

# Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art

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What does an artwork mean for you? What sense do you make of it? In the paradigm of contemporary art the answer is clear: it's up to you. Constrained by the artwork's subject matter (insofar as you can determine it), its material organization and presentation (including online transience), and the information you can glean from the press release, the artist's "interests," or what the art invokes, you *respond* to this configuration of mild injunctions. "Mild" because the parameters are open enough, loose enough, opaque enough for you to (have to) make your own way through the artwork. It asks you a question, making an open-ended assertion without definitive sense. You reply—usually not to the artwork but, in the best case, with a shift in your own system of ideas, values, even the very way you formulate your languages. You are the center of the artwork. Or, as Juliane Rebentisch accurately remarks, since the artwork is not just its material being but also the sense that it makes and the values it inscribes, what is primary in contemporary art—its condition and horizon—is the art *experience* that is the transformation of both the subjective viewer *and* the artwork:

Aesthetic experience is nothing that can be "had" by the subject. The term "experience" refers to a process between subject and object that transforms both—the object insofar as it is only in and through the dynamic of its experience that it is brought to life as a work of art, and the subject insofar as it takes on a self-reflective form, its own performativity.<sup>1</sup>

What Rebentisch captures and affirms very well here is that under the name "aesthetic experience" contemporary art depends upon its receiving subject, the addressee of the work, who is taken to constitute it rather than arrive as latecomer after its production. Put colloquially, the art "leaves space" for the viewer, the viewer "completes" the work. Contemporary art is the art that forefronts aesthetic experience in this sense. Historically, it corresponds to the work made from the late 1950s by Allan Kaprow and others against the strictures of high modernism (crucial to which was the retrospective affirmation of Marcel Duchamp's readymades), gaining traction through the 1960s in other modes, notably with the combined, if sometimes

A version of this essay appears in *Spike* 37 (Fall 2013).

- <sup>1</sup> Juliane Rebentisch, "Answers to Questionnaire on the Contemporary," *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 101. See also, in English, "7 Negations: Against Aesthetics Affirmationism," in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, ed. Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 51–64; and *The Aesthetics of Installation Art*, trans. Daniel Hendrickson and Gerrit Jackson (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

mutually acrimonious, developments of Conceptual art and Minimalism as well as early performance art, and attaining total spectrum dominance in the metropolitan centers of the West since the mid-1980s and globally since the mid-late 1990s. The centrality of aesthetic experience as *the* condition and horizon of art was abetted by theoretical insights in deprioritizing authorial claims over meaning and privileging instead interpretation and reception as the key moment of meaning making (Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, and, retrospectively, Mikhail Bakhtin were the key early figures in this regard).

That a reality such as art can only be apprehended by the thinking or consciousness of it such that it is *necessarily* accompanied by that thinking and consciousness is the dependency or injunction that Quentin Meillassoux has influentially called *correlationism*.<sup>2</sup> The problem with correlationism is that all accounts of reality are necessarily accounts of how reality is thought or known. Put the other way, reality itself cannot be known “in itself” since it is always thought or apprehended by a consciousness. Thought never takes leave from itself, if only because it *thinks* that departure and what is outside of it: what you know is always what *you* know. The many difficult self-reflexive philosophical problems that follow in establishing the possibility of a knowledge of the real for what it is independent of thought—that is, realism—will be left aside here, as will a detailed account of the various recent philosophies, gathered under the umbrella term Speculative Realism (SR), which strive to break out of correlationism. What is more immediately pressing here is that, in having a subject of aesthetic experience as its condition, *contemporary art is a correlationism*.

To be clear: contemporary art as the aesthetic experience of sense- and value-making, as the co-constitution of the art object *and* subject, assumes correlationism and reproduces it, affirms it, in every moment of its open-ended experience. The artworks and the discursive formulation of contemporary art—objects, events, performances, images, press releases, reviews, magazine essays, auction catalogues—stylize and configure a correlationism in how art is to be taken by its audience. Contemporary art appeals to its addressees to determine the art in their own terms, including the disagreement between viewers that is the best ideal “democratic” result. Artists have an “interest” in this or that; the artwork or exhibition “explores,” “plays with,” “interrogates,” or “shows a sensitivity about” such and such topic. No more definitive or precise an account can be permitted at the cost of reducing viewers’ own capacities to make their call on the art. Abstractions serve this expectation and prioritization of experience well. And, for all their considerable differences, experience is the key category in theories central to contemporary art: it sits on both sides of Michael Fried’s split between absorption and theatricality; it is the condition of Jacques Rancière’s “aesthetic regime of art,” whose political

<sup>2</sup> See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008); and also Meillassoux, “Time without Becoming,” trans. Robin Mackay, *Spike* 35 (Spring 2013).

effects are the reorganization of experience; it is the term of the intractable that can only be felt or sensed through its materiality (Jean-François Lyotard), or of the singularities of affect that can be mobilized but not perceived or conceptualized (Gilles Deleuze), or events that escape the consistency and logic of identification in an inaeffectivity (Alain Badiou). In their common flight from communicable thought and concept—sometimes formulated as an anti-aesthetics—each of these philosophies repeats the insistence that the artwork remain bound to a field of (perhaps unthinkable) subjective experience that it cannot reflect upon or rationalize without distorting itself irreversibly. An emphasis on materiality in art carries the same desire of a primacy of sensory and spatiotemporal experience: matter is held to be extraneous, uncontrolled, excessive, or processual, but in any case against or to the side of form/concept/thought/intention; unctuous, residual matter or emergent material organization escapes the control or command of the artist's imposed parameters on the artwork. How else to apprehend the chromatic bounciness of the print, the light-sucking bleakness of the sculpture, the gloopy resilience of the paint in relation to the figures presented in such material presentation? Supposing sensory and finite experience as a condition and term of art, the artwork has an inarticulate or excessive presence in front of which there can only be an articulation—a linguistic aftereffect—that necessarily misses or misapprehends it. That presence is of a material order other to language's semantic and transferrable dimension. While Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois proposed an art-historical mobilization of this insistent meaninglessness under the Bataillean name of the *informe*,<sup>3</sup> the insistence on/of matter as art's snaring of experience persists today even through digital production with the emphasis on glitches, noise, disruptions, and slickness, all of which draw attention to what is produced and made manifest by the means of production "itself" as much as by its manipulation by artists as human agents.

For all the anti-conceptuality and experiential primacy of these approaches, and the paradoxical anti-philosophy of contemporary art as a post-conceptual practice,<sup>4</sup> they are in every case correlationist. As such, they are to be rejected by any rigorous realism. (Such a realism, which claims to apprehend the real outside of thought or the conditions of subjective experience, is not to be confused with realism as a style or genre of art committed to "accurate" representations of preexisting reality, since such a genre already assumes representation as an interval from a real elsewhere.) Aesthetically determined and organized, contemporary art has nothing to offer non-correlational realism. Put the other way, a rigorous realism

3 See Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

4 For Peter Osborne contemporary art is "post-Conceptual" in that, consciously or not, art now presumes the critical legacy of Conceptual art as a condition, including an indifference to medium-specificity as granting certain ontological privileges. See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All* (London: Verso, 2013). Osborne claims that contemporary art is not "an aesthetic art in any philosophically significant sense of the term" but rather only in its difference from the literality of the everyday (p. 10). For Osborne, contemporary art is then an art without aesthetics. The present essay argues, to the contrary, that contemporary art is *the* exemplar of the aesthetic constitution of art.

can readily dispense with art as it now stands without loss or limitation. From yet another angle, realism's provocation to art is the undoing of aesthetic experience as a condition or term of art, even in the avowal of art's ineluctable materiality. Which is to say that realism speculatively indicates the conditions for *another art than contemporary art*.

But it is important in this regard to proceed with some caution in the dimension of realism. For, as Documenta 13 amply demonstrated, mobilizing object-oriented variants of SR within contemporary art is a trivial if not conservative undertaking: the relation of objects amongst themselves, in which the human supposedly has no particular privilege, fits very well with a formalist, perhaps proto-modernist notion of art that privileges its objects and their composition—internal and mutual—over the *external* eye and ear of an observing, knowing subject but that nonetheless calls upon a distributed notion of subjectivity in which the human participates on a supposedly equal footing. The artist or viewer can appear as a mediator in this relation but is not necessary to it. Other versions of this logic include immersive art, networked art, systems art, and so on. While the emphasis in object-oriented approaches on the (non)relations between all objects themselves “equally” challenges the primacy of the human subject as a prerequisite for their mutual (in)comprehension, an equality between the art object and the human maker or addressee fits very well with any number of clichés just exposed on the primacy, obduracy, or excess of matter and object to human control. While revoking the primacy of *interpretation* it is nonetheless a generalized variant of the co-constitution of object and (sometimes) human subject that is the aesthetic experience of contemporary art.<sup>5</sup>

Contrast this to the variant of SR whose apparently paradoxical claim is that the real or absolute is apprehended without anthropomorphic, anthropocentric, or noocentric distortion only by *rational* thought. The primary model here is science (for Meillassoux, in the restricted form of mathematically organized science; for Ray Brassier, in the general form of the explanatory power of the naturalistic technosciences; for François Laruelle, as the intertwining of thought and the real, without a decision in favor of the former); and the demand upon contemporary art is strictly nontrivial: it removes subjective interpretation or experience as a condition or telos of the artwork, and therewith collapses the entire edifice of the contemporary art paradigm. While this need not be a direct concern for contemporary art, since rationalist SR need have no bearing on art (and should in fact rightly disregard or dismiss contemporary art as a lost cause), such a rationalism puts firmly destructive pressure on the current operating, artistic, intellectual, and ideological paradigm of art, pressure that is much needed as contemporary art now all-too-happily continues to recycle standard tropes of anti-foundationalist critique, ethical piety, apolitical politicality, and cultural hegemonization. While contemporary art can

5 Graham Harman stresses aesthetics as “first philosophy” in “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse 2* (March 2007): 187–221. Harman also formulates this point in *The Quadruple Object* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2011) as the resurrection of a “pan-psychism” of objects.

be dismissed by a rationalist SR without consequence for the latter, bringing it to bear on art nonetheless forces a series of demands and criteria for art in terms other than those of contemporary art. The speculation it invites is what an art other than contemporary art could be, not as a capricious flight of imagination or a frustrated wish but by being rationally known.

We can begin that speculation at once: the critique of correlationism made by rationalist SR is *not* the generalization of aesthetic experience but, to the contrary, a demonstration that there can be a knowledge of what has never been experienced (for Meillassoux, such is the arche-fossil or the God arriving tomorrow; for Brassier, the death of the sun; for Iain Hamilton Grant, the natural, nonhuman concept). An art responsive to this theoretically-led imperative would be indifferent to the experience of it, an art that does not presume or return to aesthetics, however minimal or fecund such an aesthetics might be. The condition and horizon of such an art is not that it be felt, appreciated in vague ways, or made-sense-of as contemporary art is, affirming in each case the viewer in her or his sensitivities and capacity for judgment. Indifferent to aesthetic experience, it is an art of rational knowledge. “Knowledge” here means that if there is an experience to be had, it can not only be formulated with a coherent logic and reasoned (even if its results are historically irrational), but also that it is subject to the predictive and generative exercise of reason qua new organizations of matter, thought, and experience.

There are precursors to such an art. Example: the reduction of aesthetics and the indifference to fabrication or reception was instantiated at the moment of moving from modern art to contemporary art with “instruction pieces,” in which artists gave (usually typewritten) instructions for the fabrication of their work by anonymous gallery workers. Such work has been described as an “aesthetics of administration,”<sup>6</sup> the instructions taking the form of managerial or bureaucratic edicts, and have themselves been more recently subject to commodification and aestheticization as they come to be traded as archived art-objects in their own right. However, they also epitomize contemporary art’s conventions insofar as the art is taken to be “completed” not only with its construction as per the instructions, but—as advocated by several Fluxus artists—completed by its addressee. Yet this aestheticization of the instruction is not its operational logic, but the refusal of the same. What such instructions suppose in their open reproducibility as instruction, as much as in the art object whose construction or presentation it spells out, is (i) the indifference of such art to any subject or meaning imposed upon it other than the fact of its systemic fabrication, and (ii) that the artwork qua instruction is indifferent to its own material conditions (it does not matter to this art if the paper is lined or not, if the typeface is Courier or Times New Roman, even if the object is fabricated or not, if anyone reads them or not, and so forth). As Robert Morris’s *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal* from 1963 makes clear in declaring its

6 Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.



own material redundancy as well as that of the work that is its ostensible referent, in *stating* the condition for the art that it itself is qua instruction piece,<sup>7</sup> such art is conceptually-systemically organized, immaterially determined, subjectively indifferent, aesthetically redundant, rationally cogent. It need not be experienced. Taking both of its dimensions together, instruction art acts as a paradigm for all post-Conceptual art in that it lends itself to (always temporary, partial) “completion” in subjective experience yet, against this, it also need not be experienced at all, but only known, in order to be art. This is conventionally a criticism of art, in fear of art abdicating its singularity for systematicity. The series of reductive banalities that Benjamin Buchloh attributes to Sol LeWitt as critic of high modernism typify such a reaction:

[LeWitt’s] work now revealed that the modernist compulsion for empiricist self-reflexiveness not only originated in the scientific positivism which is the founding logic of capitalism (undergirding its industrial forms of production just as much as its science and theory), but that, for an artistic practice that internalized this positivism by insisting on a purely empiricist approach to vision, there would be a final destiny. This destiny would be to aspire to the condition of tautology.<sup>8</sup>

7 Morris: “The undersigned, ROBERT MORRIS, being the maker of the metal construction entitled LITANIES, described in the annexed Exhibit A, hereby withdraws from said construction all aesthetic quality and content and declares that from the date hereof said construction has no such quality and content. Dated: November 15, 1963 [signed] Robert Morris.” While the *Statement* is taken art-historically to be a negating rejoinder to Philip Johnson’s non-payment for *Litanies* (the piece that is the statement’s immediate referent), theories supportive of contemporary art take it to be either an instance of the broader negating of material-optical specificity and objectality in favor of engagement with institutional and linguistic structures that is now a standard operation for contemporary art (Buchloh, *Ibid.*, 117–18), or, concomitant to such a determination and no less typical as a contemporary art procedure, as an “ironic” overdetermination of the artwork that is its direct referent, exposing the Duchampian readymade as the common condition for both the statement and the artwork itself (Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005]). In contradistinction to these aesthetically expansive accounts, the *Statement* is here taken more emphatically to be a description of its own conditions as an artwork. That is, Morris’s *Statement* is at once performative and constative of itself, yet, in relation to Buchloh’s complaint against the scientific “positivism” of conceptual art’s empiricism quoted later in the main text here, it is not tautological in that it is heterogeneously performative, constituting its own terms of operation as art by virtue of its rational and didactic exemption of the “art” of *Litanies* from its material external referent. This “de-aestheticization” was well-captured by Harold Rosenberg in 1970, though he identifies that “movement” or tendency with a return to “primitivism” in its rejection of artifice. See “De-Aestheticization,” in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 220–22. Rosenberg was not without cause in this characterization, given the limitations of the art of the time and its broad identification of Conceptualism with anti-formalism understood as anti-idealism and hence as pro-materialist. What is advocated here is, rather, the rationalism of the *Statement*, whereby its art takes place in its presentation, here or elsewhere, strictly equivalent to its presentation on the document signed by Morris in person; that is, it is art by virtue of its literal rather than material synthesis.

8 Buchloh, “Conceptual Art,” 115.