured as a descriptor for conceptual art of this era. Notwithstanding the elevation of ideas over material form in much advanced art of the late twentieth century, it was ultimately clear that the complete dematerialization of art was not logically possible. As Craig Dworkin put it in his book, *No Medium* (2013): “even the most abstract and cerebral works of conceptual art cannot be separated from those material and technical supports. There is no single medium, to be sure, but media are inescapable.”<sup>12</sup> This necessity was never lost on more astute artists

of the time. Although Marcel Broodthaers, for example, stressed the “idea before the plastic,” he also conceded that in order “to express an idea properly, I had necessarily to play around with plastic elements.”<sup>13</sup>

It was now apparent that even conceptual artists make more or less effective material and formal decisions in order to effectively communicate an idea as art. There was simply no way that some form of materialization could be avoided, even if decidedly “anti-aesthetic” or barely evident in its public presentation. Ironically, the perceived seriousness of some works of conceptually driven art at the time were sometimes paradoxically brought into question if they didn’t “look” sufficiently anti-aesthetic. Amusingly, Susan Hiller once quipped in response to “serious male” reception of her watershed work, *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1972–76), that had her found postcards been black and white rather than color, perhaps Art & Language wouldn’t have critically rejected her work as “too visual.”<sup>14</sup> At this juncture, we might simply conclude that good and bad conceptual art both is and is not seductive in its material presentation.

Another key benefit gained from the morphological presentation of a concept is that it enables the viewer to not only experience the idea, but to survey it from a phenomenological vantage point. Although the inescapability of experiencing ideas through material form run counter to the aspirations towards immateriality sought by hardened conceptualists, the important take home point here, as argued by Elisabeth Schellekens in 2009, is that conceptual artists ultimately “instantiate” ideas by turning otherwise abstracted philosophical propositions into something “concrete” and therefore experiential.<sup>15</sup> Tellingly, even hypothetical works of art, such as those featured in the philosophical ruminations of Arthur Danto, still require a physical medium of sorts in the form of a printed page.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, even hypothetical works are exceptions that prove the rule, for imaginary creative works can only be experienced when we imagine their effect in the world. The (impossible) existence of hypothetical art is only further frustrated as we attempt to imagine effects designed to preclude the imagining of effects.

Another common claim is that certain forms of art exist exclusively in “relational space.” But almost immediately we can see that any delineated relational space still needs to be

understood as somehow occupying a realm in-between various necessary but insufficient material and paratextual elements (that encapsulate or “activate” surrounding networks of materially evident interpretations, critiques, perceptions, histories, documentations, values, accounts, encounters, etc.). Moreover, even in the case of a traditional presentation of art, we can now recognize that the viewer can only behold a work as part of a process that necessarily involves coming into contact with a range of pre-existing histories and adjacent paratextual information or other prosthetic and supplementary materials (which the artist typically claims are not technically part of the work).<sup>17</sup> Here, it is also relevant to stress that even a viewer’s recognition that they are indeed in the company of art requires at least some prior awareness of the historically developed and socially constructed idea of art itself. Here, in drawing upon a philosophical tradition that can be traced back to the insights of Immanuel Kant, we know that the relationship between physical and mental experiences in human comprehension is something that is inextricably connected—for just as concepts abstracted from experience are empty, experiences without context are blind. Considered together, direct experience of a work and knowledge of its accompanying social contexts give us *more*. This relationship, which now also forms the basis of artistic research production in the academy, is indebted to Kant’s dynamic integration of the two key traditions in Western knowledge production in action—empiricism, which holds that our knowledge is primarily derived from sense experience or observation, and rationalism, which holds that knowledge is primarily based in reason.

So, as we have already established, we cannot even recognize something as art in the first place without accessing, even in a most basic sense, a surrounding set of socially constructed fictionalizations (such as art history or language itself). Although the vehicular presence of the physical artifact or experience directs our aesthetic contemplation and interpretation, we also cannot help but conjure knowledge or awareness of its surrounding network in order to enter its world. This necessity is key to the historical failure of formalism—which conveniently ignored, for example, the “soft power” imperial (CIA-bolstered) currency of abstract expressionism. It is also why we know that the physical object in itself cannot make an exclusive or autonomous claim to the art condition. Consequently, from the vantage of our present, we now understand that that the formalists and the conceptualists only ever had half the story—despite tying themselves in knots attempting to defend their respective projects. Where the twentieth century was arguably full of artistic movements that threw the proverbial

baby out with the bathwater in manifesto-led frenzies, the twenty-first century has witnessed many of these former antinomies become reluctant bedfellows. This is probably why so many contemporary artists repetitively churn out artist statements that present their work as “positioned between x and y,”—a tactic, alas, that tends only to confirm rather than elide the problem. “Liminality” and “interstitiality” are the new normative, and the obscurer and uglier the word the better. In an effort to surmount the tyranny of binaries, “inter” is the *nom du jour*, in many cases tending to inadvertently enforce the old order as much as the new.

Art is, necessarily, built in a series of complex, layered, and ultimately mutually insufficient relationships. Moreover, as Markus Gabriel puts it, “aesthetic experience—that is, the perception of an artwork—is generally a second-order perceptual relation: a perceptual relation to a perceptual relation.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, we might provisionally conclude that the physical materialization(s) associated with a work of art simply offers the viewer a portal into a dynamic relationship between material form(s) and the surrounding networks of signs, concepts, myths, traces, sensations, and contradictions—all intertwined in ever-expanding worlds of interpretations, fictions, versions, and documentations. Without interpretation, and without this network of relations between elements that collectively constitute the “space” or “world” of a work of art, what we understand to be a work of art would be no more than a mere object or arbitrary artifact in the continuum of everyday life.

Ultimately, although all ideas must be somehow communicated sensorially, all sensory perception involves a greater or lesser degree of conceptual processing. Moreover, there is no defensible reason to claim that the presence of sensorial elements should negate an intellectual dimension. Today, the artistic implications of this inescapable convergence of the sensorial and the conceptual in contemporary art is sometimes referred to as “postconceptual art.” Central to the recent popularization of this term is Peter Osborne’s description of the mutual insufficiency of two once dominant dimensions in art—the conceptual and aesthetic, which he sees as activated in relation to a series of processes of active fictionalization. To this end, Osborne has identified six features of postconceptual art:

1. A necessary—but insufficient—conceptuality
2. A necessary—but insufficient—aesthetic dimension
3. An anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials

4. An expansion to infinity of the possible material means of art
5. A radically distributive—that is, irreducibly relational—unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time
6. A historical malleability of the borders of this unity<sup>19</sup>

*Here a site, there a site, anywhere a site*

Perhaps the most important development in the elevation and expansion of conceptions of location-specificity in art is the late twentieth century conception of site-specificity. Importantly, it was also a potent antithesis to modernism's historical assertion of the work of art as autonomous. In this instance, Robert Smithson was particularly instrumental during the 1960s and '70s in rethinking the relationship between a work of art and its environment. In particular, it was through an active interest in a work's host environment that Smithson developed his highly influential dialectical conceptualization of "sites" and "non-sites." For Smithson, a site referred to a specific location, whereas a non-site referred to an exhibition environment such as a gallery.<sup>20</sup> Many of Smithson's most significant works deliberately drew upon the nature of relationships between sites and non-sites. Smithson's non-site exhibits typically consisted of photographs, films, maps, sketches, or diagrams of a particular location exhibited alongside physical materials removed from that location. Noting, for example, that Smithson's iconic "earthwork," *Spiral Jetty* (1969–70), is also the title of a 32-minute color film and a series of exhibited film stills and sketches, Osborne has argued that "the film *Spiral Jetty* appears as one element in a complex distribution of artistic materials, across a multiplicity of material forms and practices, the unity of which constitutes a singular, though internally multitudinous work."<sup>21</sup> For Osborne, these "material forms appear as *multiple materializations* selected from an infinite set of possible actualizations."<sup>22</sup> It is for this reason that he sees *Spiral Jetty* as not an earthwork sculpture at all (as is it typically described in art historical accounts), but rather as a transcategorical postconceptual work. Moreover, he argues, it is profoundly conservative to historicize it as sculpture at all—as has been the tendency since the publication of Rosalind Krauss' influential, much-quoted essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979).<sup>23</sup>

Krauss, by analyzing the structural parameters of sculpture, architecture, and landscape, had sought to clarify what these respective practices were and were not, and what resulted when

considered fused together. In doing so, Krauss influenced thinking in all three fields, together with off-shoot epithets such as “expanded cinema” and “expanded painting,” etc. In so doing she also anticipated the way that postmodernism (and beyond) was apt to desecrate the sacred cows of modernist formalisms. For Krauss, unlike modernist sculpture, where one “enters a space of negative condition” and “a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place,” sculpture had, by the early 1960s, begun to enter categorical indeterminacy, for “it was what was on or in front of a building that was not the building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas modernist sculpture had typically fetishized its plinth-primacy—holding nostalgically to the invitation for idolatry—subsequent sculpture had instead become “one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities. And one has thereby gained the ‘permission’ to think these other forms.”<sup>25</sup>

This “permission” to rethink the nature and the form of the presentation of art would prove to be enormously significant for future artists and theorists. For Miwon Kwon, writing in 1997, central to this radical rethinking was an “epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, a site could just as easily refer to institutional power, stolen land, an economic transaction, a classroom, a shared meal, a journey on public transport, the transactional nature of the gaze, or the giving of care.

Following this marked departure from the deification of the discrete art object, the spatial and social contexts surrounding a work of art were routinely absorbed into its orbit of aesthetic and critical interpretation. Cynically, we can also recognize this development as yet another market-ready conflation. Like many other luxury goods, this expansion of art into different modes of display and consumption can also be seen as exemplifying capitalism’s extraordinary capacity to produce and sell the “air” surrounding objects (think, for example, of high-end fashion stores displaying a single garment in a large retail display, or a glossy fashion magazine listing, alongside other credits, the fragrances models are supposedly wearing).<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding many contemporary artists’ presumptive claims that works presented through this now radically expanded ontology somehow “interrogate” (another snappy word that contemporary art seemingly cannot do without) the structures of late capitalism, it is now possible for otherwise arbitrary objects and actions to be placed together

in a contextually “expanded field,” which, when presented together with a few supplementary linguistic gymnastics and strategies of ironic doubling, somehow present as a critique of capitalism. Today, this is a game with a sophistication that rivals the most abstracted forms of speculative futures trading. At best, artists regard themselves as partially redeemed by virtue of being at once critical and self-reflectively complicit (as if it is somehow more palatable to sell half of one’s soul).

It was against this backdrop that a particularly clever critical branch of conceptualism emerged, namely: institutional critique. This systematic inquiry into the workings of art institutions, such as galleries and museums, would also evoke an inverse speculation upon the machinations of the market—especially its conditions of labor and the other invisible economic, social, and political forces. This approach, at its core, involves critically speculating upon the role that institutional forces play in the reception, interpretation, and subsequent currency of art. This development was also perhaps an inevitable consequence of the spatial expansion of the possible means of art. Here, as Osborne argues, it is now possible to retrospectively point to the paradoxical way in which Smithson’s non-sites finally “acted as sites that represent other sites, and hence, reflectively, that need to represent their own character as such sites as well.”<sup>28</sup> This critical function, in which particular contextual qualities and currencies, activated by the blindly assumed neutrality of the white cube gallery space, can become an artistic medium, would help establish the requisite grounding for more pointed forms of institutional critique in the work of artists such as Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, Fred Wilson, and Andrea Fraser.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, this kind of expansion was no longer simply about space but rather upon institutional forces and their impact upon placemaking.<sup>30</sup> Unlike space, which possesses abstract physical and formal properties, a “place” is a socially constructed designation that overwrites space.<sup>31</sup> Today, for example, if we consider a socially constructed object/place, such as a nation state, we can see traces of contested places violently overwritten by other socially constructed acts of placemaking.

Institutional critique initially developed through a re-evaluation of the museum and the studio as sites for the production of works ready for circulation. Artists such as Haacke were particularly instrumental in shifting the idea of site from the physical site to the system of

socioeconomic relations within which art finds its being. Haacke's great contribution was to strip, or try to strip, the patina of prestige off art institutions, to expose them as an intricate interconnected network of self-interested patronage and self-affirmation favoring the minority who divvied out the honors and cash.

One particularly potent contemporary example of a practice indebted to institutional critique is found in the work of Cameron Rowland, whose work seeks to illuminate systems and institutions that benefit from racial injustice. Rowland's extraordinary 2016 exhibition *91020000* at Artists Space in New York, for example, featured objects produced by incarcerated felons which were all produced using the penal code, through which the host institution is availed free prison labor. (Significantly, this exhibition took place in the same year that US filmmaker Ava DuVernay released the documentary *13th*—which argued that because a disproportionately high number of incarcerated felons are Black, this penal code system is simply a continuation of the legacies of slavery under a different name.)

By the late twentieth century, drawing upon ideas developed by artists such as Broodthaers in the 1960s, it was relatively commonplace for artists to claim the exhibition itself as medium. Once again typically eschewing the discrete aesthetic object in favor of the exhibition as a protean arena of expansion and variation, the “exhibition” had become an arena for activating contestations and relations. As Hal Foster observes, the readymade gesture was now no longer simply “a tautology about art as deluxe commodity” but rather “a performance of presentation that can put latent contexts into play.”<sup>32</sup> Such works, which were often presented as projects in expanded exhibition formats, would also routinely reach beyond the visual arts to commingle with other disciplines and knowledge systems. By the end of the twentieth century, as John Armleder remarked, an “artwork's success” had become dependent upon “its capacity to co-opt an existing situation and to be co-opted in return.”<sup>33</sup>

In summary, “critical” contemporary art could no longer claim any independent essence in relation to the systems it purported to critique, and as a consequence, much advanced art today consciously incorporates this awareness of the inextricable relationship of a work of art to broader systems of production, consumption, distribution, and exploitation. Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan's *Monument of Sugar: How to Use Artistic Means to Elude*

*Trade Barriers* (2007), for example, traces the transformation of excess European sugar into generic serial minimalist blocks as “art” to elude European trade barriers. Similarly, Steve McQueen’s *Gravesend* (2007), poetically follows the movement of the “new blood diamond,” coltan, from exploitative labor conditions in Congo to the production of cellphones and computers. It is of course important to distinguish between sophisticated poetic responses to complex political issues and works that sit toward the instrumental or “activist” end of the spectrum, which at worst simply reveal inaction rather than stir any intention for real change.

### **Bodies in spaces**

An idea experienced as art can potentially unlock insights and understandings that might remain elusive in a theoretical proposition alone. With this in mind, feminist, Black, and LGBTQI+ artists have long recognized that the relational register of bodies in spaces can implicitly communicate socio-political ideas. Here, numerous examples emerge from the 1960s onwards. VALIE EXPORT, for example, challenged the public to engage with a real woman as opposed to an image on a screen. Covering her naked chest with a makeshift “movie theatre,” EXPORT invited pedestrians (in 10 European cities between 1968 and 1971) to reach inside the box and directly touch her breasts. This radical screen-free expanded “film” confronted social, political, and sexual positionings of the female body by fracturing boundaries between cinema and real life. Instead of a passive subject on a screen, the male gaze was met by the subject looking back into the eyes of the viewer.

Similarly, James Luna, a US artist of First Nation American and Mexican background, challenged the way US culture, and by extension museums, presented his people as essentially extinct by installing his own living breathing body in an exhibition case in the San Diego Museum of Man to produce *Artifact Piece* (1985–87). Positioned amongst surrounding exhibits in a museological section on the Kumeyaay—the original inhabitants of San Diego County—Luna lay dressed in a leather cloth, with labels supposedly pointing to scars from drinking and fighting. Personal items were also displayed together with other cultural artifacts. Through this mixture of elements, he sought to reveal a still living and developing culture at odds with its museological representation.

Another potent example of the relational registration of a body in a contested space is Pope.L's provocative performance-based work *How Much is that N\*\*\*\*\* in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl* (1991). In this performance, Pope.L crawled, military-style in a business suit holding a potted flower, along the perimeter of Tompkins Square Park in New York. At the time, the park was a site of ongoing riots involving the homeless, squatters, activists, and police. On the day of Pope.L's "crawl," Tompkins Square was barricaded for renovations. Assuming a prostrate posture, and forcing onlookers to direct their gazes downward, Pope.L sought to make disenfranchised bodies and displaced communities visible. This remains a timely work today within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

### *Where is social space?*

Within the context of contemporary art, the now broadly used term *social practice* (as opposed to the theory in psychology by the same name) emphasizes social engagement, collaboration, and community as a medium in the creation of so-called "relational art". For its devotees, social practice seeks to activate relationships between production and reception, the political nature of social relations, and the lived experiences of others as aesthetic experience. It also challenges the idea that art only functions through its reification as a circumscribed object or a traditional staged performance. The roots of social practice can be traced back to the 1940s, when movements such as lettrism, then after the Second World War, the Situationist International and Fluxus began to challenge established conceptions of the way in which viewers and audiences are implicated in processes of artistic production. In his seminal text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord argued that the "spectacular" image was symptomatic of capitalistic alienation and, moreover, actually concealing this estrangement.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, during the Fluxus movement of the late 1960s, George Maciunas took aim at "illusionism," and like the Situationists, sought to expose the reification of life engendered by the capitalist onslaught of the spectacular. Drawing upon ideas that had originated in early twentieth century avant-garde movements such as Dada, this second horizon of postwar neo-avant-garde tendencies was even more explicitly concerned with the creation of experiences that offer active viewer participation. Importantly, the outcomes of these interventions were not singular objects but rather materialized experiences that claimed to result in a blurring of boundaries between art and life.

In recent decades, variations of social, relational, and participatory practices, which typically occur outside of traditional exhibition environments, have become increasingly common. Within these restructured relationships between artist and audience, the viewer is no longer modelled as passive and detached but rather as an intrinsic participatory medium. During the 1990s in particular, collaborative initiatives such as the Turkish collective Oda Projesi (Room Project) set out to try and create new functions for unused public spaces. During the late 1990s, participatory practice was reframed by Nicolas Bourriaud, who argued that audience involvement made work political, since the space of interaction created fleeting communities whose inter-subjective relations and concrete communications might be politically affective. The political, Bourriaud suggested, could emerge within and through the aesthetic experience without the art or the artist engaging directly with politics. He laid claim to the term *relational aesthetics* to describe “a set of practices which takes as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context.”<sup>35</sup> One artist particularly enamored by Bourriaud was Rirkrit Tiravanija, who somewhat unconvincingly claimed to build on the work of Joseph Beuys’ 1960s/’70s idea of “social sculpture” as a mechanism for dissolving the boundaries between art and life. *The Land* (1998–present), which Tiravanija cofounded with Superflex, Carl Michael von Hausswolff, and Kamin Lertchaiprasert, is typical of projects that claim to bring art and social engagement together.

Bourriaud’s ideas, however, have also been roundly criticized, and rightly so. Claire Bishop, in particular, points to a lack of critical antagonism, a loss of aesthetic judgment, and the empty assumptions of democracy championed in the writing and curatorial work of Bourriaud. For Bishop, antagonisms and dynamic contradictions presented in the work of artists such as Artur Żmijewski contain more critical potential. Żmijewski’s *Them* (2007), for example, was a social experiment in which representatives from conflicting social groups (conservatives, patriotic Catholics, nationalist Polish youth, leftist socialists, democrats, and freedom fighters) were brought together in a series of workshops to construct symbolic representations and respond to others. In time, fights broke out, and “artworks” were set on fire and thrown out of the windows.

### **When is a work?**

The problem of unambiguously locating *when* a work begins and ends is somewhat

comparable to the “where is art?” conundrum. To begin this discussion, we might look back to some of the earliest examples of cognitively advanced human artistic expression to find examples of works that effectively stretch across millennia. Perhaps the most extraordinary example is found in the multiple painted layers that make up the ceilings and pillars of Nawarla Gabarnmang (Jawoyn for “hole in the rock”<sup>36</sup>). Extraordinarily, although evidence of habitation at this site in southwestern Arnhem Land in Australia has been dated to at least 44,000 years ago, paintings produced more than 28,000 years ago sit alongside depictions of barramundi executed in a style more typical of the last 400 years.<sup>37</sup> Crayons have also been recovered from nearby locations (Malakunanja II and Nauwalabila I) that are dated between 45,000 to 60,000 years, suggesting that Nawarla Gabarnmang may have even been creatively modified for over 65,000 years, since the earliest known human habitation of the same continental landmass on which this essay is being written. The site also includes paintings dated roughly between AD 1433 and 1952, which is consistent with local anecdotal reports that the cave was still visited within living memory.<sup>38</sup> How do we even begin to engage with histories this deep? Ironically, given that these dates will most likely be updated by the time this essay is published, the research drawn upon in this paragraph is probably as “up to date” as any claims made about the latest digital technologies elsewhere in the text. Although it is easy to be astonished by the ineffable gravity of contemplating continuous painting practices stretching across tens of millennia into the recesses of deep time, the most important point is the extent that it trivializes the two centuries of colonial occupation that so recently put an end to continuous adaptations of this site.

Moving much closer to our present day, a good example of a work of art that has only affirmed its critical significance with each subsequent adaptation is Louise Lawler’s *Birdcalls* (1972/1981/2008). In its initial 1972 version, the work consisted of a series of high-pitched quasi-bird songs consisting of absurd repetitions of the names of her more famous male artist contemporaries, many of whom who were being selected for inclusion in exhibitions in which she was not taking part. In its second iteration in 1981, the work was transformed into an exhibited audio document of the same quasi-bird songs. In 2008, in its third and still current version, the work was permanently installed as a sound work in the garden outside Dia Beacon in New York, the same location where many of the historically celebrated male artists that she parodied are now permanently exhibited inside the building.<sup>39</sup> In this third iteration, Lawler’s speculative capacity to predict the male art historical figures of the then

future is retrospectively confirmed. Clearly, activating connections to the past and speculating upon possible futures can form an important part of deepening the meaning and potency of a work. In this case, the act of interpretation requires the connection of meanings expressed in the past, toward the future, made manifest in the present.

### **Methodological confusion and ontological indeterminacy**

Art, even under controlled conditions, is indeterminate in character. Today, this intrinsic indeterminacy has become hyperbolic, sometimes manifesting as a surfeit of meaning and affect. Given the inherent indeterminacy of artistic production and discourse, there now appears to be no apparent upper limit to the extent to which artists and theorists might glean ideas—sometimes superficially—from other disciplines and cultural contexts. This is a process that was already well underway in the twentieth century. Indeterminacy, for example, was a central idea for John Cage, in particular during the latter part of his career. Under the influence of Zen Buddhism, indeterminacy underpinned the need to bring the creative act into the open without excessive forethought, with a premium given to the moment of delivery and reception. It also underscored the extreme porosity of practices: genre disciplines were not to be cordoned off or determined neither linguistically nor strategically, if only historically. But the historical term, under the weight of the creative moment, was there to be ruptured and repositioned, thereby also repositioning and rereading history. This state of heightened indeterminacy would serve to effectively emphasize the work of art's open-endedness in laying the most important stress on the encounter as opposed to the object, which ought never to be considered static nor central.

Over that last half century or so, art has largely traded medium-specific categorizations for thematic positionings that typically stress socially and politically orientated relations. Although, to a certain extent, medium-specific categorizations live on as part of what Alex Bacon usefully describes as “a nostalgia for their former ontological separation,” the flexibility of conventional medium categories has, in many ways, been expanded to the limits of plausibility.<sup>40</sup> For some, art has expanded so far beyond its internal concerns that it has lost any meaningful coherence. For others, advanced artistic activity is liberated from the exhibition of discrete objects to focus on the supposedly more important work of activating relationships. Unlike the assertions of aesthetic autonomy that underpinned the various ideological battles staged between abstract formalism and allegorical illustration during the

twentieth century, a significant proportion of artistic activity in the twenty-first century is more concerned with negotiating tensions between the agency of forms and the outermost spatial and temporal limits of a work of art. Consequently, to highlight this point again, a work of art is now less likely to be regarded as fixed in space and time and closed off from the world around it. Instead, the world of a work of art is understood as inherently labile, relational, cross-disciplinary, and open to continual transformation across multiple versions or locations. As a result, another problem has arisen: the challenge of meaningfully evaluating potential works located across multiple mediums, material forms, versions, disciplines, and histories. Consequently, it can be particularly challenging to find appropriate or consistent language and methodological criteria for evaluating forms of art that straddle seemingly incongruent realms of knowledge.

Where late twentieth century histories of art were still largely methodologically comprised of relatively distinct critical models—such as formalism, structuralist semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism, and others—these methodologies had more or less merged by the turn of the millennium. Today, as we try and make sense of this fuzzily demarcated, interdisciplinary, and transcategorical situation, it is almost pointless to insist on any particular or singular methodological approach or position. Moreover, this complexity has rendered any claim that a particular model is consistently or exclusively valid as doomed within the interpretative processes of art history. Consequently, it is paradoxically that which artists and theorists find appealing in the *anything goes* radical relativism of our contemporary situation—that is, its inherent lack of a stable definition, a-historicity, and heterogeneity—that also tends to stymie a sense of meaningful possibility.

For some artists, the term *contemporary* itself presents a barrier. For Liam Gillick, although it was not uncommon for modernist artists to deny the name associated with their respective style or movement, contemporary art activates this kind of denial differentially. Frustratingly, the term *contemporary* does not describe a particular approach or practice but rather a general “being in the context.”<sup>41</sup> Another common tendency is found in variously configured attempts to describe the contemporary as a new epoch supposedly unburdened by the oppressive narratives of imperial Western modernism. Here, one feature frequently overlooked by contemporary detractors of modernism is the extent to which such declarations tend to mirror

the kind of absolutist claims once offered in modernist manifestos. Moreover, a general dearth of historical literacy, together with an all-consuming flattening across a superficially informationally obese, often self-obsessed, and increasingly algorithmically sorted present, obscures most of us from really acknowledging that we still routinely use Western “modernist precedents to claim that we surpass the modern.”<sup>42</sup>

Another way of looking at “the contemporary” is as a moniker of exhaustion. This is to say, with postmodernism having faded away, and faced with no reasonable (or catchy or consensual) alternative, a place-saver was inserted, only for that stand-in term to generate its own autonomy and semantic economy. “Contemporary,” with or without the scare quotes, now prevails as its own entity, where, as with such semiotic transitions, the original meaning of the word is all but lost and in its place is a promissory meaning for what is in truth a lack, a void. Other terminological candidates which have variously attempted to encapsulate the still ambiguous present and historical era that has followed postmodernism include post-postmodernism, the off-modern, meta-modernism, neomodern, new sincerity, remodelnism, performatism, altermodernism, supermodernity, andromodernity, speciousmodernity, and the aftermodern. Ironically, the implicit lack of specific directionality and multiplicity of meaning and possibility variously presented in each of these competing models is demonstrated in their very failure to take hold. Furthermore, if we may allow a few generalizations, if the main tendencies of postmodernism were appropriation and deconstructive critique (resetting the habitual power structures deemed monolithic in modernism), variations upon the contemporary are most typically characterized along lines of gender and identity. As is keenly apparent across our present situation, these are battlelines which dangerously tip, time and time again, into ideological warfare. The net effect is all too often to see art pressed into the instrumentalized service of activist concerns—using often paper-thin tactics of ontological doubling or settling psychopathological disquiet. For all its inconsistencies, we are apt to turn to Theodor Adorno’s insistence that political art makes for both bad art and bad politics. It may not be a universal truth, but it does resonate anew in our present time when art is so freighted with values, concerns, and complaints that the viewer becomes cynically inured to it, effectively drowning in caveats, with the unfortunate effect that the issues themselves, extrinsic from art proper, may then not be given the attention they deserve.

Moreover, the sheer breadth that art demands of itself, and that it is used so much as a historical vehicle, mean that efforts at a precision once expected of art historical scholarship are deemed reactionary. Art and art history is thus increasingly lost in a grab-bag of methodological eclecticism. Here, to repurpose Jacques Derrida's lexicon, we might say opposing categories have slowly interwoven and "contaminated" one another to create a generalized condition of heightened confusion. Yet such circumstances have their benefits. Given the collapse of the categorical distinctions of the past that have intended to police and exclude, there is arguably now far more room for voices previously omitted from a world of clearer yet oppressive delineations. With this important point of difference in mind, for better or worse, we are open to integrating a diverse range of often contradictory methods and methodological positions. Although we are now on less stable ground, there are more voices at the table.

To attempt to make or see something as something else is an act of understanding—as is the case when reasoning shapes intuitions into a coherent structure of ideas and words. Ultimately, art has no independent essence without being framed in relationship to both life and everything that is not art. Art might not be life but is rather something necessarily framed in parallax with it. Although there is often no substantial literal difference between art and non-art objects, socially constructed structural difference can nonetheless be attributed in such a way that otherwise vastly disparate objects, methods, and formations can be brought into new sets of relation. Ultimately, categories are, to a greater or lesser extent, indistinct—and at worst violently exclusionary. It is important to remember that categorical distinctions are inherently artificial, dynamic, contested, elusive, shifting, and context dependent. Moreover, the significance of categories can easily evaporate along with the social or historical setting that created them in the first place. In some respects, it is now trivial to stress that broader contexts of production, conception, and reception are more significant than particular formal or virtuosic qualities in the critical reception of advanced art. Although "context" might typically consist of reasonably evident shared understandings and expectations about the nature and purpose of the encounter, context is also part of a mutually insufficient relationship between the formal properties of objects and the systems of cultural "belief" that surround them. Considered together, this mutually insufficient relationship between materials and contexts underpins both the interpretation of art and the accompanying mysteries and indeterminacies of the creative act itself.

As is particularly evident in extreme cases, the exceptions to the rule, it is clear the only thing that finally differentiates a work of art from everyday life, and everything else in the world, is structural framing accorded through a work's presentation. Without the legitimizing accompaniment of the artworld, many works would likely struggle to transcend arbitrariness within the continuum of lived reality. It is perhaps when something presented as art is also an apparently literal facsimile of that which is not art, that this curious philosophical transformation is most apparent.

This problem of “literal indiscernibility”<sup>43</sup> was discussed at length as part of Arthur Danto's highly influential description of an “Artworld” (as an exclusive capitalized proper noun no less).<sup>44</sup> For Danto, it was immediately apparent when he first encountered an exhibition of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* in the 1960s, that the all-important difference was not to be found in any superficial comparison of commercially available Brillo box packaging and Warhol's facsimiles. Instead, the most important distinction was philosophically marked by its artworld presentation. It is precisely here that the fictionalized conceit of the contemporary artworld is found, in which strategies of ironic doubling and claims of implicit criticality are still used so successfully to sell unremarkable objects, and their surrounding air, at inflated prices. By the mid-1980s in New York, for example, loose imported theoretical references to “simulationism” and so called “commodity criticism” surrounded the exhibition and sale of everything from the latest running shoes to lava lamps, liquid decanters, and vacuum cleaners as art. Heavily promoted by their dealers, artists such as Ashley Bickerton, Haim Steinbach, and Jeff Koons produced ironic simulations of luxury consumer items, which, despite an underlying premise of deep intellectual despair and cynicism, were sold at an unprecedented prices for living artists.

Today, many artworld participants take this constructed exclusiveness for granted. Although for Danto, there could be no “artworks without the theories and the histories of the Artworld,”<sup>45</sup> the existence of many differently configured artworlds and layered ontologies—some of which are utterly uninterested in one another yet similarly capable of constituting a consensually constructed realm within which particular activities can be understood to be at once art and *something else* (i.e., a political protest or a scientific research project)—has seen

critical attention increasingly turn to what Pamela Lee has usefully described as “the work of art’s world.”<sup>46</sup> Although Lee acknowledges the impossibility of “ignoring or standing outside it [the artworld], as if one could lay claim to a space beyond its imperial reach by wandering just far enough afield,” her focus has instead shifted from the “global art world” to the “work of art’s world.” For Lee, “to speak of the ‘the work of art’s world’ is to retain a sense of the activity performed by the object as utterly continuous with the world it at once inhabits and creates: a world Möbius-like in its indivisibility and circularity, a seemingly endless horizon.”<sup>47</sup> Here, it is extraordinarily difficult to meaningfully demarcate the categorical edges of work of art which are seemingly at once art and part of the world.

So, how do we meaningfully evaluate works of art that seek to be continuous with the world? As Claire Bishop suggests, much contemporary art actively evades aesthetic judgment by conveniently straddling doubled ontologies.<sup>48</sup> This situation, as Bishop has consistently argued, is ultimately one in which an artist might claim, for example, that the political implications of her work are far more important than mere art (despite the fact that she might sound preposterously “arty” if asked to justify her work in any serious political discourse). But isn’t art in and of itself capable of generating serious discourse? The “double dipping” Bishop is referring to here implicates much contemporary art as always in danger of either retreating into the specialized rhetoric used to frame it to an art-literate audience (and consequently of contradicting any broadly inclusive ethos that it purports to promote), or conversely of evading aesthetic judgment in the name of more easily morally justifiable values such as community awareness or “good politics.” Furthermore, this is often the kind of work that is accompanied by generic artist statements that uncritically regurgitate the fashionable critical rhetoric of the day. Today, for example, artists are almost ubiquitously interrogating ideas (just as they were once “unpacking” ideas in the 1980s or “unfolding” ideas in the 1990s). It is also common to make extraordinarily vague claims that a work is somehow rejecting established binaries by being positioned between or at the intersection of more than one discourse, discipline, or medium (without recognizing that this now generic approach is in turn paradoxically territorializing and uncritically fetishizing this unclearly demarcated “in-between zone”).

Given the tendency for artists to reject discrete aesthetic objects and traditional gallery

formats in favor of dynamic spatially and temporally expanded contexts, coupled with the fact that anything can now potentially become art once it occupies the structural place of art, it appears that the historical trajectory that has destroyed hierarchies of form is now irreversible. Although we are no longer in a period of clear dialectical distinction, the art/life distinction must remain active for the processes of radical fictionalization that we consensually accept as contemporary art to continue. Consequently, it is often when art is dressed in its most threadbare clothes, or in other words, when the distinction between art and life is closest to arbitrary or indistinguishable, that it is most readily accepted as capable of producing novelty.

From Danto's articulation of literal indiscernibility to Marcel Duchamp's historical conceptualization of the "infra-thin" as the slightest margin of dissimilitude between apparently identical entities, there are many historical examples of artists that have produced novel content within the thinnest of delineations between art and the continuum of lived experience.<sup>49</sup> And, as we have already established, in order for literally indiscernible difference to transcend arbitrariness and to be marked as philosophical difference, the object or event must first be recognized as straddling profoundly different ontologies. The performance artist Tehching Hsieh, for example, is renowned for the way in which his extreme endurance performance works have radically collapsed distinctions between art and life. His five *One Year Performances* in New York between 1978 and 1986, for example— together with his *Thirteen-Year Plan* (1986–99) (a period in which Hsieh made art but did not show it publicly) all ultimately required the liberal accompaniment of supplementary and paratextual material in order to be meaningfully transmitted to audiences as art. Tellingly, for artists such as Hsieh, such materials enable audiences to build the experience of the work in their mind. In some ways, the imponderably high stakes of works such as these are in many ways also their downfall. Perhaps, at least for some audiences, it is possible to become so beset by the imponderability of scale and effort that we lose sight of aesthetic value.

It is relatively easy to assemble a working list of historical examples of works of art that pivot around that which is otherwise barely perceptible, invisible, or contingent. One particularly pronounced example of the foregrounding of seeming invisibility is found in the moment in 1969 in which Robert Barry staged the inconspicuous release of invisible gas into the Mojave

Desert to produce *Inert Gas Series*. Here, the only evidence presented to the absent viewer were documentary photographs of the artist's actions. At around the same time, Michael Asher used industrial blowers to punctuate architectural spaces or empty galleries with invisible shafts of air in his series *Vertical Columns of Accelerated Air* (1966–67), while Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin's unspecified column of air over Oxfordshire, *Air Show/Air Conditioning* (1966–67), offered another comparable example. (This kind of approach was later given political content by Amy Balkin in her 2004 project *Public Smog*, an "atmospheric park" created using financial, political, and legal methods to promote awareness of air pollution.)

Historically, artists have attempted to illustrate the threshold between art and everything else in a variety of ways. For his first New York solo show in 1973, for example, Daniel Buren suspended 19 striped canvas squares on a cable that ran from one end of the John Weber Gallery to the other and then out the window to a building on the other side of the street and back. Once out of the gallery, the striped canvas square assumed a literal semblance with other non-art iterations of stripes within the continuum of everyday existence (i.e., awnings, curtains, clothing, etc.). Again, in cases such as these, maintaining an artworld connection remains necessary to mark this play of symbolic difference. And this artworld connection need not be activated by physical proximity to an actual gallery. It is only, for example, through the promotional activities of the Dia Foundation, that the existence of many ambitious public artworks—such as the especially subtle 24-hour/7-day-a-week harmonic sound installation *Times Square* by Max Neuhaus in New York's Times Square—are noticeable to any public at all.<sup>50</sup>

One intriguing recent example of a subtle artistic intervention is the ostensibly secretive organization by the Random Institute<sup>51</sup> of an exhibition in 2016 in Pyongyang in North Korea titled *All the Lights We Cannot See*.<sup>52</sup> For this exhibition, nine artists were invited to contribute to a project in which they were both conceptually and necessarily committed to secrecy. Apart from a very limited series of enigmatic installation shots, the most explicit trace of the exhibition's existence is a one-line mention on each of the participating artists' résumés. Tellingly, when asked about the exhibition, all participating artists agreed to respond with: "I'm not supposed to talk about it."<sup>53</sup>

## Distribution and circulation

A key characteristic of much art produced in the internet era is that it employs comparable technical means in circulation, storage, display, conservation, and reproduction. In this sense, the problem of the inseparability of form and content in contemporary art is further problematized. The internet is not simply a tool or medium but rather a whole ecosystem in which artists research, conceptualize, produce, and distribute their work. Yet artists are only beginning to reckon with ways in which these seemingly invisible yet extraordinarily powerful technologies dissolve boundaries and unify distributive systems into multiform networked spaces. Where then is a work of art in the age of the internet? Any response to this question demands consideration of both the distributed nature of the internet and the materially distributed nature of much contemporary art more generally. Historically, some forms of conceptual art, such as “mail art,” for example, already exemplified a potential for maintaining a unified identity despite global material distribution. Today, the shape and nature of digital distribution is a core concern for many artists. Although artists continue to identify explicitly with specific cultural and social groupings, the ways in which a digital object moves across and through spaces and borders can be understood to at once disperse and solidify cultural specificities.

As noted earlier, it is folly to call internet-based art immaterial, for the storage and dissemination of internet-based content still conforms to the laws of physics. Although the rise of the internet has led to a revival of interest in historical ideas related to so-called dematerialization, the same problem facing conceptual artists in the late 1960s and 1970s prevails—the internet does not negate the need for a “vehicular medium” of some kind to transmit an idea as art from one mind to another.<sup>54</sup>

The internet has only compounded pre-existing perplexities surrounding the *where*, *what*, and *when* of a work of art. At a basic level, this question was of course already encapsulated, as famously noted by Benjamin in 1936, in the inherent reproducibility of the printed page and the photographic image. Yet the digital realm does introduce additional layers to this conundrum, particularly in relation to the photographic image. As Osborne observes,

although “the whole question of *where* ‘the photograph’ is” was already “difficult to answer under the conditions of chemical-based analogue images,”<sup>55</sup> the digitally produced image now constitutes “a *visible* copy of an *invisible* original.”<sup>56</sup> Notwithstanding the requisite presence of at least one material form to transmit an idea from artist to audience, the form of this materialization is (at least hypothetically) infinitely interchangeable. As Artie Vierkant explains, a work of art in the age of the internet can be accessed in a variety of different ways:

In the version of the object one would encounter at a gallery or museum, the images and other representations disseminated through the Internet and print publications, bootleg images of the object or its representations, and variations on any of these as edited and recontextualized by any other author.<sup>57</sup>

We are thus presented with a new and unprecedented form of “commons” once advanced by Karl Marx. But even an intermediate user knows that this is where the utopian ring ends. Free access to so much courts its own costs, not least by giving multinationals, governments, and search agents free access to “us.” Consequently, we inhabit an age Shoshana Zuboff has presciently named “surveillance capitalism.”<sup>58</sup> In a sense, within this involved discussion of where art is, we must never forget the high degree to which we too, in all our convictions of being free agents, have become the locus of information and control.

## **Post-internet**

The already seemingly unfashionable neologism “post-internet art” was, at least popularly, coined by Marisa Olson in 2008<sup>59</sup> and further defined by Gene McHugh in 2009.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps most succinctly, as Vierkant observes, post-internet art is “informed by ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture, and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials.”<sup>61</sup> Tellingly, the fact that the term itself is now a cliché is perhaps further evidence of its core thesis regarding the now ubiquitous banalities of the conditions it seeks to encapsulate. In any event, the ever-increasing speed and accessibility of the technologies involved, and the sheer girth of the worlds in which art is now produced, disseminated, and discussed, will ensure that much the content of this text will be dated by the time it goes to print.

In a so-called post-internet climate, a work or exhibition is understood to exist concurrently

across both traditional modes of object display, and in the versions and alternative materializations presented online. This situation has arisen on the back of a historical era already described by Krauss as beset by a “post-medium condition”—a condition in which anything can be anything else and something formed in one medium can be readily expressed through another whilst maintaining a connection to the originary medium through symbolically expanded discourse.<sup>62</sup> We can also recognize that this post-internet situation simply is a technologically augmented extension of postconceptual art’s established capacity to maintain an identifiable unity across, as Osborne describes it, a “complex distribution of artistic materials, across a multiplicity of material forms and practices” despite being expressed through a “singular, though internally multitudinous work.”<sup>63</sup> For Vierkant, contemporary artists routinely create works that move seamlessly from physical to online presentation, “either changing for each context, built with an intention of universality, or created with a deliberate irreverence for either venue of transmission.”<sup>64</sup> Within globally distributed yet highly specialized digital communities, the process of digital transmission naturally becomes an inextricable part of the world of the work. Once again, by activating a network of relations encapsulating various discrete materializations, we can still identify specific works—irrespective as to whether the initial point of entry is online or offline.

### **Net art and online exhibitions**

As we have already established, new art forms and practices emerging in tandem with digitally activated modes of presentation and dissemination have radically reshaped the artworld. As is also the case with broader cultural production, informational transmission has become as important as content creation. One consistent factor in the dispositional development of internet and post-internet art are questions related to the political nature of distribution and access. It is therefore unsurprising that many contemporary artists seek to enter, disrupt, or take control of privately controlled distribution systems to critique power inequities. One extraordinary historical example on the incoming tide of net art was Cornelia Sollfrank’s 1997 response to a Hamburger Kunsthalle call for submissions for a net art competition. In forming her submission, Sollfrank used a program that collected random HTML materials from the web and automatically combined them to enter 289 fictional women artists in the competition. Sollfrank’s *Female Extension* was then activated in the moment in which the unsuspecting museum proudly announced how many women had entered, before predictably declaring an all-male list of winners.

Today, given that many artists are more familiar with using a computer than traditional fine art production techniques, and given that art audiences are already familiar with digital media, the distinction between a work of art and an internet meme or everyday digital artifact can sometimes seem rather amorphous. But before we get too carried away with this ontological problem, there is no logical reason to view this symbolic distinction differently to any post-Duchampian art.

If the internet has profoundly transformed how culture is created, documented, and archived, how have artists met this transformation? It is uncontroversial to assert that all art involves at least some form of mediation, translation, or transmission. Yet digital art exemplifies “remediation,” insofar as it assumes the form of a revision whilst foregrounding a new medium.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps, in simply extending upon postmodern art and popular cultural tendencies toward self-referencing (for instance, paintings about painting or TV about TV), many artists have naturally gravitated towards the production of websites about websites or social media about social media. In 2014, for example, Amalia Ulman ran a semi-fictionalized makeover through her Instagram account titled *Excellences and Perfections*. Here, Ulman pretended to undergo a breast augmentation, followed the Zao Dha Diet, attended pole-dancing lessons, and paraded lingerie in stylized interiors. Tellingly, even Ulman’s friends were unable to distinguish her real and fictional persona. This work has already entered the canon as the first serious Instagram artwork.

Some curators and institutions see the net as a platform for creating exhibitions. Surprisingly, this can sometimes involve even more work than mounting a traditional exhibition. To develop an online exhibition, curators must consider the distributional nature of the web and technical characteristics such as variability and virality. They also need be prepared to continue promoting and updating the project. Looking beyond the exhibition, the task of documentation then encounters problems of ephemerality and obsolete digital platforms. For some curators, these are challenges that can be built into the curatorial premise itself. The Tate’s *The Gallery of Lost Art* (2012–13), for example, was an exclusively online museum exhibition which sought to present “surrogates” for “lost” historical artworks, repurposed spatial and televisual tropes from crime and forensic science programs to cast its online

audience in the role of forensic investigator.<sup>66</sup> Offering a scalable high resolution array of paratextual material presented on virtual display tables viewed from above, *The Gallery of Lost Art* was available online for only one year, and then pulled down permanently. Controversially, especially given the production price tag of £300,000 (over US\$400,000), the decision to end the project after one year sought to accentuate the exhibition's core curatorial "insights into loss."<sup>67</sup> Significantly, the curatorial premise for *The Gallery of Lost Art* emphasized that artworks should be understood in relation to "a broad ecology of ideas, influences, and connections, in which the material existence of the artworks was only one."<sup>68</sup> Undoubtedly, no artwork is ever completely lost if we maintain some cultural knowledge and evidence, no matter how meagre, of its existence. This fact brings us back to the problem of *where* and *when* any work or exhibition is understood to exist.

### **Image ⇌ object**

Mass-circulated digital images can quickly become unanchored from originary contexts, collapsing distinctions between specific locations and temporal zones, and in doing so, contribute to a sense of a perpetual present that is deceptively divorced from the world of actual bodies and objects in time. Meanwhile, given that images have always existed outside of a visual art context, they cannot be ontologically contained within the confines of its discourse. Today, we are surrounded by images as never before. Yet although the digital image offers seemingly endless possibilities for manipulation and dissemination, it is important to remember that we cannot receive images without the vehicular support of objects. This image/object relationality also sits at the core of our "where is art?" dilemma.

The production and dissemination of the digital image now touches most aspects of late capitalist existence. Importantly, the internet and associated problems of locational specificity is also an issue for artists producing objects for traditional modes of display. Even painters producing works for conventional gallery walls are doing so in an era in which the digital invariably appears at least somewhere in the chain from conception through production to exhibition, dissemination, and archive. As Alex Bacon noted in 2016, even contemporary painting no longer primarily attends to "pictorial space, but, rather, is engaged with the question of object versus image."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, he asks, "does a painting lie in the object, or in the image, or in the text about the work?"<sup>70</sup> What is actually present, and where? Osborne articulates this bidirectional dilemma beautifully:

The image at once presents an absent thing and designates the thing presented as unreal, because it is absent. In other words, the image presents in two directions at once, the image is constitutively, ontologically ambiguous. . . . That's the power of the image. It points to the presence of the unreal and the absence of the real (it performs both these functions simultaneously).<sup>71</sup>

Regardless of how we choose to look at it, there is no escaping the fact that contemporary artists, irrespective of the content of their work, are implicated in ways of thinking and making formed in response to the ubiquity of the digital image. Moreover, as noted earlier, it is now likely that more people will encounter a work through the backlit glow of a portable screen than via any other means. This still new but already dominant reality has not only fundamentally changed the way that we look at images, it has also profoundly diminished our attention spans. In the words of Bishop, as images now dance across screens, “our eyes just scan the surface” as part of a process of “rapid-fire skimming.”<sup>72</sup> So how do artists meaningfully compete with the broader cacophony of competing distractions that surround art received through or alongside the backlit glow of portable screens? For Osborne, this situation is already inherently paradoxical, for “art distracts, as well as resisting distraction [yet] is received in distraction.”<sup>73</sup> The implications of these technologies are still uncertain:

Today, with the digitally based convergence of audio-visual communication technologies, the training ground of distracted reception has moved again, from television to the multiplying sites and social functions of the interactive, liquid crystal-display screen: smartphones and tablet computers, in particular. We are experiencing a new, much more spatially diffuse “cult of distraction” of the internet, the social and economic—but not yet the artistic—significance of which is clear.<sup>74</sup>

It is unsurprising, given the proliferation of online activity more generally, that the dissemination of much contemporary artistic production also employs and reflects the practices of copying, hyperlinking, sharing, tagging, and filtering that dominate contemporary lived experience. The way in which the internet now forms a subject, theme, and method has led to a growth of artistic events and activities that variously reflect upon, take place within, or are organized online. In the digital age, artists have in many ways become far more self-sufficient entities. Artists no longer simply make works and exhibitions. They also create events, texts, and archives while consistently managing online representations of their work. Peer-to-peer technologies, through which users modify and re-

post media objects, have also disrupted long established assumptions that artists create, curators select and interpret, and gallerists or traditional publishers disseminate. Consequently, the locus of activity is as difficult to ascertain as the nature of image/object relations.

### **The specter of popular culture**

In the old days, as the phrase goes, it was easy to officiate between high and low art. The encroachment of the low into the high was a fairly easy dialectic to grasp, which, along with its implication of a transvaluation of values of the new over the old, made pop art a favorite for high school and first year art students. Put bluntly, cultural phenomena that were not art, from places not germane to art, entered into art and art's domain. We may continue to look back on this time with some degree of wistfulness, since the shift is so comprehensible. It took wing in the 1960s, when there was still faith in activism and social change, when the "inside" and the "outside" of institutions—be they art-related or most other discipline-oriented activities—were still relatively coherently demarcated. Since then, it was all but an expectation for artists, including performers, composers, novelists, and poets, to muddy the waters of "pure" expression. The appropriation of popular culture henceforth entered the growing list of artistic devices.

But in the 1980s and perhaps into the 1990s, despite institutional critique and the various other artistic ironists and anti-disestablishmentarians, there was a trust in the walls of cultural institutions. Epistemically unstable as they were, museums and academies could be seen to uphold values and were invaluable storehouses of knowledge in the face of growing amnesia. Yet by the turn of the new millennium, it became more and more evident that it was not all a case of ignorance, arrogance, nor amnesia. Instead, we witnessed a rapid and sizeable change in episteme, a cultural paradigm shift. In comparison to established historical standards, in which marked cultural shifts initially took centuries and later decades to instate, this one seemed to arrive almost overnight. Comics, street art and graffiti, internet memes, music videos and other moving image forms unrelated to art—and perhaps most evidently, fashion—would become the loci of practices that could not be ignored in their capacity for both their criticality and their growing and increasingly sophisticated audiences. If we are to give lip service to the unfortunate but unfortunately (for the moment) unassailable criterion of the "success" of an exhibition according to the number of visitors, the annual exhibitions held

by the Fashion Institute of the Metropolitan Museum Art, New York, count among the top since *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* in 2011, while the Met Gala, a fashion event, now garners attention to begin to rival the Academy Awards. Meanwhile, the popular effect of Hiro Murai's music video for Childish Gambino's song *This is America* (2020)—which addressed US gun violence, systemic racism, and discrimination—dwarfs that of many a feel-good attempt to curate away racism in the visual arts (which is in turn dwarfed by the impact of 17-year-old Darnella Frazier's vernacular video of the death of George Floyd in 2020). In short, it is not difficult to recognize that far more substantial shifts—in terms of critical social change, innovative style, and substance—are taking place far away from the often-introverted so-called critical concerns of the artworld.

In response to these new cultural conditions, one of us has coined the term, “Gaga aesthetics,”<sup>75</sup> which David Carrier and Joachim Pissarro a little earlier dubbed “wild art.”<sup>76</sup> Using the cult pop figure Lady Gaga (aka Stefani Germanotta) as an avatar as opposed to central node, Gaga aesthetics can first be grasped in its most literal sense of “aesthetics gone gaga,” hence a state of affairs when tradition is up-ended such that we are compelled to look elsewhere for the critical strategies for which we once turned to art. Contemporary audiences, for example, are far more likely to turn to Jordan Peel, Banksy, or Ava DuVernay for a social message over Jeff Koons or Ai Weiwei. Here, a twenty-first century pop phenomenon such as Lady Gaga herself is worth scrutiny, whether in sequences from her videos or her appropriated “improvement” on the canonic feminist work by Jana Sterbak, the meat dress.<sup>77</sup> The number of university subjects and academic journal articles devoted to the cultural significance of Madonna for an earlier generation or Beyoncé today add further weight to this argument. Another variation worth mentioning here is Jack Halberstam's “low theory.”<sup>78</sup> There are myriad other examples of critical practices that tell us about ourselves and the world, interrogate complex matter with nuance and intensity—all within the perilous capitalist-driven domain of what Adorno (with Max Horkheimer) called the “culture industry.”<sup>79</sup> Adorno pitted the culture industry (his specialized term for popular and mass culture) against “authentic” art. Today, authentic art can be found embedded within the culture industry. This had once been the culture industry's “alienated” foil. Yet now we are presented with texts and meta-texts, values of different quanta and depth, meanings of unquestioning complexity living symbiotically in the dross of popular culture—which is no longer to be easily relegated or cast aside as it was in the “old days.” Consequently, our

“where is art?” question is only further compounded by the fact that art-like activities exist in pockets and enclaves within “non-art” domains. Moreover, these domains all too frequently do not care for the fictionalized conceit of the *art* label.

One of many early correctives in this shift of emphasis is found in the great fashion photographer Helmut Newton who, since the 1970s, exerted an inestimable influence on subsequent figurative photography, and later, on video art. On the occasions when he was asked whether he considered himself an artist, he replied that he didn’t care either way. This indifference poses challenges on a number of levels for art and those seeking out “artness.” It may also be a tacit indictment of what art as such—fine art, artworld sanctioned art—has managed to achieve in response to the challenges of the last few decades, helped on by a purblind market and craven curators. Note that we are not advocating the end of art in the manner of Hegel, or more recently, Danto or Donald Kuspit (“post-art”). Instead, we are arguing that maybe the life and soul of the party is not in the museum but rather somewhere you might pass on the way there...

### **So, where *is* art?**

Although many of the same questions that have long defined art’s relationship with the world hold, the dimensional scope of some art historical problems is being hyperbolically distorted across an obese present of global multi-temporal transcultural interactivity. This is a world that can at times seem wider than history is deep. Against this backdrop, contemporary art is hypothetically materially unlimited, ambiguously fictionalized, defined by a mutual insufficiency of material and contextual elements, and features a limit function provided only by the institutional networks of the artworld. Perhaps counterintuitively, the more that we understand a work of contemporary art as a spatially diffused distribution of elements across time and space, the more that the indeterminacy of art itself assumes a conspicuous materiality. Works of art presented in both direct and indirect relationship with the internet are less likely to be regarded as fixed in space and time, and correspondingly, more likely to be regarded as porous and open to continual transformation. Moreover, given that we can now effectively scroll along or zoom in and out of some objects potentially infinitely, questions of scale are increasingly unhinged from bodily registers. At best, however, art is still capable of performing an important and critically reflective intermediary role between what we experience as embodied beings and that which is increasingly abstracted in code on

massive servers situated elsewhere in time and space. Today, although an artist or artistic collective presented online might be indistinguishable from a corporation or brand, comparable yet ontologically distinct creative activity is always already happening online and around us. Unlike the assertions of aesthetic autonomy that prevailed in key twentieth century art, much art in the twenty-first century is perhaps more concerned with negotiating relationships and testing spatial and temporal boundaries. Consequently, many core twentieth century contestations pertaining to art's identity, value, and meaning have been recast as increasingly fuzzily demarcated and ambiguously oscillating multiform problems pertaining to art's situatedness, relationality, and relevance.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, expanded ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The mutual insufficiency of contemporary art's aesthetic and conceptual dimensions is explored at length in Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 136–69.

<sup>4</sup> *Allographic* is a term introduced by Nelson Goodman to describe works such as pieces of music or literary texts where there can be multiple copies, each of which is equally an instance of the work.

<sup>5</sup> *Intermedia* was a term used in the mid-1960s by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins to describe artistic activities taking place in-between disciplines, media, and genres.

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Osborne, "Transcategoriality: Postconceptual Art," in *Anywhere or Not at All*, 88–104.

<sup>7</sup> This unified constellation of distributed material elements is explored at length in: Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*.

<sup>8</sup> See Jeffrey Strayer, *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> In his 1938 book, *The Principles of Art*, R.G. Collingwood essentially argued that works of art are expressions of emotion and not material things. See Robin Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University

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Press, 1958).

<sup>10</sup> Douglass Huebler, "Artist Statement," in the gallery publication to accompany the exhibition *January 5–31, 1969* at Seth Siegelau Gallery, New York, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> See Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973). First published as "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 31–6.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 138.

<sup>13</sup> Marcel Broodthaers, "Interview with Marcel Broodthaers with Jean-Michel Vlaeminck, 1965," interview by Jean-Michel Vlaeminck in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafia, 2012), 151–2.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Hillier, "Artists at Work: Susan Hillier," interview by Sarah Lowndes, *Afterall*, February 2, 2011, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.afterall.org/article/artists-at-work-susan-hillier>.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Schellekens, "The Aesthetic Value of Ideas," in *Philosophy & Conceptual Art*, eds. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 82.

<sup>16</sup> See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph Grigely, *Exhibition Prosthetics* (Boston: Bedford Press; London: Sternberg Press, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Markus Gabriel, *The Power of Art* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2020), 34.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Osborne, "Contemporary Art Is Post-Conceptual Art," (public lecture, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Villa Sucota, Como, July 9, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> See Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 152–3.

<sup>21</sup> Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Osborne, 113; emphasis in the original.

<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44.

<sup>24</sup> Krauss, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Krauss, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (1997): 91.

<sup>27</sup> See Adam Geczy and Vicky Karaminas, "Fashion is a (Dis)Embodied Practice, or the Persistence of Perfume," conclusion to *Fashion Installation: Body, Space, and Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 103–5.

<sup>28</sup> Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Osborne, 100.

<sup>30</sup> *Place* (when used as a verb) can also denote the action of setting something in a particular location. In

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humanistic geography, place refers to how people think about a specific space. A place is therefore a space attributed specific meaning(s). A place might be anything from a childhood playground to a nation state. In this context, we might also consider the difference between a/the “world” and the “earth.” By extension, a “placeholder” is an object, a gesture or a marker of some kind temporarily placed as a stand-in for a location or idea. This can include anything from a personal item left to mind a space to a flag placed on a celestial object in the name of a terrestrial nation state.

<sup>31</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1977), 6.

<sup>32</sup> Hal Foster, “Close-Up: A Rose in Berlin,” *Artforum International* 49, no. 8 (April 2011), accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201104/close-up-a-rose-in-berlin-27825>.

<sup>33</sup> John Armleder “To Be Determined,” interview by Fabrice Stroun, *Artforum International* 49, no. 8 (April 2011): 174.

<sup>34</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 10.

<sup>35</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du reel, 2002), 113.

<sup>36</sup> Bruno David et al., “Nawarla Gabarnmang, a 45,180±910 cal BP Site in Jawoyn Country, Southwest Arnhem Land Plateau,” *Journal of Australian Archaeology* 73, no. 1 (2011): 73–7.

<sup>37</sup> Fallen painted rock at this site has ash residue radiocarbon dated at 27631±717 years cal BP, indicating that the ceiling must have been painted more than 28,000 years ago.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Gunn, Bruno David, Jean-Jacques Delannoy and Margaret Katherine, “The Past 500 Years of Rock Art at Nawarla Gabarnmang, Central-Western Arnhem Land,” in *The Archaeology of Rock Art in Western Arnhem Land, Australia*, eds. Bruno David, Paul S.C. Taçon, Jean-Jacques Delannoy, Jean-Michel Geneste (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2017), 303–28.

<sup>39</sup> Louise Lawler, *Birdcalls, 1972/1981/2008*, audio recording, text, 7:01 minutes, LeWitt Collection, Chester, Connecticut, located at Dia Beacon, New York, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.diaart.org/collection/collection/lawler-louise-birdcalls-19721981-l-2005-100>.

<sup>40</sup> Alex Bacon, “Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age,” *Rhizome*, May 24, 2016, accessed May 3, 2021, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/may/24/surface-image-reception-painting-in-a-digital-age>.

<sup>41</sup> Liam Gillick, “Contemporary Art Does Not Account for That Which is Taking Place,” *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010), accessed January 17, 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67664/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place/>.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew McNamara, “What is Contemporary Art? A Review of Two Books by Terry Smith,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 12 (2012): 255.

<sup>43</sup>As Arthur C. Danto has argued since the 1960s, artistic difference is not asserted literally but rather philosophically. For Danto, a good analogy for distinguishing literal indiscernibility is found in the moment in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire* (1962) that references Robert Frost’s *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy*

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*Evening* (1923)—a poem where the last two lines are repeated: “And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep.” The first line literally and autobiographically states “I have a long way to go before I can sleep.” The second, literally identical, line becomes metaphysical by implying “I have much to do before I die.” Arthur C. Danto, “Is It Art?,” interview by Alan Saunders, *The Philosopher’s Zone*, ABC Radio National, 1:35 p.m., March 4, 2006, accessed July 26, 2021, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/is-it-art/3301278>.

<sup>44</sup> Arthur C. Danto, “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 581.

<sup>45</sup> Danto, “The Artworld.”

<sup>46</sup> Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>47</sup> Lee, 8.

<sup>48</sup> See Claire Bishop, “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?,” in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 35–45.

<sup>49</sup> Marcel Duchamp described the “infra-thin” as the slightest margin of dissimilitude between seemingly identical entities. He analogized such interstices of barely discernible difference as reminiscent of the warmth of a recently vacated chair. Duchamp’s term was closely linked to what he also called deferral or delay. Indeed, the infra-thin, Duchamp declared, cannot be defined, “one can only give examples of it.” See Marjorie Perloff, “‘But Isn’t the Same at Least the Same?’: Translatability in Wittgenstein, Duchamp, and Jacques Roubaud,” *Jacket* 14 (July 2001), accessed September 5, 2021, <http://jacketmagazine.com/14/perl-witt.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Max Neuhaus, *Times Square*, 1977/2002, digital sound signal, Dia Art Foundation, New York, located on Broadway between 45th and 46th Streets, New York. This artwork was originally installed at Times Square from 1977 to 1992, and then permanently reinstalled in 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Based in Zurich, Switzerland, Random Institute has produced intriguingly ambiguous exhibitions, events, and research initiatives around the world featuring work by artists such as Richard Long, James Lee Byars, Cory Arcangel, Zilvinas Kempinas, Guido van der Werve, Bethan Huws, Carey Young, Julian Charrière, Federico Herrero, Allora & Calzadilla, Luis Camnitzer, Alfredo Jaar, Regina José Galindo, Aníbal López, Teresa Margolles, Rivane Neuenschwander, and Liliana Porter. Founded by Sandino Scheidegger and Luca Müller in 2007, Random Institute’s focus is new exhibition formats and exhibition-making as practice.

<sup>52</sup> *All the Lights We Cannot See* (2016) was conceived by Random Institute and curated by Anna Hugo and Sandino Scheidegger. The exhibition was held on April 9–12, 2016, on the 23rd floor of the Yanggakdo International Hotel in Pyongyang, North Korea. A manipulated and reproduced issue of the state-owned Pyongyang Times served as the exhibition catalogue. See “All the Lights We Cannot See,” Random Institute, accessed August 17, 2018, <http://randominstitute.org/event/north-korea-show>.

<sup>53</sup> Random Institute, “All the Lights We Cannot See.”

<sup>54</sup> David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2004), 59.

<sup>55</sup> Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 124; emphasis in the original.

<sup>56</sup> Osborne, 129; emphasis in the original.

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<sup>57</sup> Artie Vierkant, “The Image Object Post-Internet,” *Jstchillin*, 2010, accessed May 3, 2021, <http://jstchillin.org/artie/vierkant.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Soshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

<sup>59</sup> Maria Olson, “Interview with Marisa Olson,” interview by Régine Debatty, *We Make Money Not Art*, March 28, 2008, accessed August 17, 2020, <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/how-does-one-become-marisa.php>.

<sup>60</sup> Gene McHugh, *Post Internet*, accessed August 17, 2020, <http://122909a.com> (site discontinued). An archive of this blog, which was funded by a Warhol Foundation arts writers grant, was preserved by *Rhizome* at the New Museum, New York, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://122909a.com.rhizome.org/>.

<sup>61</sup> Artie Vierkant, “Image Object Post-Internet.”

<sup>62</sup> In describing a “post-medium condition,” Krauss recognized that the specificity of a medium is not synonymous with its material form. Eschewing Greenberg’s modernist ideal of medium specificity, Krauss re-conceptualizes the medium as an open field and discourse. For Krauss, the medium as a supporting structure reconciles material and technical specificity with conceptual diversity. Ultimately, however, for Krauss, this relational differentiation amplifies, rather than reduces, the conceptual importance of media. Moreover, Krauss sees the medium as an aggregative “network” or “complex” of media. Consequently, the idea of painting can be understood as a structural place, a performative action, a remediated form or even as an anti-formation containing no independent essence other than being “not painting.” See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

Picking up on Krauss’s description, Craig Dworkin argues that we encounter an inescapability of media—within overlapping networks—that runs counter to the immateriality claimed within some branches of conceptualism. See Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> Artie Vierkant, “Image Object Post-Internet.”

<sup>65</sup> See Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> *The Gallery of Lost Art* (2012–13) was curated by Tate’s head of collection research Jennifer Mundy. This online exhibition was developed together with Tate’s creative media director Jane Burton and Glasgow-based digital design agency ISO which is led by Damien Smith and Mark Breslin.

<sup>67</sup> Jennifer Mundy and Jane Burton, “Online Exhibitions,” (paper presented at the Annual Conference of Museums and the Web, Portland, Oregon, April 17–20, 2013), accessed May 3, 2021, <http://mw2013.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/online-exhibitions/>.

<sup>68</sup> Mundy and Burton, “Online Exhibitions.”

<sup>69</sup> Alex Bacon, “Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age,” *Rhizome*, May 24, 2016, accessed July 12, 2021, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/may/24/surface-image-reception-painting-in-a-digital-age>.

<sup>70</sup> Bacon, “Surface, Image, Reception.”

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<sup>71</sup> Peter Osborne, “On the Historical Existence of Objects: Archive as Afterlife and Life of Art,” (conference presentation, *Theater, Garden, Bestiary: A Materialist History of Exhibitions*, ECAL/University of Art and Design, Lausanne, Switzerland, October 21, 2016), audio recording, 33:48, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XmSSQcII58>.

<sup>72</sup> Claire Bishop, “Digital Divide,” *Artforum International* 51, no. 1 (2012): 434–41.

<sup>73</sup> Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 186.

<sup>74</sup> Osborne, 185.

<sup>75</sup> Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Gaga Aesthetics: Art, Fashion, Popular Culture, and the Up-Ending of Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

<sup>76</sup> David Carrier and Joachim Pissarro, *Aesthetics of the Margins, the Margins of Aesthetics: Wild Art Explained* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2019).

<sup>77</sup> Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, raw flank steaks sewn together, edition of two, plus one artist’s copy, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Centre Pompidou, Paris. This artwork was first shown at Galerie Rene Blouin, Montréal, and later shown the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

<sup>78</sup> “Any book that begins with a quote from *SpongeBob SquarePants* and is motored by wisdom gleaned from *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Chicken Run*, and *Finding Nemo*, among other animated guides to life, runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Yet this is my goal. Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried-and-true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed, terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness.” Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>79</sup> The term “culture industry” was coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1947 book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002).