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Elizabeth Pulie

THE END OF ART AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

2016
THE END OF ART AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

Elizabeth Pulie

February 2016
This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney
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SUMMARY

Abstract

The idea of the end of art, originating in Western modernism, forms a link between modern art and thought. The tendency for this idea to recur throughout the modern, together with the proliferation of art in the post-modern period, has rendered ‘the end of art’ somewhat redundant in most contemporary art analysis. By contrast, this thesis considers the value of applying the idea of the end of art to contemporary art discourse and practice, in particular for its potential to strengthen the link between discourse and practice and return a sense of sovereignty to contemporary artists.

Contemporary art’s open, post-historical nature is frequently valued over the perceived metanarratives and ideology of the modern; however these characteristics also result in concerns that contemporary art lacks criticality. Attempts to return theoretical or philosophical criteria to evaluating contemporary art are frequently thwarted by accompanying attempts to retain its openness and plurality, while the common tendency to define ‘the contemporary’ as a new or improved moment tends instead to replicate modern or utopian thought. This thesis contends that for many art practitioners, the openness and all-encompassing nature of the term ‘contemporary art’ paradoxically works to ‘entrap’ their practice, and preclude its potential for criticality and significance.

This thesis contributes to addressing this dilemma by proposing a definition of contemporary art as the end of art, and explores the potential for executing a contemporary practice within this view. It contrasts existing definitions of contemporary art with the idea of the end of art by examining the idea’s history and recent contextualisation within contemporary art by philosopher Arthur C. Danto. The thesis proposes strategies for practicing art at the end of art, and argues for the value of practicing art relative to the idea that art has ended.

Description of Creative Work

An exhibition of between seven to eight works will take place at Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, from February 5 to February 27, 2016. Media will include hessian, mixed fabric, mixed fibre, metal and wooden fixings, bamboo, acrylic paint. Work is primarily wall-based, but may also hang from the ceiling or be positioned on the floor. This work extends experiments with new materials originating from work previously completed as a result of the thesis research, exploring art-making methodologies in combination with an end of art statement.
PREFACE
THE STORY OF MY PRACTICE


The outset of my undergraduate study\(^1\) was accompanied by a sense that I had no real reason to make art, and confusion as to what art actually was. While at this point I had no thought of the end of art, a retrospective view of the development of my practice displays a relation to the idea.

In a second-year painting exercise instructed by artist John Dunkley-Smith, the exact dimensions of the supports we were to use – height, width, and depth – were specified, resulting in the construction of four box-like forms. While free to paint anything on them, the emphasis on the object-ness of these supports rendered the act of applying an illusory sense of representation superfluous. My solution was to draw an even grid on each visible surface, fill its squares with identical painted markings, and write each side’s measurement near the edge. The result was a set of boxes covered in similar, regular, and aesthetically compelling patterns fig 1.

A sense of nihilism had accompanied my approach to this exercise – the heavy silence of the objects’ demand for content was overwhelming, as was the responsibility I had felt to apply significant artistic form to their surfaces. Happening upon my solution however, a layer of mystique was removed from my perception of the art object due to the emphasis the exercise gave the reality of painting as a box-like form, endowing the support with greater significance over the sense of its subject matter or illusion, which came to seem superficial. Where I had previously felt a keen lack of individual style or a subject to paint within the open terrain of our newly imposed studio practice, the idea of gridded, patterned paintings provided me with a method with which to approach future works, which I continued over the next few months fig 2.

\(^1\) Sydney College of the Arts, 1987-1989.
Fig 1 Elizabeth Pulie
1988
example from early painting exercise
acrylic on canvas on cardboard, 20.4 x 20.4 x 12cm
Fig 2 Elizabeth Pulie

1988
early patterned painting examples
acrylic on board, 4 panels, each 20 x 10cm
In discussions these works were frequently contextualised as ‘process art’ by my tutors: to me however, the objectives and concerns of this 1960s movement did not provide an adequately personal rationale for making art. While I enjoyed the meditative process of making these works, and the considerable time and effort involved resulted in a satisfying sense of working, the process of ‘making art’ felt an insufficient reason for me to choose to make art in the first place – thus my founding questions regarding what art was, and why one would make it, remained.

Happening upon a small book concerned with European modernism\(^2\), I gained sudden awareness of a view of modern western art as the progressive historical movement of styles, where each new style challenged the parameters of the art that had preceded it and questioned the canon of the art of the day. This idea gave me an insight into the diversity of modern art forms, their frequently radical nature, and the historical import of modern art as a whole: it seemed that the artists of each movement had striven to make forms of art that were more real to them than the official forms of their time. I gained the idea that art’s validity lay in its questioning its own nature, and that artists should engage in a radical practice true to their own view of art and the world.

After making gridded, patterned paintings for almost a year, I was eventually advised by a tutor that I shouldn’t let my work become ‘too decorative’: here, the fact my work shouldn’t be decorative seemed to form a parameter of contemporary art. In critical tutorials where we had discussed the meaning or theory informing our colleagues’ work, a contrast seemed to exist between the import of a work’s theory or meaning and a frequently accompanying emphasis on the work as aesthetic, which raised questions for me around the relation between aesthetics or appearances and a works’ meaning or significance. These parameters and contrasts seemed to form signposts around which I could anchor a critical practice.

At this time, a sensationalised television report\(^3\) made me aware of the business-art practice of New York-based artist, Mark Kostabi. Kostabi – a cheeky, oddball character with a clownish persona – manufactured paintings in a factory, a team of artists designing,

\(^2\) I have unfortunately lost any references to this book.

\(^3\) An exposé by the Australian current affairs program 60 Minutes, 1988.
executing and even signing his work for him. The report’s journalist portrayed Kostabi’s project and its acceptance by contemporary art institutions as scandalous; to me, Kostabi’s work challenged the fact that art should be non-commercial and hold meaningful content, raising questions of authorship and authenticity and highlighting the institution’s role in forming the concept ‘art’. His maintaining a clown-like persona meant Kostabi thumbed his nose at the institution while it (albeit fleetingly) accepted him, and my awareness of his enterprise transformed my understanding and practice of art. A view of art as commodity eradicated the heavy demand I had felt that art should embody meaning, showing me something real about what art was. The conflict that I had sensed existed between a work’s aesthetic and its meaning was, to a degree, solved within a view of art as business, and the fact the institution embraced a practice that openly ridiculed it by denying the art object’s authenticity or significance signalled an exciting vision of art as radical and self-critical.

Art as decoration and art as commodity formed parameters for contemporary art, indicating a possibility for a critical art practice. Where Kostabi took something art wasn’t meant to be and made art as business, I decided to take something else art wasn’t meant to be and make art as decoration. The institutional validation of Kostabi’s paintings eradicated the necessity I felt that my art should hold meaning or significance, and it seemed that the only true role art objects could hold in such an instance was as decoration. Given this was the reality for art in my day, my aim to be true to reality meant I could only make art as decoration.

I decided that making decorative paintings was to be my life project. I titled these paintings numerically and consecutively – beginning with One (1988).

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4 I later became aware of Warhol’s earlier pioneering of the idea of Business Art.

5 While the modern Austrian architect Adolf Loos wrote his lecture condemning ornament in 1908, the fact I was warned against making decorative paintings in 1988 reveals that ‘art’ and ‘ornament’ remain conceptually opposed: see Adolf Loos, Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (California: Ariadne Press, 1998).
Fig 3 Elizabeth Pulie
One
1988
acrylic on canvas, 140 x 110cm
In order to exclude any indicators of depth, meaning, theme or content from these works, I initially rendered the shapes and motifs using stencils and flat surfaces, minimising brushstrokes or a sense of the artist’s hand. I aimed for a future wherein my paintings could be ordered and remade in different colours and sizes to suit particular interiors, and to this end kept numbered cardboard templates of the designs. My decorative paintings were well received by students and faculty, and I was invited to participate in group exhibitions and hold solo exhibitions in established public and commercial galleries and artist run initiatives.

While I continued this project for fifteen years it didn’t have the impact I wanted: I had anticipated some opposition in reaction to my work, and had hoped that the resulting controversy would raise questions regarding the nature of art and its objects within the contemporary moment. The ready acceptance of my decorative paintings by institutions of contemporary art led paradoxically to my project’s failure (at least in part), since any oppositional status they may have held as decoration, and thus as non-art, was nullified and subsumed.

Situating objects within a gallery context tends automatically to imbue them with significance, meaning or concerns: where the first monochrome or readymade may have looked like non-art in its time, it may be impossible today to make such a gesture. My paintings were not read as ‘merely decoration’, and critics and theorists tended to link my work with issues such as feminism, aesthetics, and art versus craft. In 1997, Jacqueline Millner wrote: ‘as Pulie is well aware, no amount of clarification from the artist...could prevent the behemoth of interpretation from unleashing its manifold postulations.’ The claim that my work was ‘only decoration’ had necessarily to be made in words, since the openness of contemporary art institutions to art in any form meant it was no longer possible to critique art through the object itself. While I continued to number my paintings for some time, my definition of ‘decoration’ became looser: I began to draw my own designs, allowed visible brushstrokes, and experimented with new mediums and surfaces. Losing track of my numbering system around 2003, my decorative painting project – within the strict sense of its original parameters – dissolved.

Fig 4 Elizabeth Pulie
204 (Freehand Over Landscape)
2002
acrylic on canvas, 84 x 62cm
photo courtesy Sarah Cottier gallery
Throughout the 1990s I exhibited increasingly at artist run initiatives, where creating and sharing events and spaces with other artists felt more authentic than an involvement with the professional world of commercial galleries and museums. The dwindling impact of my object-based practice had rendered it less interesting to me, while making and facilitating art outside the institution seemed more radical. In addition, the exclusive sense of an involvement with an alternative art world felt like something unique to being an artist and potentially represented a characteristic that was essential to art. In the year 2000 I made the decision to run a gallery in the front room of my house in an attempt to participate in an activity that felt more real than that of my decorative painting project.

I had noticed that I tended to scan the name(s) of the artist(s) involved in exhibitions before making a judgement as to whether or not I would attend the opening, a fact which pointed to the idea that an artist’s name (or ‘fame’) was of some value and somehow intrinsic to a definition of art. With this in mind, I began to publish and distribute my own art magazine, *Lives of the Artists* (2002-2005). I wanted to create an interest in (and exploit) the lives of my friends and colleagues for those outside the art world and highlight the community that surrounded the alternative scene, outside official art contexts. Similarly to my introducing decoration to the realm of art, I focussed on something (i.e. the artist as name or personality) not normally considered intrinsic to art’s meaning, and I hoped to lend a sense of do-it-yourself, street-style glamour and thus exclusivity to the activities in which I was engaged with my artist friends.

*Lives of the Artists* was a black and white photocopied publication that I edited and published myself. While my aim was that it would eventually achieve greater distribution,

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8 Including regular exhibitions and attendance at *CBD Gallery, Pendulum, South and Elastic Projects* in Sydney.
9 The term ‘Relational Art’ was first raised within the exhibition catalogue for *Traffic*, curated by Nicholas Bourriaud at the CAPC Musee d’Art Contemporain de Bordeaux in 1996; I was however unaware of the term when I undertook my own relational activities.
10 *Front Room*, 2002-2003, with co-director and artist Jay Balbi.
glossier production standards and increased advertising revenue, within its eventual run of ten issues, Lives of the Artists retained an underground, handmade quality.

Fig 5 Elizabeth Pulie
Lives of the Artists #5, Spring 2003
photocopy on paper, A4, 32 pages
(cover image: Kathy Temin)
Contributions to the magazine were made by artists and friends and varied greatly in nature, ranging from exhibition reviews and articles to artist pages, advertisements and light-hearted, pop-cultural references. My own contributions (occasionally published under a pseudonym) consisted mainly of interviews with artists and reviews of non-art subjects, for example local retailers or Danish pastries. I aimed for the publication to contain writing of a light-hearted, approachable nature interspersed with more serious art content.

My final relational activity was an artist’s group called *Sydney Ladies’ Artist’s Club (SLAC)* (2005-2007). Initially comprising a core number of Sydney-based female artists, the group was based around events rather than a physical space or exhibitions, and communication occurred via email and a blog. I believed strongly that the group should operate democratically: to this end, any member could organise any event they liked under the auspices of the group. Events could be open to all (including men) or to members only, and organisers were responsible for obtaining a venue, sending invitations, and setting out the event’s parameters. Some of the events included a craft afternoon, slide nights, netball tournament, and a reading group.

While enjoyable, my relational art practice felt ineffective as an art strategy: facilitating others’ ideas was frustrating when they did not resonate with my own questions regarding the nature of art or my desire to challenge what art was. The most rewarding aspect of this practice may have been the sense of respect it lent, rendering me gatekeeper of my own institution. While I viewed these projects as my art practice, it gradually became clear that some assumed this more facilitative role meant I had stopped making art: despite growing international awareness of such practices as in themselves art, it became apparent that an expectation that the role of artist necessitated the making and exhibiting of objects frequently remained. While I had maintained an ongoing studio and exhibiting practice during these years, my relational involvement tended to read as my giving up art.

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12 The blog is still active: http://sydneyladiesartistsclub.blogspot.com.au/.

13 An offer to the group in 2006 to hold an exhibition at *Artspace*, Sydney, challenged my aim that the organisation operate democratically: three or four members had negotiated the offer and felt a need to control the event, curating other members into their own installations rather than allowing all members equal access to gallery space and funding. Since a hierarchical approach was not in the spirit of my original aims for the group, I withdrew SLAC from Artspace’s offer. The occasion proved difficult to negotiate and caused unforeseen friction and discord, with the group petering out not long afterwards.
End of art project (2010 - )

In 2006, impending motherhood seemed to necessitate a withdrawal from relational activities, and I returned to a solitary, studio-based practice. In this phase, lacking a project or framework in which to operate, I experimented with new materials such as oil stick and ink and juxtaposed them with my more usual hard-edged acrylic forms \(^6\). I hinged my paintings around personal themes and made intentionally ‘ugly’ art, mimicking mass-produced paintings that sell as furniture for interiors rather than high art.

While this period of work was open and experimental, the sense of nihilism that accompanied my confrontation with the blank support remained. Once again afloat in a sea of conceptual uncertainty, I nonetheless produced and exhibited some paintings which were interesting enough.

In 2010 I was invited by Melbourne-based artist Elvis Richardson to contribute to her gallery project *Death be Kind*, wherein all work was obliged to deal with the theme ‘death’. This presented me with a very real challenge: having spent twenty years avoiding an association with meaning in relation to my art objects, I didn’t know how to approach this particularly significant theme without resorting to clichéd images and death motifs. Spending a great deal of time considering this dilemma, I repeated the words ‘death’ and ‘art’ in my head, which led naturally to the phrase, ‘the death of art’. Given the context of my ongoing questioning of art as a concept, the failure of my decorative painting project and the sense of nihilism I encountered when approaching art as a practice, this phrase felt real to me. I liked the idea that I could potentially say ‘the death of art’ yet continue to make it, and that this contradiction would reflect the reality I sensed wherein art – in the continuous, progressive modernist sense of the self-questioning art object – seemed to be over, yet ‘art’ continued to exist.
Fig 6 Elizabeth Pulie
Foyer
2010
acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 102 x 84cm
photo courtesy Sarah Cottier gallery
INTRODUCTION

My practice is informed by a sense of art in its relation to theory or philosophy, linked to the historical and linear development of the art object’s ontology through modernism. This view considers ‘art’ a historically determined, contingent concept over an essential one, its discussion restricted to the realm of western visual art. While borders between eras are notoriously porous, for the purpose of this study I consider the inauguration of mechanical reproduction in the 19th century to have initiated the period of modern art due to the challenge it posed to the traditionally mimetic forms of painting and sculpture, instigating the development of modern art’s project of self-critique and beginning (arguably) with the movement of Realism. As theorised by Arthur Danto, a sense that the history of the self-critical development of art as a visual medium is over is the meaning of the end of art, due to the connection between this history and art’s ontology as a concept. My thesis research aims to argue for the concept’s application to a theory or definition of contemporary art, as well as examine its agency in facilitating a more philosophical contemporary practice than the current moment in art tends to allow, returning a sense of sovereignty to contemporary artists.

A view of modern art as developmental links it to western philosophy; here, rather than represent competing disciplines, they instead share a common concern with the critique or definition of their subject. The changing attitudes toward the validity of art objects’ forms historically may be seen to parallel philosophical treatment of the human subject and its essence, and in both instances, this development may be viewed as the liberation of form as theorised by Jean Baudrillard14. Where modernist thought increasingly liberated attitudes regarding the forms the concept ‘art’ could inhabit, the process accompanied the increasing liberation of the human subject, the real, and thought itself. A sense that this progression is over informs both modern art and thought via ‘the end of art’ and ‘the end of history’: where art ends in the final liberation of its form within the everyday, history is viewed as having ended with the final liberation of our concept of the human and the real. These histories’ explanations of our self-conception form our metanarratives, and the end of

history or the end of art may be characterised as either the end of the metanarrative in total, or the end of a certain ideological metanarrative. Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* in the early 19th century predate this developmental view of art.\(^{15}\)

Contemporary art is frequently defined in its *difference* to the modern due in large part to its post-historical, global nature, as emphasised in Terry Smith’s\(^{16}\) and Peter Osborne’s\(^{17}\) attempts to provide a definition or philosophy of contemporary art. These readings are accurate as the field does display historical stasis and is increasingly global; however this view of contemporary art is only effective *as the result of* modernism and in line with modernist aims, and must therefore be viewed as inextricably linked to the modernist project rather than possessing a distinct ideological drive. Contemporary art’s ontology must equally acknowledge that the infinity of forms at its disposal are the outcome of the modernist liberation of art’s essence rather than something inherent to the concept ‘art’ itself. Where a definition of contemporary art as the end of art refers most explicitly to the end of the modernist project of self-critique leading to art’s liberation, this is complicated by the fact of the contemporary’s intrinsic link to this project as its logical outcome. Where an end of art motif may be seen to have informed the modernist project and its development, contemporary art may more accurately be described as ‘the end of the end of art’. It is in this sense that the contemporary moment contrasts most starkly with the modern, despite the interrelationship of the two moments.

The label ‘contemporary art’ tends to lack criticality when it does not denote a particular style, form, or period in art, simply referring to art which is ‘happening now’ – Hal Foster in particular raises this concern in his commentary on the field.\(^{18}\) Where the openness of the term ‘contemporary art’ may also be viewed as positive due to its allowing for multiple voices and forms and its escape from the perceived imperial project of modernism, this same openness is equally considered to preclude critique due to its relativity and meaninglessness, detracting from attempts to theorise it, and the fact that definition and


\(^{17}\) Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All – Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

critique are perceived as features of the modern further complicates the project of defining contemporary art in its difference. Equally, while the availability of all form to contemporary practice may viewed positively, this same feature represents a trap for such practice, with absolute openness and an infinity of means resulting in a lack of significance or meaning in relation to any particular form.

As arguably the last modern movement, conceptual art is viewed as having established contemporary conditions and – among other themes – within his philosophy Peter Osborne raises the idea that contemporary art is a ‘post-conceptual’ art19. Where the progression of modern movements may be conceived as the systematic removal of that which was inessential to art’s definition, conceptual art represents an attempt to separate the concept from its material form, defying previous expectations that art remain visual or object-bound. Thus conceptual art’s project of dematerialisation maintained the modern project of definition, illustrated by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth’s characterisation of artworks as propositions, wherein by exhibiting a work the artist is declaring that something is art and thus engaging with the question, ‘what is art?’20 The attempted eradication of aesthetics or materiality by conceptual art allowed for a return of radicality to art practice, holding potential for art’s release from commodification and the collusion with socio-economic structures such commodification engendered, and potentially re-enfranchising individuals previously excluded by institutional expectations that artists be white or male. Here, a radical art practice was possible: the sense that art could inhabit any object or action seemed to render it accessible to all and make possible its escape from institutional sanctification.

However Kosuth, theorist Lucy Lippard and others identify conceptual art’s pure project of dematerialisation as having failed, since much conceptual and contemporary art remains bound by the object, its ontology determined in terms of aesthetics or the material and its

reality as a commodity giving rise to a collusion with neo-liberal values\textsuperscript{21}. Paradoxically, this outcome may have its roots within the conceptual project’s very aims: for the concept ‘art’ to exist, it requires demarcation from the realm ‘ordinary life’, thus the sense that art must be seen, and therefore visual, remains. When art exists within the ephemeral and the everyday, our ability to see it as art rather than as a normal everyday occurrence necessitates its institutional contextualisation, lending greater agency to the institution. Where Kosuth and Lippard view conceptual art’s re-materialisation as the movement’s failure, Osborne views it as proof of the necessity of aesthetics to a philosophy of contemporary art as a post-conceptual art\textsuperscript{22}.

The concept ‘creativity’, may – unlike ‘art’ – be essential to human activity, and may be applied to disciplines as varied as mathematics, cooking, agriculture or pedagogy. Despite conceptual art’s failure to eradicate a sense of art as aesthetic, a number of conceptual artists retain the hope that art may yet be seen to exist within everyday life rather than in collusion with institutions. Here, ‘art’ would be recognised within those actions and inventions that critiqued, challenged or provided alternatives for mainstream or neo-liberal values, improved our everyday existence and hopes for the future, or allowed a voice to those disadvantaged by, or ‘outside’ of, mainstream culture. In the instance that ‘creativity’ is more exclusively associated with the institutionalised realm of art, the innovation that frequently occurs within the multitude of processes outside the field are rendered of less value: some of the most radical (ex)-conceptual artists, such as Ian Milliss, continue to maintain a view that art (as creativity) be recognised within all activity\textsuperscript{23}. In order that this be realised the automatic association of art with the institution and the visual must be challenged, and it is here that an end of art statement has a crucial role to play: this viewpoint goes some way toward maintaining a view of art’s potential for radicality and questioning, values that continue to be applied to or expected of contemporary art but are frequently perceived as lacking.

\textsuperscript{22} Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All, 49.
The availability of all form to contemporary art means nothing of significance remains to contribute to art as a visual concern: when any object or situation can be art, a view of art as a proposition (as outlined by Kosuth) is over. In the contemporary moment, artworks’ significance tends instead to be located within their status as allegory, in their supplying meaning or raising awareness around matters normally unrelated to art discourse, frequently political issues. In this context it is increasingly impossible to make work about nothing, since any form or situation framed as ‘art’ is automatically attributed with meaning. Where this framing occurs increasingly within the work of curators, commentators, and collectors, artists tend to be rendered mute producers of material – as allegory – to be shaped. The disenfranchisement of the artist within contemporary art may be seen as a symptom of the end of art, where the cessation of the development in art’s form means all art is equally valid in a view of art as individual expression. When the art object no longer embodies the conditions of its existence it inhabits the roles of decoration, commodity, or allegory, or simply symbolises art’s previously significant history. The disparaging term ‘zombie formalism’ – coined by artist and critic Walter Robinson in 201424 - refers most commonly to a certain type of commercially successful painterly abstraction typical of the current moment, however the zombie analogy is interesting in relation to a view of contemporary art as the end of art.

Conceptual art’s concern with art as concept aligned it with philosophical discourse and practice, while the return to materiality and aesthetics within the contemporary tends to align art practice with a sense of self-expression and art as necessarily object- or experience-based. The contemporary phenomenon of the artist’s statement arose within the conceptual era as a work of art in itself, replacing the art object and justifying its absence: within the contemporary moment, the artist’s statement tends instead to take the form of a marketing tool, the provision of a few lines of text identifying the themes or concerns linked to the separate, material work. An end of art statement as practice returns a sense of philosophy or theory to artists’ practices, enabling their engagement with art as discourse.

The idea of the end of art may appear fallacious in the face of art’s continued and magnified production within the contemporary moment, and the fact the idea tended to recur within modern art’s theorisation results in disparaging references to the ‘multiple ends of art’ within current discourse, for example by Hal Foster. The fact that claims regarding the end of art have arisen most frequently within the realm of philosophy means it is rarely viewed as impacting contemporary practice, and many contemporary artists are unaware of the claim’s existence. This thesis examines the potential for an end of art practice – that is, a practice wherein an end of art statement accompanies the continued production of art – to enable engagement with art as a proposition as outlined by Kosuth: where such a practice *in its entirety* constitutes the statement ‘this is not art’, it results in philosophical re-engagement with the question, ‘what is art?’ A statement that art has ended may both facilitate a break with the developmental history or progression inherent to the modernist project and resolve the sense of nostalgia displayed in characterisations of contemporary art as a new, improved moment. Stating ‘the end of art’ may complete the circle of art rather than move it forward: were the conceptual ideal of the disappearance of the art object within life to occur, art would move closer to its beginning than its end, to a time wherein ‘art’ as a concept did not perhaps exist.

In chapter one of the thesis, the impulse to either ask or attempt an answer to the question, ‘what is contemporary art?’ is examined. Instances of the raising of this question post the inception of the new millennium are cited and analysed, particularly in relation to contemporary art’s evasion of definition and the variety of attitudes displayed towards this evasion. Existing attempts to theorise contemporary art as a new or alternative moment to that of the modern are examined and critiqued, specifically Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of the altermodern and Terry Smith’s and Peter Osborne’s provision of a definition or discourse for contemporary art.

Chapter two examines contemporary art’s ontology in relation to conceptual art, linked to Peter Osborne’s characterisation of contemporary art as a ‘post-conceptual’ art. The lack of critique identified within current art is discussed in relation to the legacy of conceptual art’s

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25 See Hal Foster, ‘This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse’ in *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002), 130-43.
having opened art as a concept to the infinite possibilities of form and non-form, and related to moments within the modern wherein a lack of critique or sense of openness was similarly perceived to have existed. The history of conceptual art’s pure project of dematerialisation is examined, specifically within the ideas of Joseph Kosuth and Lucy Lippard, and the failure of this project is analysed both in relation to Peter Osborne’s notion of the necessity of aesthetics to contemporary art and ideas from the field of object oriented ontology. The chapter concludes with an argument related to Jean Baudrillard’s characterisation of the current moment as ‘trans-aesthetic’, wherein a sense of the absolute liberation of form (as achieved by conceptual art) informs the contemporary moment as an impossibility of form.

Chapter three continues the thread of the impossibility of form in relation to the idea of the end of art. The end of art is discussed in its relation to the idea of the end of history, and attitudes toward the end of art within the German philosophical tradition as outlined by Eva Geulen are canvassed. The work by the most recent theorist on the end of art, Arthur C. Danto, is examined in relation to Hegel’s original end of art statement, and the extensive critique that exists regarding Danto’s thesis is outlined, along with Danto’s responses. The idea of freedom within the conceptual and contemporary moments is related to Hegel’s original postulation, and perceptions of the end of art as a specifically philosophical concern discussed in relation to contemporary practice.

In chapter four, the strategy of giving up art in the face of the end is assessed, alongside other potential practice-based strategies in relation to the idea of the hegemony of contemporary art as the end of art. Finally, my own end of art strategy is outlined in terms of the conceptual tendency to work via projects and within established parameters, the nature of my thesis research in relation to an end of art statement is described, and justification is made for a theoretical consideration of contemporary art as the end of art.
CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY ART?

PART 1 - On the need to ask the question

What is contemporary art? First, and most obviously: why is this question not asked?¹

At the end of 2009, the editors of the journal *e-flux* – Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle – devoted two issues to the question, ‘what is contemporary art?’ commissioning articles from an assortment of commentators and artists around this theme². Only a few months prior, Terry Smith published his book, *What is Contemporary Art?* At the same time, Hal Foster presented the results of his Questionnaire on “The Contemporary” in *October* magazine. Where Aranda, Kuan Wood and Vidokle suggest the question isn’t asked, attempts to define, theorise or historicise current or contemporary art were being made at the end of the last decade.

In his book, Smith suggests why the question may not be asked:

Generalization about contemporary art has evaded articulation for more than two decades: first because of fears of essentialism; followed by the sheer relief of having shaken off exclusivist theories, imposed historicisms, and grand narratives.³

Here Smith alludes to what is perhaps the most problematic aspect of attempting to answer the question: one of contemporary art’s most defining characteristics is its evasion of definition.

Perhaps there is no need to raise questions around the nature of contemporary art? As the *e-flux* editors suggest (echoing Smith), contemporary art is a field that:

...stretches across boundaries, a multi-local field drawing from local practices and embedded local knowledge, the vitality and immanence of many

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² *e-flux journal* 11 (December 2009) and *e-flux journal* 12 (January 2010).

histories in constant simultaneous translation. This is perhaps the contemporary’s most redeeming trait, and we certainly do not miss the old power centers and master narratives.\textsuperscript{4}

In addition they state: ‘the contemporary as a cacophonic mess gives us enormous hope.’\textsuperscript{5}

Despite the positive sense of art’s escape of grand narratives resulting in contemporary art’s overthrowing or questioning of the imperialism seen as inherent to previous art, doubts do exist around contemporary art both as a term and a field of practice. Such doubts include the validity of contemporary art’s claim to political or social engagement, its characterisation as democratic, and its identification with a postcolonial, de-bordered world. For some, the term ‘contemporary art’ itself is inadequate in describing the art of our time, lacking philosophical stringency and unable to historicise current art. In Jean Baudrillard’s unforgiving critique of contemporary art throughout the 1990s and early 2000s he characterised it as ‘a conspiracy’\textsuperscript{6}: the fact his discourse tends to most successfully theorise the field in its relation to modernity and modern thought makes it fundamental to this particular investigation.

The critical nature of the \textit{e-flux} journal\textsuperscript{7} renders it a reliable, recent source of questions concerning the nature of contemporary art. \textit{e-flux} has been committed since its inception to considering such questions, and a survey of articles commissioned throughout its history provides good coverage of the issues involved in defining or theorising the field. In the journal’s twelfth issue in January 2010, its editors describe contemporary art as a glass ceiling or invisible barrier, as something that we know exists but are unable to put our finger on. While contemporary art is easily and readily acknowledged, the authors claim, ‘nothing attains critical mass under any umbrella beyond “the contemporary”’\textsuperscript{8}. They compare this tendency to the machinations of capitalism, wherein individuals and relationships exist in a state seemingly unrelated to a larger whole, masking ‘the hidden ultimatum of an innocuous

\textsuperscript{4} Aranda, Kuan Wood, Vidokle ‘What is Contemporary Art? Issue Two’.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Baudrillard, \textit{The Conspiracy of Art}.
\textsuperscript{7} An online contemporary art journal established in 2008, http://www.e-flux.com/journals/.
\textsuperscript{8} Aranda, Kuan Wood, Vidokle ‘What is Contemporary Art? Issue Two’. 
protocol. They describe contemporary art as carrying out ‘evasive manoeuvres’, the first of which is to claim fluidity while demanding institutionalisation: where the word ‘contemporary’ is associated with a sense of currency, flexibility and responsiveness, the editors suggest that contemporary art in fact continues to require housing within less fluid and less responsive institutions, and that it remains contextualised by the monolithic, bricks-and-mortar structures of modern art.

The second ‘evasive manoeuvre’ the e-flux editors identify concerns contemporary art’s seemingly more redeeming traits – its multiculturalism, focus on the local, crossing of boundaries and acknowledgement of all histories. Here, they cast doubt as to whether the local is represented on its own terms or whether a larger, more international discourse is imposed onto these localisms, ‘...asserting its own language distinct from centre and periphery alike’ – for example via the phenomenon of the international contemporary art biennale. Critic, curator and historian Cuauhtémoc Medina also views the claim to the local and post-colonialism with suspicion, stating that, ‘we now face a regime of international generalization transmitting the pandemic of the contemporary to the last recesses of the earth.’ He connects the globalism of contemporary art to the buoyancy of the international art market:

...the main reason for the craze surrounding the contemporary art market in recent years (and for its not having immediately collapsed after the plunge of global capitalism) has been the market’s lateral extension: bourgeoisies who would previously buy work within their local art circuits became part of a new private jet set of global elites consuming the same brand of artistic products, ensuring spiralling sales and the celebration of an age in which endless ‘editions’ allow artworks to be disseminated throughout an extended geography.

Artist, film maker and author Hito Steyerl provides perhaps the most scathing view of contemporary art, claiming that it, ‘pollutes, gentrifies, and ravishes. It seduces and

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
consumes, then suddenly walks off, breaking your heart.’\textsuperscript{13} For Steyerl, contemporary art both \textit{mirrors} the hyper capitalism typical of post-Cold war political paradigms and \textit{actively participates in} the facilitation of this order: ‘The Global Guggenheim is a cultural refinery for a set of post-democratic oligarchies, as are the countless international biennials tasked with upgrading and re-educating the surplus population.’\textsuperscript{14} Contemporary art is characterised by Steyerl as, ‘unpredictable, unaccountable, brilliant, mercurial, moody, guided by inspiration and genius. Just as any oligarch aspiring to dictatorship might want to see himself’\textsuperscript{15}, and contemporary art’s claim to the local is negatively conveyed:

\begin{quote}
From the deserts of Mongolia to the high plains of Peru, contemporary art is everywhere. And when it is finally dragged into Gagosian dripping from head to toe with blood and dirt, it triggers off rounds and rounds of rapturous applause.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

In 2014, Keti Chukhrov described contemporary art’s aspiration to democracy as false. She identifies two strands of resistance as having occurred within art historically: the first – the modernist stance of estranging the work of art from its audience by ‘blocking perception, pleasure, or the judgement of taste’\textsuperscript{17} – meant the artwork existed in ‘extra-social conditions’ outside the capitalist economy and culture industry, as theorised by Adorno. The second strand, that of the avant garde, questioned bourgeois culture by dissolving art into life, wherein it became concerned with matters of a political or social nature. Chukhrov identifies both strands as having ‘reached their peak in the 1960s and 70s’, after which they were ‘absorbed and compromised’ within contemporary art. Here, Chukhrov claims the ‘reduction and rigidity’ of modernism transformed into the production of ‘successful abstract art’, while the avant-garde’s openness to the world outside the art institution became absorbed by the institution itself, in its increasing self-criticality and flexibility\textsuperscript{18}.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
For Chukhrov, a belief in art’s capacity for emancipatory or democratic social impact is continually reproduced by contemporary art, wherein the legacies of modernism and the avant-garde are, ‘re-enacted, reinstituted, and revisited’ even while losing ‘their social and aesthetic viability.’ Referring to the thought of Adorno and Peter Burger, she claims: ‘if art’s strategies of dissolution into life do not coincide with radical social transformation, then art’s claim about its political engagement is not valid’:

...while claiming extreme social openness and political commitment in the vein of the avant-garde’s impact on society, contemporary art—de facto—in its economic disposition happens to be part and parcel of post-Fordist alienated production. In other words, in narratives it claims democratic and resisting values, but in reality it happens to be a nonsocialized, nondemocratic, i.e., quasi-modernist, realm in its means of production and sense.

Chukhrov believes art’s potential as socially transformative is eradicated when it operates in compliance with the institution – in this sense, the space we may hold open for art in relation to its value as a radical or questioning field is compromised by the contemporary’s reliance on and reproduction of modernist tropes in the absence of real social change.

An inability to define contemporary art is also viewed as problematic to its practice. Artist Liam Gillick writes that while it was not uncommon for modern artists to have denied the name lent their style or movement by others, ‘the term “contemporary art” activates denial in a specifically new way, in that it describes not a practice but a general “being in the context.”’ Gillick claims that ‘the most progressive artists and curators’ are dissatisfied with the term ‘contemporary art’ and so he calls for a new term, the construction of which he believes artists must be involved in. Citing the tendency for contemporary art to refer to, ‘that which is being made now—wherever’, Gillick claims such flexibility cannot encompass, ‘all dynamic current art, if only because an increasing number of artists seek to

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
radically differentiate their work from other art\textsuperscript{24}, claiming the term is only useful for the purpose of ‘auction houses, galleries and art history departments’\textsuperscript{25}. Where Gillick had previously suggested the term ‘current art’ as a replacement\textsuperscript{26}, he later admits this alternative is equally unable to ‘include all the work that is being made with the intention of resisting the flexibility of contemporary work’\textsuperscript{27} – thus it would seem the problem lies within the flexibility of that which is allowed as art today over the particularity of the term used to describe it.

Gillick identifies the difficulty of producing art within such a state: ‘the contemporary necessarily restricts the sense in which you are looking for a breakthrough’\textsuperscript{28} – Gillick claims that here, individual works lack significance outside of the greater whole. He describes works produced within this context as lacking political or social affect, where, ‘moving against the stream is a problem, for it goes in every direction.’\textsuperscript{29} Gillick cites the value of attempts by artists to instigate political action within life, alongside their art practice but existing separately from it. Referencing the work of artist Paul Chan, he claims a description of Chan as an ‘artist and activist’ provides the necessary distinction between the efficacy of his activism and what one assumes is the less effective mode he assumes as an artist: ‘it is currently impossible to escape the hold of the contemporary, but it might be possible to separate life and action from contemporary art.’\textsuperscript{30} While a desire for political critique or activism may be facilitated by such cognitive separation, the activity of the artist as an artist and the complicated status of the art object within the inclusive situation of the contemporary are no further resolved by such distinctions. As Gillick concludes, ‘not working at all is very hard to do. So the answer is to keep working within a limited form of conceptual difficulty.’\textsuperscript{31} He likens contemporary art practice to the act of joining a highway at full speed, where, ‘slowing down and getting on or off again is difficult and undesirable.’\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Gillick, ‘Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place’.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
In 2012 Vidokle and Kuan Wood echoed Gillick’s sentiments concerning the difficulty of practicing in opposition to or critique of the contemporary. Claiming that ‘for many years’ it was possible to make politically or socially engaged work in order to break with accepted forms of art, they write that now:

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

A sense of entrapment by the contemporary is evident in Vidokle and Kuan Wood’s critique, who claim that artists who do possess a ‘genuine social commitment’ tend to lead a secret double life due to their awareness that the ‘social relevance of their work is trapped in their own subjectivity’. They write that while a political consciousness is still relevant to art, this sense is today overshadowed by ‘the much more pressing politics of what constitutes contemporary art in the first place – the question of why this or that work is even being shown in a given space’, suggesting that recent biennale- or Documenta-style exhibitions avoid themes in favour of a, ‘vague and relativistic, open-ended idea of heterogeneous plurality.’

For Vidokle and Kuan Wood the invention of Duchamp’s readymade is pivotal here, credited as having freed artists from both the ‘laws of traditional taste’ and ‘manual labour’ and rendering the artist free to ‘do and exhibit anything’, the institution obliged to accept any object the artist presents. The price for this condition of ‘total sovereignty’ is high:

Duchamp’s liberated artist could only appear when sanctioned by an art institution. In other words, the basic condition allowing the artist to

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
produce whatever he or she pleased was that the liberated artistic
gesture must only appear in sanctioned spaces of art.38

This situation lends greater authority to institutions, which become ‘in turn just as
responsible for producing art as artists themselves’39 – an outcome of the institution’s
validating role is the disempowerment of artists. This situation is a complex one: while we
value contemporary artists’ freedom to exhibit any object, when any object can be art the
context of its presentation is crucial to its identification as art, compromising artists’ ability
to situate their practice against the institution.

The question of defining contemporary art first occurred to the editors of e-flux when, in
attempting to make a wiki archive, they found they couldn’t create meaningful categories
for a user-navigable menu:

...there have been no significant movements in the past twenty years, and
artists have not been interested in organizing themselves around any... we found that no objective structure or criterion exists with which to
organize artistic activity from the past twenty years or so, and the
question of how to structure such an archive, to make it intelligible,
proved to be so difficult to address that it completely derailed the project
for the time being.40

In the instance that we may look to a sense of history or a structure in an attempt to create
a narrative for today’s art, the lack of such features may contribute to a sense of
contemporary art as the ‘end of art’.

**Hal Foster: Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”**

Difficulty in defining the field of contemporary art is linked to its post-historical status, a
concern raised by Hal Foster in his *Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”* in 2009. Having
sent the questionnaire to seventy curators and critics, Foster received and published replies
from thirty two, noting that ‘very few curators responded’. Foster’s questionnaire posits

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.

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that contemporary art’s heterogeneity results in its lack of critical definition, rendering the field ‘free-floating’ and unattached from history. Stating that former categories of art (such as postmodernism and the avant garde) no longer apply, Foster suggests contemporary art has become an ‘institutional object in its own right’, approached by institutions as disconnected ‘not only from prewar practice but from most postwar practice as well’. He asks respondents whether this ‘free floating’ is something real or imagined, whether it is the result of the end of grand narratives or an outcome of an increasingly neoliberal society, and if there are any benefits to what he describes as the ‘apparent lightness of being’ of the field.

Foster’s questionnaire indicates a genuine interest on his behalf in acquiring consensus around these ideas. When asked his motivation for conducting it, Foster states:

Perhaps it was fueled by discontent, but bewilderment also played a part. For my generation contemporary art seemed to have a special purchase on the present; the sense that art is an index of the moment appears lost in today’s profusion of practices. That is a source of discontent for me.\(^\text{41}\)

A survey or questionnaire purports to be a formal, impartial and scientific study of a subject, potentially resulting in a fairly accurate overview. While a general reading of the 124 pages of answers to Foster’s question gives a sense of the range of attitudes that exist towards the subject, to attain more concrete data a scientific breakdown of the results is required. To this end, I coded and counted the responses to Foster’s survey.

The predominant response (44% of respondents) was to comment on contemporary art’s global and postcolonial nature and speculate on this fact’s potentially occluding a single, centralised paradigm or set of criteria for contemporary art. The two next most common responses stated that contemporary art should be defined and practiced in relation to contemporary issues (37%), and that contemporary art either reflects, or is the result of, neoliberal or capitalist structures (37%). A large number of respondents felt it was important to interrogate the nature of contemporary art, to attempt to define it or at least

have the discussion (34%), and an equal number commented on the ‘untimeliness’ of contemporary art, on it’s being both in and out of time, or a time of a non-linear nature (34%). It was felt that contemporary art must be defined via specific artist’s works, histories and locations rather than one broad definition (34%); that there is value in contemporary art’s lacking a definition (34%), and that contemporary art by its very nature resists paradigms and grand narratives (31%)⁴².

A sense of contradiction exists within the survey results: for example, while 34% of respondents found it important to examine or interrogate contemporary art or question its lack of definition, an equal number viewed its lack of definition as valuable, as something we should maintain rather than challenge. Not only did the survey results as a whole contain contradictions, but opposing opinions often existed within individual responses themselves. This represents another frequently held belief about contemporary art: a quarter of respondents characterise contemporary art as a contradictory field, or a field defined by antinomies.

PART 2 - Theorising contemporary art

Nicolas Bourriaud: The Altermodern

Two respondents to Foster’s questionnaire, Okwui Enwezor and James Meyer, refer to curator and writer Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of the ‘altermodern’ in their response. Having coined the terms ‘relational aesthetics’ (1998⁴³) and ‘postproduction’ (2002⁴⁴) as means by which to categorise contemporary art in relation to new methods of artistic practice, Bourriaud developed his concept of the ‘altermodern’ in 2009 alongside his curation of the Tate Triennale. Rather than identify new practices, the altermodern attempts to theoretically accommodate contemporary art in contrast to art of the past and in its relation

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⁴² See Appendix A for full results.
⁴³ Bourriaud curated a group exhibition, Traffic at the CAPC musée d’art Contemporain de Bordeaux, France in 1996. His book Relational Aesthetics (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002) commented on what he saw as ‘the result of the close observation of a group of artists who happened to become leaders of their generation’, and was connected to the 1996 exhibition.
⁴⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, Caroline Schneider, Jeanine Herman, Postproduction Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).
to an increasingly globalised world. To Bourriaud, the current moment in art is both a break with post modernism and a new view or version of modernism altogether: ‘Travel, cultural exchanges and examination of history are not merely fashionable themes, but markers of a profound evolution in our vision of the world and our way of inhabiting it.’

Okwui Enwezor views the altermodern as, ‘directed at teasing out what may be called the logics of contemporary art and the kind of historical arguments on which they are founded’, a viewpoint he claims echoes the concerns raised by Foster. However in contrast to what he sees as the more dubious tone of Foster’s question, Enwezor identifies the concept of ‘the altermodern’ as asserting certainty in its tracing the way questions of modernity have generated new forms of contemporary art ‘worldwide’. He sees contemporary art as not a ‘borrowed language’ like modernism, but ‘a meta-language developed at the intersection of multiple historical collisions’ which locates it beyond the modernist centres of Europe and North America. As a meta-language, Enwezor identifies contemporary art as having developed due to ‘different historical reasons’, but mostly in relation to, ‘the powerful influence of imperial expansion across the world’.

For Bourriaud, the concept of postmodernism cannot account for the global nature of contemporary art and society. Identifying postmodernism as having been concerned with ‘multiculturalism and the discourse of identity’, he believes the altermodern more effectively defines our period as ‘a planetary movement of creolisation’. Other characteristics with which Bourriaud endows postmodern discourse are that of ‘cultural relativism and deconstruction’, which he dismisses as simply substitutes for ‘modernist universalism’, providing, ‘no weapons against the twofold threat of uniformity and mass culture and traditionalist, far-right, withdrawal’. Here, postmodernism’s apparent

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46 Okwui Enwezor in Foster, ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”: 33.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 ibid
50 Bourriaud, ‘Altermodern Manifesto’.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
alignment with universalisms has political implications, which the altermodern avoids in its dispersal of culture via the increased movement of individuals around the globe. Where discontent exists concerning postmodern discourse’s ability to account for the contemporary moment, in her response to Foster’s question professor Pamela M. Lee wonders if we may have passed too quickly through its arguments to reach the conclusion of ‘the contemporary’. She posits that postmodern discourse may have laid the groundwork for the fragmented, ahistorical nature of the contemporary via its focus on the end of history and the narrative, thus drawing a closer relationship between the two discourses than that depicted by Bourriaud:

...in so quickly giving up the ghost of postmodernism for a set of ever-proliferating contemporary art rubrics—globalization, the relational, the politics of aesthetics, you name it—I wonder if we have inadvertently contracted with a set of terms to which we have neither intellectual nor ideological affinity. 53

A tendency to define the contemporary moment via a reading of contemporary artists’ increasingly nomadic existence, wherein they constantly and seemingly necessarily move around the globe to exhibit in large-scale, international exhibitions, is perhaps more accurately a reflection of the increased mobility of the global population more generally than an adequately ontological factor to account for differences between the contemporary and modern moments. In addition, where the notion of the altermodern tends to characterise contemporary art practice as taking place solely within exhibitions of a global scale, it surely excludes those practitioners who lack the mobility or finances such participation demands: for artists with families, artists with jobs, or artists who prefer to remain within their locale, the necessarily nomadic categorisation of the altermodern renders it a highly exclusive one.

The global nature of contemporary art also informs two other recent attempts to theorise, philosophise or define the field: Terry Smith’s What is Contemporary Art? (2009) and Peter Osborne’s Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art (2013).

53 Pamela M Lee in Foster, ‘Questionnaire on “the contemporary”: 27.
**Terry Smith: What is Contemporary Art?**

Just as Smith characterises the asking of this question as going against the grain of a larger cultural trend, the editors of e-flux state, ‘if we begin to discern its (the contemporary’s) shape, either it shifts, or we become obsolete: *uncontemporary*.’ Nonetheless Smith believes it is important to ask the question, stating, ‘whatever one’s engagement with art, it will always be, at root, an entanglement within art’s questioning’.

In his text, Smith frequently situates contemporary art in contrast to that of the modern, his argument reflecting the sense of a theoretical battle between these periods and their ideologies. While acknowledging that the roots of contemporary art lie within modernity Smith mostly refers to modernist art (and ‘modernism’) in a negative sense and contemporary art (and ‘contemporaneity’) in the positive: this results in ‘the contemporary’ reading as a good force within his text, contrasting with the bad force of the modern – ‘during the past two centuries, the elements of contemporaneity have been subsidiary to the powerful forces constituting modernity’. According to Smith, while ‘the contemporary’ was actually in existence alongside ‘the modern’ it was simultaneously suppressed by it, a situation that has changed with, ‘the recent ascendancy of the contemporary’. The theme of ‘modern versus contemporary’ seems at times the main point of Smith’s argument, which reads as a story wherein the irrepressible power of the modern is gradually yet inevitably overcome by the combined forces of the contemporary’s simultaneously open, questioning nature and global, all-encompassing presence.

Identifying the narratives of modernism as having included, ‘art as mirror, leisure, or licensed dissent’, Smith states that these narratives ‘have had their day’. Postmodernism’s counter-arguments to modernity have ‘become consumed in self-fulfilling prophecy’ and other theories of contemporary art, described as the, ‘most recent universalisms, such as

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55 Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, XI.
56 Ibid., 6.
57 Ibid., 256.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 2.
60 Ibid.
globalization or the fundamentalisms\textsuperscript{61} either fall short of the task, or ‘are overreaching, disastrously’\textsuperscript{62}, with the consequence that, ‘contemporary art has become...thoroughly questioning in nature, extremely wide-ranging in its modes of asking and in the scope of its inquiries’\textsuperscript{63}. Here it seems the open, questioning nature of contemporary art is the result of its lack of adequate theorisation.

Smith attempts to structure his argument within a series of categories and subcategories, statements and hypotheses. He offers ‘three core meanings’ of the term “contemporary” (with the addition in brackets of a fourth), two ‘contentions’ to describe the conditions of contemporaneity and four ‘main themes’ of contemporary art. It is difficult to track the categories and subsections around which Smith structures his discourse, its multiple declarations lending the argument a confusing emptiness and often occluding meaning.

Smith identifies three different yet overlapping ‘major currents’ of contemporary art: the first current, associated with ‘neoliberal economics, globalizing capital, and neoconservative politics’, is broken down further into two ‘trends’, the first of which repeats ‘avant-garde shock tactics’ and includes artists such as Damien Hirst, Julian Schnabel, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami. The second trend, the result of, ‘the constant efforts of the institutions of modern art...to rein in the impacts of contemporaneity on art’\textsuperscript{64} revisits and revives ‘old modernist impulses and imperatives’\textsuperscript{65} and includes artists Richard Serra, Jeff Wall, and Gerhard Richter. Calling this trend ‘Remodernism’, Smith maintains that, ‘together, these trends amount to the aesthetic of globalization, serving it through both a relentless remodernizing and a sporadic contemporizing of art’\textsuperscript{66}. Here, contemporary art that may seem modern is ‘served’ through both ‘relentless modernizing’ and ‘sporadic contemporizing’ – sporadic, but apparently just ‘contemporized’ enough to be allowed as contemporary art. Further, Smith claims that, ‘in the work of certain artists, such as

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
Matthew Barney, both currents come together, generating an art tsunami, offering the labels ‘Spectacle Art’ or ‘Spectacularism’ as appropriate to this current.

The second current, ‘distinct in origins, nature and outcome’, is defined in opposition to the modernist idea of movements (‘no art movements here’) and is ‘something akin to a worldwide cultural change – indeed, a postcolonial turn.’ Identifying this current as following decolonization, Smith describes the art it includes as a ‘plethora’, shaped by, ‘local, national, anticolonial, independent, antiglobalization values’. Sounding something like the type of art Bourriaud describes in his altermodern manifesto, Smith claims the art of this current ‘circulates internationally through the activities of travellers, expatriates, the creation of new markets’ and that it, ‘predominates in biennales.’ It includes practices that entail research over time, public involvement and ‘didactic presentations’, and which look at sustainable environmental relationships and often involve ‘electronic communicative media’. Unlike the first, Smith does not here identify any artist’s names or suggest any labels for this current.

Smith’s third and final current is the result of ‘a generational change occurring as the first two (currents) have unfolded’; he associates it with younger artists and describes it as recent, worldwide, and ‘everyday’. Unlike the first current, this art rejects ‘gratuitous provocation and grand symbolic statement’, and results in ‘specific, small-scale, and modest offerings’. While containing elements of the first two currents, the third is less concerned with notions of power structures or struggle and more with, ‘material media, virtual communicative networks, and open-ended modes of tangible connectivity’. These artists look at ‘the nature of temporality’, the ‘possibilities of placemaking’ and at media immersion, sharing concerns with the second current around ‘sustainable flows of survival, cooperation, and growth.’ Again, no names or labels are supplied at this point.

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67 Ibid.  
68 Ibid.  
69 Ibid.  
70 Ibid.  
71 Ibid., 8.  
72 Ibid.  
73 Ibid.  
74 Ibid.  
75 Ibid.
Having identified these currents, Smith discusses in subsequent chapters the nature of contemporary art in its relation to them: here, the structure and architecture of art museums and the art market are related to the first current, the ‘Postcolonial Turn’ and ‘Otherness’ to the second, and ‘Contemporaneity: Times/Places’ the third. At the outset of Smith’s final chapter he states that until this point he had been putting forth his ideas about contemporary art, ‘by way of show and tell’ – acknowledging perhaps the essentially descriptive nature of his argument, that he had yet to reveal his answer to the question, ‘What is contemporary art?’ Declaring that it is, ‘Time to come clean, to relate my approach to others that are in contention, to show my disciplinary hand’, Smith wonders what the results would be for art practice, criticism and theory if he raised the idea that, ‘it is time that contemporary art was subject to a certain kind of art historical analysis’.

Paragraphs later, having further elaborated upon the contemporary’s sense of multeity in its distinction from the modern, Smith explains, ‘Just because this scene can be so dazzling, so entrancing, so distracting, the question “What is contemporary art?” calls for further answers, drawn from wider perspectives’. Here, Smith repeats his intention to investigate the question in relation to art history – however the investigation is once again suspended while he critiques the, ‘range of answers to the question of contemporary art that have been offered in recent years’. These include characterisations of contemporary art as post-historical, criticism of contemporary art’s collusion with the market and fashion, the challenge of interpreting contemporary art as it occurs, the work of the October critics, Okwui Enwezor’s ideas around postcolonialism and contemporary art, Bourriaud’s altermodern, and contemporary art’s definition as pluralistic – all of which Smith finds lacking as singular theories or responses.

At the outset of the final section, Smith states that a contemporary art history should both, ‘draw on efforts to date’ and be, ‘built on a framework that is distinct from that which

76 Ibid., 241.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 244.
80 Ibid.
underlay Modern Art’ and that it must address the qualities of ‘earlier art’ (including the pre-modern), ‘world art’, and ‘current and recent art’ in order to be, ‘worthy of its object: contemporary art’ He declares: ‘I have been attempting to lay the groundwork for such a history throughout this book’ (alluding to the fact that an actual definition, or history of contemporary art, may not after all be forthcoming) then further subjects the reader to an expanded description (‘for the sake of recollection’) of his original hypothesis of contemporaneity as manifested within the three currents from the introduction, wondering how these individual currents themselves would answer the question, ‘What is contemporary art?’

‘Spectacularism’ (as ‘a late modern art’, ‘too easily in tune with the times’, and ‘the latest phase in the universal history of art’) is counting on the fact that ‘art emergent within the other currents I have identified will fade into oblivion’ while it itself persists as, ‘the art remembered by the future’. The second current would, ‘forge an independent culture’ by reviving ‘local traditional imagery’ within the formats of Western modern art, and ‘remake Western culture’. The third current has ‘no single answer’ to the question, ‘what is contemporary art?’ Instead, it is ‘more networked’ than the global perspectives of postcolonial artists, and ‘indifferent to the generalizations about art’ of the ‘remodernists’. Artists of the third current, ‘abhor the superficialities of the spectacle’ and ‘live in the present’, therefore their question is not ‘what is contemporary art’, but more about ‘what kinds of art might be made now, and how might they be made with others close to hand’. Classifying these currents once again in relation to their modes of display (the museum, the biennale, alternative spaces), Smith posits that his method of defining contemporary art via three currents could be viewed as based on the ‘classic logic of the dialectic’, where a thesis of ‘institutionalizing remodernism and retrosensationalism’ against an antithesis of ‘postcolonial multiplicity’ would result in the synthesis: ‘remix, relational survivalism’.

While admitting that a potential outcome of this form could mean that the third (synthesis)

81 Ibid., 264.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 265.
86 Ibid., 267.
87 Ibid., 268.
88 Ibid.
may ‘turn into a thesis’ attract an ‘as yet unimaginable antithesis’ and therefore maintain the structure of art history (which would then go forward ‘in essentially the same way’),
Smith contests that the general shifts engendered by contemporaneity are so powerful that the situation wherein this dialectic is even possible has disappeared, and ‘the synthesis will not occur.’\textsuperscript{89} Instead he characterises this potential synthesis as a ‘supplement’, which exists within a potentially infinite number of supplements. Smith insists his three narratives of contemporary art are not ‘merely symptoms’ of ‘what it is to make art in the conditions of contemporaneity’ – rather they are (puzzlingly yet somehow crucially), the ‘actual kinds of art that these conditions have generated.’\textsuperscript{90} The three currents are antinomies, ‘like all other relationships characteristic of these times’\textsuperscript{91}, and the friction between them is a part of their essence.

The directness of his original question ‘What is Contemporary Art?’ contrasts markedly with the vague nature of Smith’s resulting argument: it may be that his desire to remain true to the overriding sense of contemporary art’s openness and resistance of metanarratives fatally inhibits his ability to arrive at a conclusive answer. Smith’s book doesn’t define contemporary art, but the inconclusive nature of his effort perfectly reflects the issues involved in attempting a definition.

\textit{Peter Osborne: Anywhere or Not at All – Philosophy of Contemporary Art}

Peter Osborne aims to provide a philosophy or discourse for contemporary art, something he describes as being ‘badly known.’\textsuperscript{92} While admitting this quest seems ‘at times, almost impossible’, he identifies three tendencies - ‘straw conceptualism’ (the idea that contemporary art requires only conceptual interpretation, or is reducible to ‘direct propositional expression’\textsuperscript{93}), the reduction of art to aesthetics, and the exemption of

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 269.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Osborne, \textit{Anywhere or Not at All}, 1.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 2.
contemporary art from history – as means commonly used in ‘sustaining ignorance about contemporary art’\(^{94}\).

Osborne identifies three periodizations of contemporary art, each of which is, ‘constructed from the standpoint of the rupture of a particular historical event’\(^{95}\), and privileges particular geopolitical terrains. The first of these is chronological and refers to art made in the period after modern art; it is primarily US-based and occurs after WWII, or post-1945. The second periodization begins in the 60s with art’s break with object-based or medium specific art forms, and the third classification is that of art post-1989, at the end of the Cold War, the end of Communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the third periodization Osborne claims art is no longer associated with the notion of the avant garde and is integrated into the ‘culture industry’; this period sees the growth of the institution of the biennale. Similarly to Smith’s perception of his three identified currents, Osborne claims these periodizations do not compete but instead work with each other in contextualising contemporary art.

Osborne aims to produce a discourse which will ‘render the idea of contemporary art critically intelligible’\(^{96}\), but which is not empirical or ‘temporally inclusive’, stating that not all art produced now, or all art regarded by others as contemporary, is worthy of the name: “Contemporary” is, at base, a critical and therefore selective concept: it promotes and it excludes\(^{97}\). Osborne cites Harold Rosenberg’s 1975 statement that, ‘art criticism today is art history’\(^{98}\) as the basis for his argument around the need for a critical philosophy of contemporary art. He views recent art criticism as having been dominated by the ‘second-generation October art historians’ who, disillusioned with Greenberg’s medium-specific approach, gave definitions of contemporary art a ‘largely documentary and reconstructive’\(^{99}\) character, discouraging its critical judgement. For Osborne, the outcome of the revival of a

\(^{94}\) Ibid.
\(^{95}\) Ibid., 17.
\(^{96}\) Ibid.
\(^{97}\) Ibid.
\(^{99}\) Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All, 4.
philosophical art criticism is condensed within the proposition that, ‘contemporary art is postconceptual art’\(^{100}\), a statement on which he expands further via the dialectic of his text.

Osborne characterises ‘the contemporary’ as fictional and hypothetical due to its assumption of a ‘total conjunction of present times’ and a ‘unity to the temporal mode of the present’\(^{101}\); here, contemporary art functions as though there is a shared subject-position from which any sense of a relational totality could be ‘lived as a whole’\(^{102}\). Similarly to Smith’s emphasis on the multeity of the contemporary as differentiating it from the modern, Osborne sees the idea of multiple contemporaries making a similar distinction: here, the sense of ‘our’ contemporaneity refers to the ‘temporal conjunction of differential subject positions’ that results not in a ‘we’ that is an ‘I’, but a ‘plurality of temporally co-present ‘I’s’\(^{103}\), lending the contemporary its ‘distributive unity’. To Osborne, a view of ‘the contemporary’ as fictional means it is something that we must construct rather than discover.

For Osborne, as for Bourriaud and Smith, the concept of postmodernism is inadequate in accounting for contemporary art. Osborne views postmodernism as the result of the ‘conceptually and chronologically restrictive manner’\(^{104}\) with which Greenberg defined modern art, and claims this definition opened the field for postmodernism’s ‘abstract negation’. Osborne believes that, ‘the critical priority of conceptual art’ and the ‘significance of its postconceptual legacy’ is not adequately theorised by the modern-to-postmodern transition, suggesting instead the periodization: formalist modernism to conceptual art, followed by postconceptual art. The ‘conceptual-postconceptual trajectory’ then forms a ‘standpoint from which to totalize the wide array of other anti-formalist movements.’\(^{105}\)

Osborne references numerous philosophical positions throughout his argument and claims he structured his text on the fragment format of Romantic philosophy; the fact each chapter is both complete within itself while forming a fragment of a larger whole reflects his view of

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\(^{100}\) Ibid., 3.
\(^{101}\) Ibid., 22.
\(^{102}\) Ibid., 23.
\(^{103}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{104}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{105}\) Ibid., 48.
contemporary art as ‘distributive’ while demanding of ‘systematic intent’. He classifies his statement that ‘contemporary art is postconceptual art’ as a ‘speculative proposition’, a Hegelian concept wherein the subject of a statement (in this case ‘contemporary art’) disappears within or is destroyed by its predicate. The predicate then becomes the subject (‘postconceptual art is contemporary art’) and is consequently destroyed in turn: here, Osborne claims the ‘infinite movement of thinking’ these terms engender lends them a certain harmony or unification. Osborne believes this proposition ‘approaches the experience of art’, but only, ‘at the end of a very long process through which the meaning of the elements at issue…are developed.’

Thus it would seem that Osborne aims to reflect or even embody the nature of contemporary art within his text as a way of constructing rather than describing his subject, in line with his stated aim. Where Osborne’s philosophy of contemporary art is something one must experience through the entirety of his text, Osborne hints at a claim to the role of artist, and his belief that contemporary art is something its philosophy must construct renders his text itself something akin to a work of contemporary art.

**PART 3 - Critiquing ‘the contemporary’**

To ask what something is suggests that its identity is unclear, that it is something we don’t recognise or can’t categorise: to ask what contemporary art is may be considered an act of criticism, potentially casting doubt on the legitimacy of its claim to the category ‘art’. Where a confident and satisfactory answer to the question, ‘what is contemporary art?’ might suggest that the field and its discourse is valid, an attempt to answer the question could also be viewed in the light of defence and paradoxically reinforce the sense of crisis surrounding its identity. If contemporary art’s identity was sound, we could assume that the question would not be raised, nor an answer provided.
In ‘The Necessity of the New: Between the Modern and the Contemporary’ \textsuperscript{107}, Ian McLean compares and critiques Osborne and Smith’s discourses. While outlining the differences between their analyses of the character of the modern and the contemporary, he identifies these discourses as sharing the underlying point that, ‘the concept of the contemporary has acquired the historical-ontological significance that “the modern” formerly had, thus usurping its former paradigmatic function.’ \textsuperscript{108} If it is true that a significant new paradigm \textit{has} replaced that of the modern, the question may be raised as to how contemporary the contemporary really is, in its characterisation as having escaped the more paradigmatic structure of the modern? In addition, if a new paradigm \textit{does} exist, questions as to its nature would perhaps be less urgent: rather, the apparent need to define or defend this paradigm tends to lend it instead a sense of crisis over one of certainty. While McLean views Smith and Osborne’s approaches to modernity as marking the difference between their arguments, the structure of \textit{both} these discourses may in fact be revealed to be more firmly entrenched \textit{within} the modern than as providing any sort of alternative to it.

In a conversation at Sydney’s \textit{Artspace} in 2009, Rex Butler identified Smith’s attempt to define contemporary art as resulting in fact in \textit{three} definitions, which he describes as ‘somewhat tautological’ \textsuperscript{109}. Butler’s summary of these definitions is that:

\begin{itemize}
  \item 1. Contemporary art asks what it is to exist in the conditions of contemporaneity.
  \item 2. Contemporary art is contemporaneous.
  \item 3. Contemporary art is the most evident attribute of the contemporary world picture. \textsuperscript{110}
\end{itemize}

Smith’s reply to this is that tautology, as a concept, is commensurate with:

\begin{itemize}
  \item ...the contemporary tropes of recursion and realignment, such that each element turns back on itself – not in the reflexive then resolving
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 134.
\end{itemize}
manner that was typical of modernist thought, but with a temporal/spatial logic that seems to me to be peculiarly contemporary.\footnote{Ibid.}

Beyond the common sense of the word ‘tautology’ as a deficit of style, in rhetoric it refers to ‘statements that are in-themselves redundant’\footnote{Philosophy Index, accessed May 21, 2015, http://www.philosophy-index.com/} due to their use of words or concepts that don’t add meaning, where in the realm of logic a tautological statement is, ‘a statement that is always true’\footnote{Collins English Dictionary online, accessed May 21, 2015, http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/tautology?showCookiePolicy=true}. Redundant, self-reinforcing statements, universal truths and logical expressions overlap more with Greenberg’s 1961 description of the essence of modernism than Smith may recognise:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it.\footnote{Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting,’ in Gregory Battcock, The New Art (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co 1966), 100-10.}

In reference to Terry Smith’s emphasis on the postcolonial and multicultural nature of contemporary art, art theorist and historian Andrew McNamara has commented:

His promotion of the postcolonial and multicultural coexistence implies the liberal value of tolerance (liberal but commonly held on the Left), a notion of the equality and universality of civic rights and liberties (Enlightenment), critique and legitimate dissent (Enlightenment), ‘hopeful anticipations’ (modernist), and also cultural relativity (modernist). For this reason, it is difficult to concur that a commitment to decolonisation and postcolonialism necessarily requires a disavowal of universals, even though this is said to mark its key point of difference.\footnote{Andrew McNamara, ‘What is Contemporary Art? A Review of Two Books by Terry Smith’, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art 12 (2012): 256.}
McLean describes it as odd that Osborne situates his discourse in reference to the German philosophical tradition, due to this tradition’s justification of, ‘Western modernism within a post-Enlightenment frame’\textsuperscript{116}. Referring to Osborne’s claim that ‘the more successful an artist, the less likely they are to live and work in their country of origin, or indeed in any single place’ and that the movement of such artists is, ‘overwhelmingly “inwards”, from the periphery to Europe and...New York’\textsuperscript{117} McLean believes that while Osborne recognises the importance of non-Western art to contemporary art’s ontology, it is only alongside the significance of its ‘Westernisation’ that this recognition is made, meaning that, ‘the old provincialism model of Western hegemony prevails, even if in a more (neo-) liberal guise.’\textsuperscript{118} While he describes Osborne’s argument as ‘powerful’ in its accuracy, McLean also finds it an ‘apologia for the status quo – the West’s institutional embrace of the contemporary’\textsuperscript{119}, and identifies within his argument a, ‘reluctance to let go of modernism, which to date at least is a history of Western art’\textsuperscript{120}. McLean speculates such a tendency provides justification for, ‘keeping the discourse of contemporary art within a Western frame in which the major museums have a huge investment.’\textsuperscript{121}

Where Bourriaud identifies the ‘heterochrony’ or ‘multeity’ of times of the altermodern as, ‘a view of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining a nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era’\textsuperscript{122}, curator James Meyer has written that:

\begin{quote}
This multeity, this purported breakdown of linear time that is declared to be definitive of the contemporary, is an artifact of the 1960s, of postmodernity, the very period the contemporary has allegedly left behind.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

Meyer identifies equally a commitment to modernist sensibilities within Bourriaud’s notion of time in the altermodern:

\textsuperscript{117} Osborne, \textit{Anywhere or Not at All}, 164.
\textsuperscript{118} McLean, ‘The Necessity of the New,’ 44.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{122} Nicolas Bourriaud, ‘Altermodern’ in \textit{Altermodern: Tate Triennial} (London: Tate, 2009), 13.
\textsuperscript{123} James Meyer in Foster, ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”’: 75.
Another modernity indeed: the contemporary is the fantasy that one can be modern again, that one can once again “float free from historical determination,” as the avant-garde supposedly did. “Altermodernity” is another repetition of this modernist dream. Bourriaud disdains the nostalgia he feels.\textsuperscript{124}

The prevalence of modernist sensibilities within attempts to create a discourse of contemporary art renders the purported break between these periods, or differences between their ideologies, less distinct, casting further doubt over the validity of the category of ‘the contemporary’. According to Andrew McNamara:

...efforts to claim any advance on modernist culture since the 1960s have floundered because in one way or another they have relied on modernist precedents in order to claim they surpass the modern.\textsuperscript{125}

An attempt to characterise contemporaneity in opposition to the modern is seen by McNamara as hindering the development of a discourse around the current moment:

The zeitgeist frenzies that have regularly broken out since the late 1960s around terms that promise a sheer break from modernity in order to announce a new and unique cultural situation actually inhibit understanding of how our contemporary situation remains embroiled within its wayward, far from resolved legacy.\textsuperscript{126}

Despite Smith’s (and others’) view of contemporary art as a multeity or as defined by contradictions, Butler claims Smith won’t settle for a paradoxical definition of contemporary art, wherein ‘what defines the contemporary is that we cannot say what defines it’\textsuperscript{127} – according to Butler, ‘the contemporary is what cannot be defined, a definition and its opposite’\textsuperscript{128}. He states that where Smith’s definition may ‘sound incoherent or unhelpfully all-inclusive’, that it is in fact ‘necessarily so’\textsuperscript{129}, characterising Smith’s view of the contemporary as a ‘division’. Both Smith and Butler agree that Smith’s discourse bears some

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} McNamara, ‘What is Contemporary Art?’ 255.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{127} Butler, ‘What is Contemporary Art?’ 134.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
relation to Slavoj Zizek’s notion of ‘the parallax’, a gap between two separate points (existing in relation to perception) between which no synthesis is possible. However Zizek’s point regarding the parallax is in reference to the synthesis of any identity, relating more to matters of perception than the characteristics that constitute any particular thing: if the inability to define contemporary art is an example of the notion of the parallax, it is only because contemporary art exists as a subject to be perceived like any other.

Much criticism of the field of contemporary art tends to personify it, lending it the character of an autonomous force with which we must reckon: where the e-flux editors describe it as carrying out ‘evasive manoeuvres’, McLean sees it as, ‘a contested space with powerful vested interests’, speculating further as to how the idea itself may serve the interests of the institutions of contemporary art. The sudden consensus around the existence of the field is viewed with suspicion by James Meyer, who wonders why, ‘the museum, the academy, and high critical discourse came to such a consensus (regarding the contemporary) so swiftly during the first decade of the twenty-first century’. On the other hand, those who attempt to endow the field of the contemporary with a definition or discourse tend to characterise it as positive, especially in its perceived contrast to that of the modern, for example in Smith and Bourriaud’s depiction of the contemporary as post-colonial and resistant to modernist ideology. Whether characterised as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, there is a sense within both viewpoints that the contemporary moment arose automatically, as a mysterious occurrence over which we somehow lack control.

Whether one views ‘the contemporary’ with suspicion due to its inescapability and perceived resemblance to the capitalist hegemony, or views it as a positive force open to multiple voices and resisting modernist ideology, the apparent requirement for a definition of contemporary art reflects the sense that the tradition of the modern may be more essential to the structure of the field than we either realise or desire to be the case. In this instance, a more effective characterisation of current art may be found by contextualising it in respect of rather than in opposition to the modern, and by locating within the modern that which has led to the seemingly inescapable, undefined field of the contemporary.

130 Ibid., 143.
131 Meyer in Foster, ‘Questionnaire on “the Contemporary”’: 74.
In investigating the nature and limits of contemporary practice, this research situates a definition of contemporary art within the context of its historical relation to the modern. Where the contemporary moment is characterised by the impossibility of a self-critical, modernist practice alongside nostalgia for such practice, this research also posits a definition of contemporary art as the end of art.
CHAPTER TWO: CONTEMPORARY ART AS POSTCONCEPTUAL ART

To imagine the future, we should perhaps start from the more or less recent past.¹

PART 1 – Were we ever contemporary?

As the most recent, and (arguably) last, modernist movement, and in a historical view of art as linear and developmental, conceptual art’s significant ontological impact can be seen to justify describing the art which followed it – that to which we refer as ‘contemporary art’ – ‘postconceptual’. As indicated in the previous chapter, Peter Osborne endows conceptual art with ‘critical priority’ to the extent that he argues against the periodization of modern to postmodern or contemporary art, in favour of a transition from ‘formalist modernism to conceptual art, followed by postconceptual art’. Where Osborne describes his statement ‘contemporary art is postconceptual art’ as a speculative proposition in a Hegelian sense, he also aligns the structure of the proposition with Adorno’s idea that ‘art’ – as a concept – only achieves unity retrospectively: thus for Osborne, the ‘ongoing retrospective and reflective totalisation is necessarily open, fractured, incomplete and therefore inherently speculative’.²

However a description of contemporary art as ‘post’ conceptual (or indeed, ‘post’ anything) tends to recall the sense of linear movement viewed as typical to the modern: Osborne’s need to contextualise this statement as a speculative proposition, characterised by a sense of infinite movement between terms, may result from his desire to avoid such allusion to linearity. Osborne himself declares that his statement results in, ‘a certain productive opaqueness’³ – productive, because it works in conjunction with the sense of the interpretation of, ‘the individual works that constitute its referent: contemporary / postconceptual art.’⁴ For Osborne, this ties his philosophy to his sense concerning the importance of art criticism to contemporary art’s ontology, as stated at the outset of his argument. While it is difficult to grasp his reasoning here, Osborne appears to connect one

¹ Marcel Duchamp, ‘Where Do We Go From Here?’ *Studio International* 189 (January-February 1975): 28 (Text from a symposium at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, March 1961, Helen Meakins, trans.).
² Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 51.
³ Ibid., 53.
⁴ Ibid.
of the founding statements in his perusal of a philosophy of contemporary art, ‘the art history that art criticism (ideally) is’ with a modernist sense of art history, ‘the qualitative historical novelty of the present, from the multiple standpoints of which the past is to be reconstructed and made legible’\textsuperscript{5}. However his use of Hegel’s speculative proposition means the ‘openness of the present onto an indeterminate future’ is foreclosed, therefore his philosophy, ‘cannot involve totalization as a continuous or developmental process of systematic presentation, imagined as approaching a point of completeness, but rather, more Romantically, the placing of emblematic fragments into systematic perspective’\textsuperscript{6}. Here it would seem Osborne believes the fact his proposition is speculative, alongside his use of the Romantic format of the fragment, negates the sense of modernist linearity and totalisation his proposition tends to recall. In reality, the declared opacity of this proposition may more simply reflect the contemporary’s evasion of definition; I believe a more useful consideration of contemporary art as postconceptual exists instead within a literal understanding of this idea in its linearity.

A key point in Osborne’s determination of contemporary art as post conceptual lies within the sense of conceptual art’s ‘failure’ to realise its pure project of dematerialisation or de-aestheticisation. While a view that conceptual art failed is shared by participants from the movement itself, the conclusions Osborne draws from this failure, and upon which he establishes his conditions for a philosophy of contemporary art, are at odds with the stated aims and objectives that the multitude of conceptual artists expressed for their practice at the time. Where the definitions of contemporary art so far discussed tend to describe particular instances of the multitude of forms available to the contemporary, a greater focus on and respect for the stated aims of the conceptual artists around art’s dematerialisation may allow for a more convincing definition of contemporary art, with respect to a desire for art’s liberation and the explosion of form in which such liberation tends to result.

In contrast to the movement of conceptual art, a notable exception to the chorus of voices providing commentary on the contemporary is that of artists themselves. Foster sent his 2009 questionnaire to critics and curators only, stating later that, ‘I did not ask artists

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6}Ibid.
because I felt it was not their problem really—that it bore more heavily on critics, historians, and curators." An exception is the inclusion of a response by artist Anton Vidokle, whose status as editor of *e-flux* appears to have lent him adequate qualification: it is within debates on contemporary art facilitated by *e-flux* that one can find occasional participation by artists, although even here the conversation is dominated by critics, philosophers and historians.

The lack of the artist’s voice in debates concerning contemporary art may be due to what curator Mark Godfrey describes as artists feeling ‘extremely ambivalent about the very idea of the contemporary’:

> This ambivalence has several causes. For one, artists no longer see their practice as a development from, or argument with, art of the past twenty years, or as a brand-new moment in a neat line of “movements” or “paradigms,” in the way that (for instance) Conceptual artists in the early 1970s positioned themselves against Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism.⁸

From this it would seem that today’s artists, having no particular sense of belonging to the moment of ‘the contemporary’, do not view it as a label that distinguishes their art from that of other eras in any crucial sense, nor possess the drive to make such distinctions. Liam Gillick’s call for a term with which to replace ‘contemporary art’ doesn’t stem from a desire to distinguish it from the art of the modern, but a desire to differentiate between the multitude of styles and approaches the term ‘the contemporary’ straddles, since, ‘this very inclusiveness has helped suppress a critique of what art is’.⁹ Equally Hito Steyerl’s complaint is about the ethics or politics of the field of contemporary art rather than a critique of previous generations or particular contemporary art forms. Unlike theorists such as Smith, Osborne or Foster, contemporary artists don’t appear driven to conceptualise their work as opposing or escaping the modern.

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⁸ Mark Godfrey in Foster, ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”’, 31.

⁹ Gillick, ‘Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place’. 50
As stated in the previous chapter, respondents to Foster’s ‘Questionnaire on “the Contemporary”’ expressed equally positive and negative attitudes towards contemporary art’s perceived openness or lack of definition: where openness may be seen to occlude contemporary art’s criticality and sense of paradigm, it allows for multiple voices and can be interpreted as an escape from modernist metanarratives. Uncertainty regarding the lack of a central discourse for contemporary art is also evident when definitions, discourses or paradigms are offered for the field, in the sense that they tend to occur in the *multiple*: as series’ of categories grouping the contemporary’s various tendencies and styles. For example where Smith developed three currents of contemporary art in 2009, Foster identified four characteristics of the contemporary in 2003: the ‘traumatic’, involving a lack of grieving for the avant garde and a refusal of memory, ‘shadowing’, or the spectral nature of contemporary art, ‘nonsynchronous forms’, the use of outmoded genres and mediums, and ‘incongruence’, the juxtaposition of spaces, hybrid objects and sites. Alexander Alberro, in response to Foster’s 2009 questionnaire, developed his own four tendencies of the contemporary: globalisation (the end of the three worlds), technology (new media, the black box, internet art and visual studies), the reinvestigation of the avant garde (relational aesthetics, art transforming life) and the re-emergence of philosophical aesthetics (art as affect and experience, participatory art).

Alongside the tendency to define contemporary art via categorisation, commentators frequently stress the fact of these categories’ overlapping and complementary natures: where contradictory or antagonistic forms may occur, they are said to co-exist harmoniously within the contemporary rather than cancel each other out. An example of this is Osborne’s three periodizations of contemporary art, which in his view are not, ‘self-sufficient and competing alternative definitions’, but ‘different intensities of contemporaneity’, wherein ‘each may become closest to the surface on particular occasions, but always as mediated by its relations to the other two.’ Thus where a definition or paradigm of contemporary art is perceived to be required, single definitions are avoided, retaining the equally necessary sense of contemporary art’s multeity.

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10 Foster, ‘This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse’, 130-43.
11 Alexander Alberro in Foster ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”’: 56.
12 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 22.
Just as Gillick claims that today, ‘an increasing number of artists seek to radically differentiate their work from other art’\(^{13}\), conceptual artists also sought to distinguish between theirs and other, concurrent styles of art: the difference however lies within their readiness to explicitly identify the forms of work theirs differs from. For example in 1970 Kosuth divided the ‘American art activity’ of the time into three categories: the first, ‘aesthetic’ or formalist art (‘the general notion of art as held by most of the lay public’\(^{14}\)) he associated with Greenberg’s notion of aesthetic judgement: formalist artists didn’t, ‘take part in the conceptual engagement…of the “construction” of the art proposition.’\(^{15}\) The second category, ‘reactive art’, Kosuth describes as, ‘the scrap-heap of 20\(^{th}\) century art ideas’\(^{16}\), claiming it referred only to the ‘how’ of an art proposition (its formal elements) rather than the ‘why’. To Kosuth such art was a, ‘superficial and necessarily gestural reaction’\(^{17}\) which related art to craft, and which was described (‘by journalists’) in terms such as ‘anti-form’, ‘earthworks’, and ‘process art’ – types of art Kosuth denounced as embodying, ‘a traditional notion of art while still being “avant-garde”.’\(^{18}\) In contrast to these two forms of art, Kosuth believed that, ‘at its most strict and radical extreme the art I call conceptual is such because it is based on an inquiry into the nature of art.’\(^{19}\)

The tendency to situate one’s art in opposition to the art of the time is also evident within an anecdote relating to Andy Warhol’s motivations in making Pop art, a decade earlier:


In contrast to these examples of late modern artists situating their work in direct and even hostile opposition to that of others, Gillick’s essay ‘Contemporary Art Does Not Account for That Which is Taking Place’ doesn’t explicitly describe the forms of work some

\(^{13}\) Gillick, ‘Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place’.

\(^{14}\) Kosuth, ‘Introductory Note to Art-Language by the American Editor’, Art After Philosophy and After, 37.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

contemporary artists wish to ‘radically differentiate’ their work from; instead, he attempts to identify models alternative to ‘contemporary art’, which, ‘appear to operate in a semi-autonomous way’ alongside it. Gillick identifies these alternatives as, ‘recent focus upon the documentary, educational models, and engaged social collaborations’\(^{21}\), offering the ‘United Nations Plaza’ project of 2006 as an example of such a model\(^{22}\). Terry Smith’s attempt to define contemporary art is equally devoid of examples of current work that do not conform to his definition, and despite his criticism of sensational, ‘remodernist’ art, he nonetheless (somewhat begrudgingly) allows it within ‘the contemporary’ as one of its currents. Peter Osborne, while insisting upon contemporary art’s sense of criticality and exclusivity, refrains from naming examples of current art that his paradigm might exclude. Neither the artists nor the theorists of contemporary art cited here display antagonism towards forms of art that their model of contemporary art excludes, or that they claim to operate in opposition to. An inability to critique or oppose one’s practice or theory to any particular form of contemporary art or exclude any form from this realm reflects the sense of the openness of the contemporary moment to all form and the end of the modernist sense of formal discourse.

Where Gillick identifies documentary, educational models and engaged social collaboration as providing alternatives to ‘contemporary art’, he is nonetheless aware of these forms’ limits as alternatives. While recognising that the ‘mediation of one’s own practice creates moments of escape from the contemporary’, Gillick claims this also creates, ‘a dilemma when it becomes the primary production of the contemporary artist’, because, ‘even the “educational turn”…quickly produces its own coding as part of the contemporary.’\(^{23}\) Identifying that, ‘collective and documentary forms have attempted to escape’ contemporary art, Gillick wonders further: ‘how can we avoid the post-contemporary becoming an historic nostalgia for the group or mere political identification?’\(^{24}\) Where an artist such as Warhol displays a strong belief in the potential for new forms of art powerful enough to overthrow existing conventions, Gillick is unable to imagine a form with which to

\(^{21}\) Gillick, ‘Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place’.

\(^{22}\) A twelve month temporary art school set up in Berlin by Anton Vidokle and involving participation with over one hundred artists, writers and philosophers, described by Gillick as, ‘a series of discussions and lectures framed within the idea of an educational setting.’ http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/.

\(^{23}\) Gillick, ‘Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place’.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
make a similar impact on ‘the contemporary’. While the enemy for modern artists may have been other types of art, the enemy for contemporary artists such as Gillick lies within the hegemony of ‘the contemporary’ itself.

Although a characterisation of contemporary art as ‘open’ – as either a positive or negative trait – has some consensus within the discourses discussed so far, a view of art as overly open is not specific to the current moment. In 1982, over twenty-five years before his 2009 questionnaire, Hal Foster raised very similar questions in his essay ‘Against Pluralism’.25 Here, they were framed in relation to the new ‘pluralistic’ art he saw manifesting at the time: ‘My motive here is simple: to insist that pluralism is a problem, to specify that it is a conditioned one subject to change, and to point to the need for cogent criticism.’26 He identified the increasing influence of the art market and the proliferation of art schools as characteristic of the new pluralistic art, reflecting comments made in answers to his 2009 Questionnaire. Describing the new pluralistic art as an ‘institution’ to which its practitioners willingly conformed, Foster declared further that, ‘posed as a freedom to choose, the pluralist position plays right into the ideology of the “free market”’,27 predating here later critique of contemporary art’s alignment with a neo-liberal attitude. He declared that, ‘few artists or even critics seem to feel the lack of cogent discourse’ within this pluralistic art, speculating further that this was, ‘perhaps the signal of the concession to pluralism’28 – foreshadowing current tendencies to embrace contemporary art’s lack of discourse.

Foster contrasted the new pluralistic art, in its lack of a dominant mode and a critical position, to late modern art: ‘in the ’50s abstract expressionism seemed monolithic, and in the ’60s the visual arts had an order that American culture otherwise lacked.’29 He declared further that:

Late modernism was literally corrupted — broken up. Its self-critical impulse was retained, but its ethical tone was rejected. This rejection

26 Ibid., 13.
27 Ibid., 15.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
led to an aestheticism of the non- or antiartistic. Such a reaction (much conceptual art is representative) allowed for many new modes of art: hybrid, ephemeral, site-specific, textual.  

While not elaborating upon his sense of the ‘ethical tone’ of late modern art, Foster connects the rejection of this tone with the rise of a ‘non-artistic’ aesthetic. Commenting upon the fact that ‘much conceptual art’ is ‘representative’ of the rise of the non-artistic, he refrains from laying specific blame with conceptual art – or with any particular artist or movement – for late modernism’s supposed corruption. Thus within this statement, a sense of mystery exists around the cause of this – apparently new – anti-aesthetic attitude of undefined origin.

Foster identifies abstract expressionism and minimalism as movements associated with what he perceives as having been the more centred art of late modernism. While describing 1950s abstract expressionism as ‘monolithic’, Foster claims further that:

In the ’60s self-criticism centered these arts radically. In (schematic) retrospect the major art and criticism of the period constitute a highly ethical, rigorously logical enterprise that set out to expunge impurity and contradiction . . . only to incite them as countertactics. For if minimalism was the apogee of modernism, it was also its negation. 

In 1961 however, Ad Reinhardt – an artist associated with the movement of abstract expressionism – displayed a more critical attitude towards the art of his contemporaries:

I was trying to speculate about what corruption means everywhere. Now what would corruption be in art? And my answer would be in the work that’s too available, too loose, too open, too poetic. I would say it permits too many people to project their own ideas in it, and I don’t like to see art that open, so that at some point almost anything goes, almost anyone could do it. I think that whole idea is corrupt. I

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30 Ibid., 14.
31 Ibid., 13.
think the idea of the artist making believe he doesn’t know what he is doing is a corrupt one.\textsuperscript{32}

Reinhardt goes on to speculate on artists’ responsibility for this corruption, citing the behaviour of abstract expressionists to illustrate his point:

For example, the latest \textit{Life} article about avant-garde art that I saw was involved with Still, De Kooning, and Rothko, and they permitted their work to be treated as flames, girders, grasses and sunsets. Now does the art permit this? If the art permits \textit{Life} magazine making anything they want of it, this may make for a corrupt situation, too. A kind of art, perhaps, that seems to excite or entertain, perhaps. That way it seems to be accessible and maybe it’s involved in quickly exhausted values, in a kind of built-in obsolescence.\textsuperscript{33}

Reinhardt also critiques what he perceives to have been a lack of engagement on behalf of the artists of this time with discourse around their work: ‘Last week one of the artists said to me, “Let someone else raise these issues, they have nothing to lose”...there is a passivity in artists today’\textsuperscript{34}. Reinhardt’s critique of late modern artists’ perceived passivity contrasts with Foster’s view of these same movements as ‘rigorous’ and ‘logical’ in approach, and has much in common with Foster’s later critique of pluralist artists’ indifference to discourse. Reinhardt makes the further declaration that within late modern art, ‘commercialism or careerism or professional painting has become a racket like every other racket, a business like every other business’\textsuperscript{35}, echoing the alignment of art with the market found within both Foster’s 1982 criticism of pluralism and current critique of the contemporary. Where Foster retrospectively characterises abstract expressionism as centred and self-critical, Reinhardt described it at the time as ‘too open’ and in itself ‘corrupt’. Whether we view the perceived openness of contemporary art in a positive or negative light, it would seem an accusation of art as too open, as lacking criticality, or as willing to conform to the demands of the market or popular culture is not specific to the current moment, but one that has recurred within art over at least the last half century.


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 155.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 154.
PART 2 - The brief history of conceptual art

The first pronouncement by an artist on the nature of conceptual art was made (arguably) in 1961 by Henry Flynt:

"Concept art" is first of all an art of which the material is "concepts", as the material of for example music is sound. Since "concepts" are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language. That is, unlike for example a work of music, in which the music proper (as opposed to notation, analysis, and so forth) is just sound, concept art proper will involve language.  

Despite this early idea of conceptual, or ‘concept’, art, the idea as a movement did not take force until 1967 with the publication of Sol le Witt’s ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ in *Artforum*. In the same year, the then-unknown artist Joseph Kosuth declared that his art objects were made of ‘conceptual rather than found materials’, in a statement published alongside his inclusion in a group exhibition in New York.

An examination of Kosuth’s writing throughout the evolution of his practice – from his initial 1967 statement above to those made in the 1990s – reveals some of the issues inherent to the development of conceptual art when viewed retrospectively. In his first major essay ‘Art After Philosophy’ (1969) Kosuth expounds upon his idea of conceptual art in relation to his thesis that philosophy as a discipline is over, since: ‘one begins to get the impression that there “is nothing more to be said.”’ He identifies the twentieth century as a time of philosophy ending and art beginning – ‘not strictly speaking, but rather as the “tendency” of the situation.’ He claims that while art existed before Duchamp, such art’s concern with ‘other functions’ rendered it ‘only minimally art’ – these other functions included,

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 15.
'depiction of religious themes, portraiture of aristocrats, detailing of architecture, etc.' which Kosuth views as having, ‘used art to cover up art.’

Kosuth separates aesthetics from art, characterising art as something akin to an ‘analytic proposition’, which he describes as a, ‘tautology which enables art to remain “aloof” from philosophical presumptions.’ In this sense art, in its concern with the conditions of its existence over matters of aesthetics or representation, is seen to more successfully fulfil philosophy’s role of self-reflection and analysis. Kosuth likens the form of this art to a language, leading to a view of works of art as analytic propositions:

...if viewed within their context – as art – they provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art.

For Kosuth, art’s tautological nature likens it to logic and mathematics, since the ‘art idea’ and ‘art’ are one and the same: they can be ‘appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification.’ When art exists for its own sake (as a tautology) it escapes the assumptions philosophy is subject to in its reliance on something ‘outside’ itself – language – to make its assertions. There is a sense within Kosuth’s early thesis of wanting to rescue art as a pure idea from the influences or assumptions that weaken it, or rob it of its significance. The notion of ‘art as art’ as a replacement for philosophy removes art from the mundane, practical realms of architecture, decoration, craft or representation, returning it to a higher purpose associated with human thought. The perceived concern of more formalist movements of the time with matters regarding aesthetics (as propounded by Greenberg) was viewed by Kosuth as a degradation of art, trapping it within redundant traditional formats. For artists such as Kosuth, it was only by questioning these formats and considering them boundaries to be broken through that art could achieve its noble, philosophical pursuit.

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42 Ibid., 16.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 20.
45 Ibid.
This sentiment is echoed by artists viewed as having been influential to Kosuth, and whom he quotes at the beginning of part two of ‘Art After Philosophy’: ‘In France there is an old saying, “stupid like a painter”... All my work in the period before the Nude was visual painting. Then I came to the idea.’ (Marcel Duchamp); ‘The disinterest in painting and sculpture is a disinterest in doing it again’ (Donald Judd); ‘For each work of art that becomes physical there are many variations that do not’ (Sol LeWitt)\(^46\). While declaring his reluctance to reinforce the notion of conceptual art as a ‘movement’, Kosuth identifies artists associated with conceptual art who he in fact regarded as doing something outside this art in its more pure form. Kosuth was concerned that the use of the term ‘conceptual art’ to describe the multitude of work that was becoming increasingly associated with it would lead to a sense of conceptualism as an artistic ‘tendency’, which he feared would then become viewed as a style associated with a particular form of art’s materialisation. While Kosuth admitted that a certain presence of the object necessarily remained alongside attempts to deliver art to its more pure conceptual form, he felt the notion of conceptual art as a style would lend undue emphasis to its existence as an object, to its related form and aesthetic, detracting from his assertion around the irrelevance of aesthetics to art.

The emphasis on the material or object-ness of art is viewed by Kosuth as determining the similarity (or otherwise) to his project by the multitude of artists identified at the time as ‘conceptual’. He describes the work of Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner as having become associated with conceptual art, ‘almost by accident’\(^47\), as an association made solely on the basis of their choice of materials and processes over a concern with art as concept. To illustrate his point, Kosuth describes a work by Barry where small paintings were progressively reduced, first to a series of single lines, which then became radio-wave beams, then inert gases and finally existed only in the form of ‘brain energy’. To Kosuth, this work by Barry is only conceptual, ‘because the material is invisible. But his art does have a physical state, which is different than work which only exists conceptually.’\(^48\) Kosuth claims that more ‘purely conceptual art’ existed in the work of Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin in the UK, On Kawara in Japan, and Christine Kozlov and Ian Baxter in Canada. He identifies a

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 27.
\(^{48}\) Ibid.
new, ‘purer’ form of conceptual art as made by younger artists of the time (Adrian Piper, Saul Ostrow and Perpetua Butler) and further conceptual work (‘in this purer sense’) by Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden, and Roger Cutforth. ‘Pure’ conceptualism is thus lent a sense of historical continuity via the identification of older artists who influenced Kosuth through to younger artists he viewed as carrying the idea into the future. However Kosuth’s attempt to justify his reasoning around claims of works’ purity or otherwise tends to render the notion less precise: while he describes some artists as making work which is ‘conceptually presented’ or ‘along conceptual lines’, others are described as treating art objects in a ‘much different way than they are usually treated in an art context’, while others are said to use a ‘conceptual format’ or make "conceptual" sort of work’. In spite of Kosuth’s desire to retain the pure thread of conceptual art, where the art as idea (or as ‘art’) is more apparent than its existence within an object, it seems he is unable – even within this own early reasoning – to avoid its muddying.

Conceptual art as a defined movement or period is known for its brevity. Only six years post his attempt to restrict the parameters of this art – as discussed above – Kosuth addressed the sense of its having ‘failed’ in issue two of the equally short-lived conceptual art journal, The Fox (1975-76). Kosuth writes that, ‘the last Fox poster advertised “…the failure of Conceptual Art” as part of the content of Number 1’. While identifying this sense of failure as having only been, ‘…alluded to in various articles’ within the issue, Kosuth took the theme up in issue 2, in an essay he called ‘1975’⁴⁹. While suggesting that conceptual art’s history was more complex than may be implied by the notion of failure, Kosuth nonetheless admits that, ‘the activities of the mass of practitioners within what is now an (art) institution is a betrayal of the impetus of its original aims’.⁵⁰ This betrayal takes the form of what he identifies as the development of ‘stylistic conceptual art’ (SCA):

...a formalistic hypostatization of cultural sleepwalking; as dependent on and as expressive of the institutions of the prevailing dominating socio-political-economic ideology as is the current practice of the more traditional modes of art-making (painting and sculpture).⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Ibid., 130.
⁵¹ Ibid.
While declaring he may have been responsible for, ‘some of the current malaise in art-practice’\textsuperscript{52}, Kosuth saw conceptual art’s death as the result of its acceptance or annexation by the establishment. The idea of conceptual art as action, where, ‘the activity was art, not the residue’\textsuperscript{53}, is written about by Kosuth in ‘1975’ as having been co-opted by the institution:

\begin{quote}
...what can this society do with activity? Activity must mean labor. And labor must give you a service or a product. Only as a product could what I spent my time doing be meaningful in this society. But what it meant to me, and to anyone really interested in art had nothing at all to do with its existence as a product. The more recent work needed galleries and museums to provide the necessary context – and this is where the problems, artistic and political, begin.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Kosuth’s early fears concerning the opening up of conceptual art to a multitude of less pure conceptual practices and of art’s subsequent re-entrenchment within the material object and thus aesthetics were seemingly fulfilled. Kosuth illustrates this co-optation as the sense of the conservative forces of the establishment reining this practice in by embracing it: there is a sense here that what might today be referred to as the force of neo-liberalism was ultimately stronger than artists’ ability (or desire) to escape it.

Lucy Lippard’s anthology of texts documenting the conceptual movement, ‘Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972’ was originally published in 1973. It was reissued in 1997 and introduced with a new essay by Lippard called ‘Escape Attempts’, wherein she reflects on the nature of the art of that time 25 years earlier. While not an artist, Lippard was closely associated with the conceptual art movement, participating within it as a curator, writer and critic, however her experimental style of curating and writing was in itself art-like. Lippard, herself situated in New York, emphasises conceptual art’s internationalism and its having occurred seemingly spontaneously and concurrently over a broad sweep of cities globally. Lippard’s essay is detailed in its reference to the many and varied forms taken by conceptual art, such as mail art, earthworks, performance art,

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
happenings, actions and even minimalism. While she references conceptual art’s contested history regarding its origins, outcomes, and the purity of its programme, Lippard’s essay is less concerned with the intricacies of these claims and more with recalling the ‘spirit’ of the movement in all its instances.

Lippard describes conceptual art’s dematerialisation as an attempt to escape what she calls the ‘frame-and-pedestal’ syndrome, as being anti-art-as-commodity. Similarly to Kosuth, she viewed ‘ultra-conceptual art’ as evolving from art as idea and art as action. Lippard identifies conceptual art as having made art more accessible to women than previous art movements, since its dematerialized form made it inexpensive, unintimidating and accessible. While acknowledging that conceptual art may today appear timid and disconnected in comparison to the political activism of the time, she describes the conceptual artists themselves as having looked and sounded like radicals. Even if the art was apolitical, in its presentation the form (or lack of a form) this art took was radical: it was often the form of conceptual art that was political over its content. Lippard describes conceptual artists as wanting to attack notions of originality, individual style and genius, which were associated with ‘patriarchal, ruling-class art’.

However as early as 1973, Lippard wrote in the ‘Postface’ of the original publication of Six Years that, ‘hopes that “conceptual art” would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively “progressive” approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded.’\(^{55}\) Where in 1969 artists believed nobody would want to pay money for objects such as ‘a Xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded’, only three years later, ‘major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by...the world’s most prestigious galleries’.\(^{56}\) In 1997, Lippard was realistic about the outcomes of the period:

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\(^{55}\) Lippard, ‘EscapeAttempts’, xxi.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread).\(^57\)

Nonetheless, Lippard retains a hope that ‘the most exciting “art” might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art.’\(^58\) Reflecting on the time of conceptual art twenty five years prior, Lippard declares that while art’s escape had been temporary, the spirit of the art remained, waiting to be tapped into by artists of the future: ‘Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell, but parole is always a possibility.’\(^59\)

Where Lippard emphasises conceptual art in its diversity, in the openness and ephemerality of its forms and its political nature, Kosuth attempts to restrict conceptual art’s definition in order to prevent its being seen as a movement at all. However while Lippard and Kosuth may diverge in their emphases on its nature, their retrospective views of conceptual art maintain an equal sense of its having failed. In both accounts the source of this failure is art’s return to a material form, its subsequent re-institutionalisation and re-emphasis on aesthetics, and its commodification. This sense of the inescapability of art from materiality or the aesthetic represents a particular end of the ideological drive toward art’s liberation within the modern, an end that contributes toward the conditions of contemporary art as post-conceptual.

**PART 3 - Contemporary art as post conceptual art**

In chapter two of *Anywhere or not at All* (‘art beyond aesthetics’) Osborne claims that within Kant’s aesthetic theory, ‘art judgements’ are excluded from the notion of pure aesthetic judgements of taste. Since art judgements were identified by Kant as belonging to the realm of ‘logically conditioned’ aesthetic judgements, they operated under ‘conditions of a determinate concept, such as “art” or “painting”,’ which are ‘not aesthetically “pure”’.\(^60\) For

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\(^{57}\) Ibid., xvii.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., xxii.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 42.
Osborne, the result of Kant’s exclusion of art judgements from the aesthetic realm results in a gap:

In so far as ‘aesthetics’ is taken as the name for the philosophical treatment of art, we are confronted with a new and equally ironic ‘ignorance of the thing and of the language’: aesthetic’s principled ignorance of art qua art.61

The fact that Kant’s notion of aesthetics centred on the effect of an object on a subject means, according to Osborne, that the notion of ‘aesthetics’ relates more to the ‘metaphysics of the subject’ than to a ‘metaphysics of the artwork as a self-sufficient or “autonomous” entity’, and that the notion of ‘aesthetic art’ is, ‘the contradictory result of the negotiation of the impasse.’62 Osborne characterises the nineteenth and twentieth century tradition of ‘aesthetic art’ as having been based on the ‘self-contradictory absolutization’ of Kant’s aesthetic art:

This ignorance of language – the idea that ‘aesthetics’ is an appropriate term to designate the philosophical treatment of art – sums up the ignorance of the thing: ‘art’. This ignorance persists today in the widespread belief that it is the logical autonomy of pure aesthetic judgements of taste from other types of judgement (as theorized by Kant) that is the philosophical basis of the autonomy of art.63

It would seem here that Osborne is aligned with a view of art in its autonomy as necessarily disconnected with the notion of aesthetics, similar to beliefs held by artists such as Kosuth in forming the foundations of conceptual art. However, Osborne’s view of conceptual art’s failure to ultimately disconnect art from aesthetics is that it constitutes, conversely, its success:

It was the ironic historical achievement of the strong programme of ‘analytical’ or ‘pure’ conceptual art to have demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a necessary, though radically

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 43.
63 Ibid.
insufficient, component of the artwork through the failure of its attempt at its elimination: the failure of an absolute anti-aesthetic.64

For Osborne, conceptual art’s attempt to exceed a convention – that of art as concerned with aesthetics – ultimately rendered the convention more visible and reinstated it ‘on new grounds’, in a function he describes as Hegelian.65 Therefore conceptual art for Osborne was, ‘an idea that marked the experimental investigation of a particular anti-aesthetic desire’66: this leads him to conclude that, ‘the meaning of “conceptual art” must be retrospectively critically refigured to incorporate this insight.’67 The implication for contemporary art – as a ‘post’-conceptual art according to Osborne’s reading of the movement – is that, ‘it is only in relation to the category of conceptual art, in its inherent problematicity, that a critical historical experience of contemporary art is possible.’68 Thus a foundation for Osborne’s theorisation of the art of the current moment, in its contextualisation as ‘postconceptual’, is firmly based on an idea of aesthetics as: ‘a necessary, though radically insufficient, component of the artwork’.69

The retrospective return of art here to a sense of the aesthetic or the object – to a sense of aesthetics as ‘necessary’, even while ‘radically insufficient’ – jars when contrasted with the stated aims of the multitude of artists involved with conceptual art, further examples of which include: ‘I’m not really interested any longer to make an object’ (Jan Dibbets), ‘materialist implies a primary involvement in materials, but I am primarily concerned with art’, (Lawrence Weiner), ‘I present oral communication as an object...I’m diametrically opposed to the precious object’ (Ian Wilson) and ‘Whatever happened to the art object?’ (Carl Andre).70 Despite evidence provided by statements such as these, Osborne maintains a view that the dematerialization of art was, ‘always a misunderstanding of art’s conceptual character’71.

64 Ibid., 49.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 51.
69 Ibid., 49.
71 Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All, 131.
Osborne tends elsewhere in his argument to contradict or doubt the stated views or ideals of certain conceptual artists. For example he quotes Dick Higgins from 1965 (in relation to the breakdown of the traditional categories of medium in art):

Much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media. This is no accident...We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant.

And Robert Smithson from 1967:

Painting, sculpture and architecture are finished, but the art habit continues. Art settles into a stupendous inertia.

...only to contradict them:

As it turned out, we were not approaching the dawn of a classless society; nor did art settle into a stupendous inertia.  

Elsewhere, although Osborne describes it as ‘conservative, indeed reactionary’ when Smithson’s self-declared ‘transcategorial’ work is retrospectively analysed within the category of ‘sculpture’, he doesn’t recognise the conservatism of his own tendency to retrospectively re-materialise work originally created in the spirit of dematerialisation. Even Henry Flynt’s statement (as quoted above) - “Concept art" is first of all an art of which the material is "concepts"' - is interpreted by Osborne as proof of the existence of a, ‘medium-based conception of conceptual art’. While Osborne claims Greenberg’s formalist reading of modernism does not allow for conceptual art’s critical nature and thus precludes an effective theorisation for contemporary art, I believe Osborne’s own tendency to overrule or deny the priority of the anti-aesthetic ideals as stated by conceptual artists similarly curtails an effective theorisation of contemporary art, post such ideals. While artists of the conceptual movement may have failed in their project to – as stated by Lippard – free art from the ‘white cell’ of its material form, Osborne’s tendency to retrospectively cast aspersion on the aims of this universal movement feels like defeat and a return to order.

72 Ibid., 99.
73 Ibid., 109.
74 Ibid., 103.
Currently, object oriented ontology and new materialist theories, frequently related to the philosophical thread known as ‘speculative realism’, are popularly employed in the contextualisation and theorisation of contemporary art. Notions of art as necessarily ‘material’, or object-based, centre on a sense of the vitalism or metaphysics of objects, as found in the work of Jane Bennett or Graham Harman.\(^{75}\) In his book *Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology, Causality*\(^{76}\), Timothy Morton attempts an analysis of art in relation to these ideas. For Morton, art as *aesthetic* relates to causality as it is rethought in speculative realism, which, rather than adhering to a view of human knowledge as limited in its ability to understand events and their causes, views a sense of causality existing instead within the world of objects, which can be known. In this sense, events that impact us are not caused by an unknown force outside our world of experience (for example by a God-like figure) but by forces we can know and experience via an exploration of objects and their impacts – that is, via their materiality or objecthood – located within our world. For Morton, ‘entities interact in a sensual ether that is (at least to some extent) nonlocal and nontemporal’\(^{77}\): this idea of a ‘sensual ether’ is important to the notion of causality within human thought, in that it destroys the relativism of subjective views of reality. Therefore Morton believes that ‘art’ – in the sense of aesthetics as related to feelings and the senses – plays an important role within such a scheme:

> Causality floats in front of objects, figuratively speaking. It doesn’t lie underneath them like some grey machinery. Another way of saying this is that causality must belong to the aesthetic dimension. To study the aesthetic dimension, then, is to study causality.\(^{78}\)

This sense of aesthetics destroys notions of reality as subjectively constructed: to Morton, it means reality becomes ‘real’ because it is, ‘...encrypted against access by any object,

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\(^{77}\) Ibid.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 30.
including a probing human mind. An effort to view the world as operating aesthetically — where ‘aesthetics’ is understood as connected to the senses — escapes the problem of reality existing as mere illusion due to the subjectivity of our individual views. The way things appear is seen to act on and change the world: for Morton, this gives great agency to aesthetics as appearance, from which he concludes that art (as aesthetics) has a major role to play in an object-oriented view.

However Morton’s idea of art in relation to such theories is selective, as demonstrated by his description of ‘performance art, or at least the manifestoes of conceptual art’:

By undoing the difference between art and nonart, by self-consciously getting rid of self-consciousness and professional artists, conceptual art ignores the rift between essence and appearance, reducing the ontological to the merely ontic. An overall atmosphere of jaded cynicism hangs over it.

Here it seems that conceptual art’s move toward de-materialisation, or performance art’s existence within the non-material parameters of an event or happening, excludes them from Morton’s view of art as causal:

...when you only have the meshwork, the mask, without the possibility that there’s something real underneath it, then you have no play, no pretense, no illusion, no display, no magic. You know it’s an illusion—so it isn’t an illusion. You know there is no essence—this becomes the essence, a shadowy, inverted form of the very essentialism you are trying to escape.

Like Osborne, Morton disqualifies conceptual art’s project of disconnecting from aesthetics. When art questions its essence (for example the fact that art is necessarily material) and finds this essence to be an illusion, Morton believes the illusion becomes the essence, and the result of this is that nothing is real. Movements viewed as ‘anti-art’, or ‘anti-aesthetic’ are in this sense ‘anti-reality’, and anti- the object oriented ontology Morton is pursuing.

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 75.
81 Ibid.
Morton’s view of art as aesthetic is at odds with Osborne’s interpretation of Kant, and his description of conceptual art as having been clouded by ‘an overall atmosphere of jaded cynicism’ contrasts with Lippard’s account of conceptual artists’ radicality, the spontaneous universality of the movement, and the words of the conceptual artists themselves. Where Morton views art in its object-ness as intrinsic to a more radical view of the world, Lippard and other conceptualists viewed it as a cell from which art needed to escape. Morton’s discussion of the impact of art in its materiality is illustrated using examples of paintings by Turner:

The aesthetic experience that we humans now call “beauty” is a naked experience of relations between entities: between the Turner painting and me; among the brushstrokes in the painting; between me and you, both having the experience; and so on.82

…and Bridget Riley:

You are working directly with people’s optic nerve and field of vision, as in a Bridget Riley painting. You cause the optical system to vibrate, creating interference patterns. Your painting is a device, a machine, an object that has causal effects.83

Where Osborne views conceptual art’s impact on art’s ontology as significant enough to define contemporary art as ‘postconceptual’, Morton denies conceptual art’s validity altogether and situates new materialist theories within the traditional medium of painting, thus denying the forms, or frequently lack of form, on which much contemporary art is based. Where it is not only impossible to delete the fact of conceptual art’s widespread and influential occurrence, it is equally impossible to ignore this movement’s (somewhat ironic) facilitation of the multitude of forms available to the art of today. Equally, where the openness and radicality of conceptual art gave art a new political emphasis, Morton’s return of art to the boundaries of the traditional form of painting represents a conservative turn.

In reviewing the exhibition ‘Materializing Six Years: Lucy Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art’ at the Brooklyn Museum in 2013, Chloe Wyma asks, ‘Is Conceptual Art Still

82 Ibid., 90.
83 Ibid., 24.
Referring to Lippard’s critique of conceptual art’s failure to evade the clutches of the institution and art market, Wyma describes as a ‘stalemate’ the fact that,  

Almost 40 years after Lippard argued for art’s dematerialization, we don’t seem to have moved past our anxiety over the art object. We are dubious of art for art’s sake, equally dubious of academic austerity and visual impoverishment.  

Describing object oriented ontology as a ‘particularly sketchy answer’ to this stalemate, Wyma suggests the theories’ tendency to ‘put objects on level footing with humans’ is magical thinking, related to Marx’s ideas around commodity fetishism and the paranormal. She suggests Lippard herself may have been too harsh in her own judgement of the limits of conceptual art’s dematerialisation:  

We can accept that it’s impossible, even undesirable, to transcend the art object, without succumbing to commodity fetishism wrapped in the bacon of seductive metaphysics. The positive legacy of “Six Years,” then, might be a healthy dose of skepticism.  

In addition to Osborne and Morton’s somewhat retroactive views of art as necessarily aesthetic – either despite, or because of, the movement of conceptual art – it must be noted that anti-aesthetic or anti-art ideals are not specific to the moment of conceptual art. Jean Baudrillard cites an early example of art’s de-aestheticisation as having occurred within the work of Picasso: ‘In the 1970s, Roger Caillois wrote an article in which he called Picasso the great liquidator of all aesthetic values. The work and aspirations of the artists of the international movement of Dada are also strong examples of an anti-art tendency. However every modern art movement, when examined within the context of its historical particularity, may be seen to have sprung from a sense of anti-art or the anti-aesthetic, to the point where this sentiment may be seen to constitute a tradition of the modern.

85 Ibid.  
86 Ibid.  
87 Ibid.  
Baudrillard quotes Caillois further: ‘He (Caillois) claimed that after Picasso, no one could conceive of anything more than a circulation of objects, of fetishes, independent of the circulation of functional objects.’ For Baudrillard, the anti-aesthetic drive of modern art is connected to the increasing fact of contemporary art’s commodification:

One could say, in fact, that the aesthetic world is the world of fetishizing. In the economic realm, money must circulate in any manner it can, otherwise there is no value. The same law governs aesthetic objects: there have to be more and more in order for an aesthetic universe to exist.

Despite conceptual art’s explosion of traditional forms and attempt to situate art outside the object and aesthetics, it is not uncommon within the contemporary art world to hear difficult, restrained, highly conceptual or even invisible artworks appreciated in aesthetic terms. Gavin Brown’s enterprise in New York recently restaged a 1969 work by Jannis Kounellis, Untitled (12 Horses), wherein twelve horses were housed within the gallery for one week, standing on a specially cushioned floor surface and eating hay. Kounellis’ work was originally created in the spirit of the Art Povera movement, which – similarly to and at the same time as conceptual art – challenged the institutions of art in applying art as a concept to everyday, banal or anti-art situations, in a spirit of radicality and liberation.

A review of this work on the popular art blog Hyperallergic represents a common tendency within contemporary art reception by referring less to this work’s challenging or radical history and more to its aesthetic affect in its present materiality:

The space is cool and still, and the horse’s sleek bodies of rippled muscle and smooth manes are illuminated by the skylights. Similar to the original 1969 staging of the Kounellis piece at Rome’s Galleria L’Attico, there’s a consideration of the art in the beauty of an animal like a horse, which artists have been drawn to since the Lascaux caves were painted.

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90 Baudrillard, ‘La Commedia dell’Arte,’ 74.
91 Ibid.
A comment from a viewer follows:

‘It’s so quiet’, Melanie Kress, a curatorial fellow at Friends of the High Line, remarked after seeing the horses. ‘Having fallen in love with that piece in art history class, it’s still stunning.\(^{94}\)

Within the contemporary art world, work that may have originally been created in a spirit of the anti-aesthetic, of ugliness or anti-art is frequently appreciated in aesthetic terms: while there is nothing wrong with aesthetic appreciation per se, that which may have been significant or profound about a particular works’ contribution to art as discourse tends to disappear in the emphasis on its immediate aesthetic affect. Anything we come across in our everyday existence may be appreciated aesthetically – for example a pile of rocks, a sunset, a road in a certain light, a clean floor: while this fact may be a point that conceptual art as discourse makes, the point is lost when conceptual objects are appreciated exclusively in regard to their aesthetic qualities over their historic or conceptual import.

Later in the review, Gavin Brown, the gallery’s director, attempts to return *Untitled (12 Horses)* to its original historical significance in deflecting the sense that it is ‘about’ something, or that it is allegorical. The *Hyperallergic* reviewer writes, ‘When I asked gallery owner Gavin Brown what he thought it meant to bring these live animals into the space as art, he said: “I don’t think it’s about anything.”\(^{95}\) Here, Brown impedes an attempt to read this work allegorically by insisting that it is not about anything, thus maintaining the sense of the work’s significance as a concern with art’s ontology. While the aesthetic emphasis of this review may have been a result of Brown’s deflecting the notion that the work is ‘about’ something, this instance of the re-aestheticisation of the anti-aesthetic tendencies of conceptual art here illustrates the more general tendency to aestheticise contemporary art discourse in general, and not only within more popular media such as *Hyperallergic*. The theorisation and appreciation of contemporary art in aesthetic terms means its discourse loses a connection with both its recent and more distant modernist past in the pursuit of the

\(^{94}\) Ibid.

\(^{95}\) Ibid.
anti-aesthetic, precluding the attainment of a significant, philosophical or historical discourse for the field.

In 1987, Baudrillard described modern art as, ‘an explosive practice, then an implosive one, following which the cycle was over.’ The explosive practice of modernity is likened by Baudrillard to an orgy, a process leading to ‘liberation in every domain’, including that of art, where it manifested as: ‘the assumption of all models of representation, all models of anti-representation.’ While Baudrillard doesn’t specify the particular moments or periods within art to which these ideas refer, it could be interpreted that modern art’s explosive practice of the liberation of art from form was realised within conceptual art’s ultimate idealisation of this aim, at which point an implosion occurs via art’s dispersal within any and every conceivable form in contemporary art. This implosion results in a sense of contemporary art’s inescapability, described either in terms of the ‘stalemate’ of contemporary art’s troubled relationship to the object by Wyma, the sense of no escape from art’s institutionalisation by Lippard, Kosuth’s attempt to escape the aesthetic, or Gillick’s aim to escape ‘contemporary art’ altogether as a signifier. By characterising modernism’s sense of increasing liberation as an orgy, Baudrillard reframes an anxious, ‘what is contemporary art?’ with a more emphatic, ‘WHAT DO WE DO AFTER THE ORGY?’

Rather than attempt to define art in the contemporary moment by either reining in its sense of multeity to align with complicated, imposed categories, returning it to a concern with aesthetics or reading it allegorically, it may be more instructive to view the contemporary moment in its openness to all forms alongside the accompanying sense of entrapment this openness induces. Baudrillard characterises this moment as:

...an end without finality, the opposite of the finality without end that, according to Kant, characterizes classical aesthetics. In other words, we are in a transaesthetics, a completely different turn of events, a turn that is difficult to describe and delineate, since, by definition, aesthetic judgments are impossible in it.

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97 Ibid., 104.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 103.
This end without finality, along with its accompanying sense of the transaesthetic, is an end from which there seems no escape. This state is represented in the shift from modern artists’ sense of hostility towards the official *form* of the art of the day (for example conceptual or pop art’s critique of abstract expressionism), to the hostility contemporary artists feel towards ‘contemporary art’ itself, its entrapment of art via the embrace and subsequent institutionalisation of all forms. As Baudrillard states, ‘there is no worse enemy to form than the availability of all forms.’  

100 Baudrillard, ‘La Commedia dell’Arte,’ 74.
CHAPTER THREE: CONTEMPORARY ART AS THE END OF ART

Art is dead, don’t consume its corpse.
Art is dead, let’s liberate our everyday life.¹

PART 1 - The end

Where Osborne determines aesthetics or materiality as ultimately essential to a definition of contemporary art based on conceptual art’s inability to eradicate them, I believe a true definition of contemporary art as post-conceptual must accommodate the anti-aesthetic ideals of such art, as stated by conceptual artists. While contemporary art discourse is certainly complicated by conceptual art’s failure to escape the object, it may equally be enhanced by the consideration of these ideals as part of its ontology. If contemporary art is to be determined according to its relationship with the modern, I believe the anti-aesthetic trend inherent to the modern must be accommodated more adequately than Osborne’s statement – that aesthetics form a ‘necessary, though radically insufficient, component of the artwork’ – allows. Equally, the fact that the outcome of conceptual art’s anti-materialist ideal paradoxically made manifest an infinite availability of all forms to current practice renders this ideal more useful to its theorisation than displayed by the somewhat compromised, indeterminate solution of aesthetics as ‘necessary’ while ‘insufficient’.

It is in respect to contemporary art’s openness to form that the notion of the end of art finds application. Here, the end of art refers to the end of the modernist project of the liberation of form, as referenced earlier within Baudrillard’s thought. Where modern art may be viewed as the increasing liberation of the concept ‘art’ in its drive to define art and locate that which is essential to the concept, the culmination of this project as the location of ‘art’ within all forms in its ultimate liberation may be seen to mark this project’s end. It is in this respect that contemporary art may be theorised as the end of art, where the avant garde tendencies of modern art movements formed that which we understand as ‘art’ today. While Baudrillard characterises the state of current art as an ‘end without finality’, in

1994 he wrote of the ‘impossibility’ of the end: ‘it would be too much to hope that we had finished with history. For it is possible not only that history has disappeared...but also that we still have to fuel its end.’ It is in respect to fuelling the end of the historical progression of the modern that an end of art statement may be crucial to the full realisation of ‘the contemporary’.

Notions of ‘the end’ accompany modern and post-modern thought, and their roots are frequently located within Hegel’s reading of history as progressive and dialectical. Within this linear sense of history, the events that accompany humankind’s progress through time are said to lead towards a rational state via a dialectical process, the inherent contradictions of which result in a clash of thesis and antithesis, leading to a state of synthesis. Marx predicted his idea of a future communist utopia as occurring along these lines, while in the 1930s Kojève interpreted this process as resulting in the end of history via the ultimate achievement of a ‘universal homogenous state’. In such a state, the struggles that occurred within the historical process preceding it would cease to exist due to the sublating of its conflicts. This state for Kojève was that of a classless democracy, of equality and freedom for every individual, an outcome of the increasing liberalism seen as characteristic of the history of Western democracy.

Where Marx believed history would end via the fall of capitalism and the inevitable rise of the proletariat, Kojève believed the capitalist system had demonstrated increasing capacity for the effective distribution of resources to all members of society, and viewed the end of history as aligned with a state of democracy. In 1989 historian Francis Fukuyama, following Kojève, claimed the end of history had been reached due to the shifts that had occurred within that decade’s history, such as the end of the Cold War and an increase in the number of peaceful nations globally. Fukuyama believed this shift could be meaningfully contextualised via the idea of the end of history: not as the literal end of actual, or political,

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events occurring within the world, but a sense that a momentous enough shift had occurred within global ideologies that this moment could be viewed as the end of history’s process of liberation. While Fukuyama’s reading of the end of history has been viewed as an alignment with the US political system, in 2007 he claimed this had been a misreading of his theory:

The End of History was never linked to a specifically American model of social or political organisation. Following Alexandre Kojève, the Russian-French philosopher who inspired my original argument, I believe that the European Union more accurately reflects what the world will look like at the end of history than the contemporary United States.7

Fukuyama states further that his end of history was an argument about modernisation: ‘I argued that, if a society wanted to be modern, there was no alternative to a market economy and a democratic political system’.8 He claims that the desire to be free of tyranny is a universal one, while the desire to live in a liberal society – ‘a political order characterised by a sphere of individual rights and the rule of law’9 – is not necessarily universal. Fukuyama identifies the desire for liberalism as being more frequently the outcome of a process of modernisation – a process he believes can only be instigated within a political democracy with a market economy. This view connects a particular political and economic system – democracy and capitalism – with a desire for increasing liberalism due to the modernisation such systems engender.

Marx’s view of the end of history was more optimistic than that of Kojève, in that he believed the final communist utopia would free workers from time-consuming labour and enable them to enjoy activities that made them happy – perhaps more ‘human’ – for example via participation in cultural activities or increased leisure.10 Kojève however portrayed the image of the ‘last man’ as something resembling the undead, wherein the cessation of the contradictions or clashes of history would lend a sense of insignificance to human activity, or a purposeless existence. Similarly, Fukuyama concludes his 1989 essay

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
with the speculation that history’s ending may potentially result in a bland world, one lacking passionate, ideological debate or battles. He posits also that this state could involve an end of the disciplines of art and philosophy, since the only focus left for human activity would be as perpetual caretakers of the ‘museum of human history’. Fukuyama speculates further that such a state may lead to ‘centuries of boredom’, the prospect of which could result in the beginning of a new history.\(^{11}\)

In 2014, the editors of *e-flux* devoted two issues of the journal to the theme of the end of history, reflecting on the idea within the context of contemporary world affairs. They describe Fukuyama’s essay as prophetic, due to the fact that it, ‘now reads as a crystal-clear blueprint for a peculiarly murky apolitical nonideological condition that has proven to be incredibly difficult to work from—particularly for artists.’\(^{12}\) While affirming the accuracy of Fukuyama’s prediction, Aranda, Vidokle and Kuan Wood claim that the state of liberal democracy that underpins his idea of the end of history is buckling:

...we are increasingly bumping up against the utter failure of liberal democracy to account for the bankers and corrupt regimes who commit their worst crimes from within the logic of economic freedom and electoral democracy.\(^{13}\)

Suggesting the free-market democracy may have been a ‘Ponzi scheme all along’, the editors claim that, ‘history is not beginning again, because it never really ended.’\(^{14}\) They suggest rather that history is returning, under conditions different to those of the idealist tradition in which it was previously understood:

...the idea of a homogenous system built on idealism has become unsustainable and has given way to the many identitarian battles that it has had to suppress in order to keep itself going. Only the end of history is ending.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
The editors claim that art ‘probably did’ disappear alongside history’s drive toward a universal homogenous state, citing increasingly withdrawn arts funding, artists’ ‘strategic withdrawals’ from the art world, and the fact that, ‘everyone is bored sick of the waves of inflationary and depressive episodes of large-scale, bombastic zombie exhibitions.’ They also refer to the increasing tendency for contemporary artists to boycott such exhibitions due to ideological clashes with their source of funding: ‘it seems art does not end only because it has flowed into life, but also because its conditions have become too contradictory to be contained any longer.’ The editors believe this end of history’s idealist progression has resulted in the proliferation of origin myths, and the compression of our sense of time and space by rapid technological advances has allowed for an increase in ‘identitarian and sectarian movements’. In this view of the end of history, Aranda, Kuan Wood and Vidokle claim that, ‘history and notions of progress seem to be twisting back on themselves’.

The idea of the end of art exists alongside notions of the end of history, and was similarly initiated in the thought of Hegel. In his Lectures on Aesthetics from the early nineteenth century, Hegel makes the claim that:

> Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.

Just as Fukuyama’s end of history does not entail the end of significant events occurring in the future, Hegel’s end of art does not involve the complete cessation of artistic activity and production. For Hegel it is art’s role within society that shifts significantly at its end: Hegel’s end of art is the end of art in its ‘highest vocation’: ‘The universal need for art...is man’s rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self.’ When art can no longer occupy such a role within, or relationship to, society, Hegel characterises it as concerned instead with humanity’s

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Hegel, Hegel’s Aesthetics, 10.
20 Ibid., 31.
'objective spirit', described by Arthur Danto as, ‘the system of meanings and practices that constitute the form of life its members live.’

In *The End of Art - Readings in a Rumour After Hegel*, Eva Geulen traces the history of the idea as it occurred within the work of German philosophers – Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno, and Heidegger – subsequent to Hegel. Geulen’s aim in treating the end of art as a rumour is less an attempt to, ‘unmask its pretensions or to denounce its truth content’ than to account for what she views as the paradox inherent to the idea: its tendency to recur historically, beyond Hegel. Geulen neither wants to ‘settle the paradox of the end, nor to stage or to deny the end of art’: for this reason she claims she is left with the ‘provisional goal of providing a formal doctrine for this rumour’. Characterising ‘the end of art’ as an object of thought that lacks unity, within her analysis Geulen interprets the various claims made about this end along the lines of, ‘a phenomenology of the end of art as a rumour’. Geulen arranges her discussion of post-Hegelian thinking around the end of art chronologically, identifying the development of its contextualisation from Nietzsche through Benjamin and Adorno to Heidegger, following Hegel.

‘Until now there has been no way to think the end of art, to develop its forms or write its history, that is not already anticipated in Hegel’ – Geulen claims contradictions exist within Hegel’s notion of the end which prevent conclusive readings of it, but that he has equally thought the idea through to a point of exhaustion: she believes it is specifically Hegel's aesthetics that have led to the end of art, and that he, ‘repealed modernity before it had even begun, thus simultaneously ensuring that the end of art would have to be repeatedly invoked.’ She states that Hegel does not claim a totalitarian end to artistic production but, ‘the end of a possibility of a reflection on art or aesthetics that does not involve the end of

23 Ibid., 7.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 12.
27 Ibid., 5.
art. In this sense the end of art is framed as a *discourse* initiated by Hegel, a discourse which Geulen claims invokes the name of Hegel in every instance of its recurrence.

When the end of art exists as a discourse, it necessarily involves the interdisciplinary association of art with philosophy: Geulen writes that, ‘art cannot end itself, for it would then no longer be art’, and her tracing of the discourse within a specifically German philosophical tradition is appropriate to this. A study of this discourse lends a sense that the idea that art has ended exists solely within its bounds, rather than having informed or impacted art as a practice, which continues on regardless. As Geulen points out, the end of art is, ‘the hinge between aesthetics and anti-aesthetics’. The anti-aesthetic strain within modern art movements may be viewed in relation to an anti-art drive, or a drive toward the end of art. However this strain *in itself* formulates modernist aesthetics and drove art on its continuous path through modernism, despite its end having been proclaimed at its outset. Where modern art builds its end into its own ontology – into the fact that art *exists* – the idea of this end cannot be spoken of within the ontology of its practice. There is a sense that the end of art has no place in the practice of art, and the prevalence of the idea within aesthetic theory creates discord between these seemingly interrelated realms. According to Geulen, ‘the virulent competition, at least since Plato, between philosophy and art is sharpened under the conditions of the end of art as discourse to an antagonistic principle that binds the competitors firmly to one another.’

**PART 2 - Arthur C. Danto’s end of art**

Geulen’s study of the end of art is bordered by modernity and she does not consider its relevance to a specifically contemporary art discourse, in either its difference or resemblance to the modern. This may be because, as she claims, ‘at the end of the end of art one does not find an end, but a beginning: the discovery of the end of art as a discourse of modernity.’ If the period of modernity is complete and its discourse irrelevant to the

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28 Ibid., 86.
29 Ibid., 16.
30 Ibid., 16.
31 Ibid., 16.
32 Ibid., 14.
contemporary moment, one may sense that the inclusion of the idea of the end of art within contemporary discourse is itself over. In characterising the various revolutions of modern art as cyclical and repetitive rather than linear in nature, Geulen identifies the discourse of the end of art as having come to ‘a peculiar sort of end in sheer exhaustion’\textsuperscript{33}, where it is viewed as banal and trivial, and where, ‘the end of art has become such a cliché that even to raise the question seems superficial’\textsuperscript{34}. She writes: ‘nowadays it is de rigeur to debunk the end of art as a white elephant of modernity’\textsuperscript{35}.

Nonetheless the discourse did continue at a point between the modern and contemporary moment, most notably in the work of the American philosopher Arthur C. Danto\textsuperscript{36}. In the 1950s and early 60s, Danto was (appropriately) engaged equally with practices as both artist and philosopher. While living and working in France in 1961, Danto saw for the first time a reproduction of Roy Lichtenstein’s The Kiss in the American magazine Art News, which he describes as having, ‘looked like it came straight out of a comic book’\textsuperscript{37}. The experience had a profound effect on Danto:

I thought of The Kiss the rest of my time in France. I thought that if it was possible as art anything was possible in art. I remember drawing a church in Rome after that, and thinking: it’s okay to be doing this. I can do anything I want! It was then that I think I really lost interest in making art. That was a very philosophical response.\textsuperscript{38}

Upon returning to New York, Danto continued a relatively successful career as an artist, maintaining his studio practice (primarily involved with printmaking) and selling and exhibiting his work: however he began to feel that he was, ‘not part of what was going on, there were things happening in art that were fresh and exciting, but in which I would have to change radically as an artist if I was to be part of it all.’\textsuperscript{39} In the field of philosophy

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} German art historian Hans Belting has also contributed to this discourse with his work on the end of art’s history: see Hans Belting, \textit{The End of the History of Art?} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
however Danto felt he had contributed original work, specifically on the philosophy of history, and felt he may contribute something more original to art via that practice:

In some deep way, something was stirring in the early sixties that I wanted to be part of, and I thought that philosophy, as I was beginning to practice it, was more likely to take me there than art would.  

Danto does not explicitly refer to the cessation of his art practice in the context of the end of art, but more in relation to his realisation that art as a form had opened to almost infinite possibilities. While his interpretation of the fact that comic books could be art meant anything could be art, lending the sense that as an artist, ‘I can do anything I want!’ the freedom lent by this realisation led to the cessation of his practice and a philosophical response. His work as a philosopher held potential for Danto to engage with and respond to this new situation in art, so while his response was philosophical, it was as an artist that the idea of the end of art – as the cessation of art production in favour of its theorisation – arose for him. This fact may be seen to set Danto apart from the theorists analysed by Geulen, who as practitioners of theory may have approached art discourse from the outset within a philosophical context.

Danto describes the fact that, until that point, it had been easy to keep his practice as an artist separate from that as a philosopher, since he didn’t feel the two fields had much in common:

The field of aesthetics held no interest for me in any case...I was puzzled by how little the canon of aesthetics appeared to bear on what was happening in art, where the concept of taste, so central in the philosophical texts addressed to art, had nothing to do with the painting that shook the world, Abstract Expressionism.

While Danto continued to publish books and essays about philosophy, in 1964 his essay ‘The Artworld’ – presented at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association – had, as its subject, art. Taking a scientific approach, Danto highlighted the fact that much of the

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
emerging Pop art did not merely *represent* objects within the usual artistic formats (such as paint on canvas), but instead inserted *the object itself* into an art context, echoing the insertion of Lichtenstein’s comic strip painting within the format of an art magazine. Upon experiencing such work, the question was raised for Danto around what it was that allowed these objects to be art when they either were, or were indiscernible from, ordinary objects not normally considered ‘art’. Danto was attempting to grasp something invisible, a process or a set of conditions to which he felt a philosophical approach was necessary.

Within this essay Danto identifies both Socrates and Hamlet as having shared a view of art as a mirror, in its tendency to reflect our world back to us. Where the invention of photography invalidated the thesis that art was necessarily mimetic, Danto believed a new theory was required for a time wherein art objects were frequently indistinguishable from ordinary objects – or even were ordinary objects. Danto likens moments in the evolution of science, when, ‘a well-established, or at least widely credited theory is being threatened in such a way that all coherence goes’ to the progression of art movements in Western modernism, claiming new theories are required at these moments in order to accommodate newly emergent, and potentially incoherent, conditions. He gives as an example post-impressionism, wherein the mimetic theory of art – that artworks necessarily resemble or mirror the world – is proven inadequate to explain the post-impressionist tendency to intentionally *distort* the world, via exaggerated or unnatural forms or colours. Danto quotes Roger Fry’s analysis of the post-impressionists as having aimed, ‘not at illusion but reality’, in that the work aimed to capture the real, actual view these artists had of the world rather than attempt a more clinical reflection. Fry’s invention of this new definition, or theory, of art – Danto refers to this as the ‘realism theory’ of art – would alter the way art audiences would approach works from that point on, in that it was in the *creativity* of an artwork that its sense of reality existed over its success at imitation. Danto identifies this as the theory that allowed for the existence of post-impressionist artworks within the realm of ‘art’ – a realm from which the imitation theory would have had them ejected.

42 For example, Danto cites works by Rauschenberg and Oldenburg where they exhibit actual beds (with minor modifications) within a gallery space, rather than exhibiting pictures of beds.


44 Ibid., 574.
Danto claimed another such theory was required to explain why real, actual beds were now accepted as *art*, and were no longer just beds:

> To mistake an artwork for a real object is no great feat when an artwork is the real object one mistakes it for. The problem is how to avoid such errors, or to remove them once they are made.\(^{45}\)

He develops the concept of ‘the “is” of artistic identification’, which ‘is the sense of “is” in accordance with which a child, shown a circle and a triangle and asked which is him and which his sister, will point to the triangle saying “That is me”’.\(^{46}\) This same ‘is’ is employed when looking at art, as Danto describes, ‘in the gallery I point, for my companion’s benefit, to a spot in the painting before us and say, “That white dab is Icarus”’.\(^{47}\) It is the ‘is’ of artistic identification that allows an everyday object, such as a bed, to undergo its transformation into art, in which it inhabits an entirely new function. Danto concludes from this that the ‘is’ of artistic identification in fact constitutes a work of art, ‘to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.’\(^{48}\)

It is within his artworld essay that Danto’s most famous example of ‘indistinguishables’ – art objects that are visually indistinguishable from ‘mere real things’ – is raised with Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*. Danto describes Warhol as being endowed with something like the Midas touch: when ordinary grocery boxes can become art, the world and all its objects may be viewed as a set of latent artworks, waiting to be, ‘transfigured, through some dark mystery’\(^{49}\). He identifies the fact that such objects may not have been recognised as art fifty years prior: ‘but then there could not have been, everything being equal, flight insurance in the Middle Ages, or Etruscan typewriter erasers.’\(^{50}\) In this sense, ‘the world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one.’\(^{51}\) Here, the development of artistic movements and their shifts in that which constitutes the concept ‘art’ is again

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 575.  
\(^{46}\) Ibid.  
\(^{47}\) Ibid.  
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 580.  
\(^{49}\) Ibid.  
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 581.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
likened to the realm of science: Danto claims that the members of a society must be ready to accept views of the world that challenge or upturn those that previously informed their knowledge of it, therefore it is within the readiness of such members to conceptualise their world differently that makes change or experimentation possible. In this sense, changes in the thinking of the art ‘world’ – that which either accepts or refuses an object’s definition as ‘art’ – in itself makes new art possible. This lends a sense of collaboration to the existence and development of art as a concept: while individual artists may provide an initial challenge in presenting a work to the artworld (in the manner of a scientific experiment), it is the readiness of that world to accept it as such that it gains entry, subsequently altering the ontology of the concept ‘art’ itself. Danto claims, ‘it is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible’ – thus his interest in providing a theory to explain this new phase in art’s form, which he perceived as radically different to those preceding it.

While this early essay does not refer to the end of art, it establishes Danto’s analytical approach toward art as a subject, his emphasis on art’s ontology as historical and developmental, and his interest in establishing philosophical definitions or theories for art. Fifteen years after publishing ‘The Artworld’, Danto claimed the essay had been misunderstood: ‘I had the morbid satisfaction of not having it understood at all.’ In 1969 philosopher George Dickie based his Institutional Theory of Art, in his essay ‘Defining Art’, on ideas from Danto’s essay, however he reached conclusions that Danto viewed as unaligned with his own. Having quoted Danto’s statement that: ‘to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld’, the final paragraph of Dickie’s essay concludes, ‘a work of art is an object of which someone has said, “I christen this object a work of art”’, where Danto’s essay was more aligned with the idea that it is art theory or philosophy that makes art possible.

52 Ibid.
55 Dickie, ‘Defining Art,’ 256.
It seems Danto did not publish further on art for fifteen years, until in 1981 he wrote *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Here Danto aims to further develop a convincing definition of art, again applying an analytic, scientific methodology to an analysis of art’s characteristics, including the aforementioned comparisons between works of art and ‘mere real things’; the content of a work of art (the idea that if something has content, it is art); the relationship between art and philosophy; aesthetics (whether something needs to be beautiful in order to be art); the interpretation of art (if it can be interpreted, does that make it art?); the difference between works of art and ordinary representations; and the ideas of metaphor, expression and style in art. The lengths Danto goes to in locating the relevance of each area in isolation to a definition of art makes for laboured reading, the ultimate finding being that works of art cannot be defined in relation to any one of these characteristics – that is, it is not simply metaphor, or aesthetic, or something to be interpreted, but something along the lines of a combination of them all. As a way of locating Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* as art, when their identical counterparts in a supermarket aisle are not, Danto claims they appear to make a ‘revolutionary and ludicrous demand, not to overturn the society of artworks so much as to be enfranchised in it, claiming equality of place with sublime objects.’\(^{56}\) Danto claims *Brillo Boxes*, as a transfiguration of a commonplace object, ‘transforms nothing in the artworld’ but that, ‘it only brings to consciousness the structures of art which, to be sure, required a certain historical development before that metaphor was possible.’\(^{57}\) This is aligned with Danto’s approach towards art as philosophy, wherein the gesture of placing ordinary objects into an art context is a ‘philosophical act.’\(^{58}\) Thus it seems it is as philosophy that artworks may be most convincingly defined here: in his concluding statement, Danto states that as a work of art, *Brillo Boxes*, ‘does what works of art have always done – externalizing a way of viewing the world, expressing the interior of a cultural period, offering itself as a mirror to catch the conscience of our kings.’\(^{59}\)

The connection between art and philosophy is strong for Danto, who claims that while philosophical thought cannot be applied to just any discipline it can be applied to art. Danto

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 208.
\(^{57}\) Ibid.
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
views the definition of art as having become part of art’s nature, forming its intersection with philosophy. He states that the idea of reality is intrinsic to the discipline of philosophy in that philosophy only arises within a society when that society attains a sense of reality as a concept, as distinct from things such as illusion, appearance, or art. Philosophy therefore occupies the space between language and the world, and Danto likens language (or words) to art as both language and art represent the world to us while also residing in it, in their existence both inside and outside the world simultaneously. While it does not follow that art is language, Danto believes they share a similar ontology in their relationship to and contrast with reality.

In the early 1980s Danto was invited to contribute a statement to a symposium on the state of the artworld; this statement was published alongside statements by John Berger, Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss in the Soho News, and subsequently developed into an essay forming the target contribution to a collection of essays called The Death of Art published in 1984. In this original essay on the end of art Danto references Hegel’s Aesthetics and describes art’s transference to the realm of philosophy as forming the end of its historical development as art. Here he identifies the invention of moving pictures (over still photographs) as having usurped traditional art forms’ mimetic role, with the relinquishing of this role resulting in early modern art movements such as post-impressionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He describes the art preceding this moment as having been concerned with the technical development of mimesis: a progressive history that ends with the simultaneous advent of mechanical reproduction and modern art movements, which, in the absence of a progressive technical history, formed a new structure for art based on self-expression over representation.

Hegel, having died eight years before photography attained commercial or widespread viability, did not base his idea of art’s having ended on the progressive history of technical representation but on his analysis of the shift he perceived between the Classical and Romantic periods in art. Whether or not Hegel foresaw art’s future post the advent of

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60 Two years later Danto claimed that, ‘...art fulfils its destiny by becoming philosophy at last. Of course art does a great deal more and less than this, which makes the death of art an overstatement’ – thus his notion of art becoming philosophy at the end of its history indicates its end rather than a death.

mechanical reproduction is difficult to ascertain, but from his own position well beyond the advent of mechanical reproduction, Danto’s reading identifies the shift from pre- to post-photographic art as having formed the end of art’s historical progress in relation to the technical attainment of mimesis, with the resulting requirement for a new theory or ontology of art resulting in the ‘expression theory’ of art following the lead of the styles adopted by artists in this new state. If a theory of modern art is based solely on artists’ self-expression, Danto claims each artist’s work could be viewed as existing in isolation from the next:

...each artist could express himself in his own way, so that one vocabulary, as it were, would be incommensurable with another, which makes possible a radically discontinuous view of the history of art.62

Danto however is concerned with locating a theory or definition that can account for all forms of art historically, turning to Hegel’s notion of art as a cognitive process to achieve this. This idea relates to the notion of the end of history as the advent of self-knowledge:

The End of History coincides, and is indeed identical with what Hegel speaks of as the advent of Absolute Knowledge. Knowledge is absolute when there is no gap between knowledge and its object, or knowledge is its own object, hence subject and object at once.63

Despite early modern art’s having been based on a theory of self-expression, it and the art that followed did not exist as a series of separate individual instances of expression. The developments that did in fact occur within the various modernist movements rule out a notion of art as based solely on this sense, in that a sequential development is detectable in relation to the changing forms of art that modern movements allowed. Where pre-modern art may be viewed in terms of technical progression, modern art can almost be seen as its opposite: as a search for the essence of art in the absence of such a progressive technological history via an unravelling of perceived technical requirements. The pre-modern attempt to depict reality via verisimilitude is replaced by the modern attempt to create a real or pure concept of art, initially by questioning the necessity that art must

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63 Ibid., 33.
mirror reality in the manner of a photograph, and then that it depict anything recognisable at all, via abstraction. The necessity that art exist as a framed painting or a sculpture on a plinth is then challenged, and the further question subsequently raised that art must inhabit painted or sculpted objects at all, exemplified via the readymade or Pop Art. Finally within conceptual art, the sense that art as a concept must even inhabit an object is tested. The development of modern art involves less a search for realism in relation to representing the world and more a search for and liberation of the real sense of art, wherein that which may be extraneous to the concept in its pure form – the frame, the image, the object – is deleted in order to liberate it from that which may restrict a pure view of the concept. It may be here that Hegel’s notion around the achievement of self-knowledge, where ‘knowledge is absolute when there is no gap between knowledge and its object, or knowledge is its own object, hence subject and object at once’ as interpreted by Danto, is striven for in modern art. This knowledge may have been attained within the pure objectives of the conceptual moment wherein art is located within any object or situation, rather than solely in those constrained by exterior or institutional demands on its nature. As Danto states, ‘freedom ends in its own fulfilment’\textsuperscript{64}: when the illusions of art are stripped back to free art as a real or pure concept inhabiting all objects and situations, art may be seen to end when knowledge (an attempt to represent reality) and its object (reality) become one, forming both subject and object.

PART 3 - Critique of Danto

Eight responses were published alongside Danto’s essay ‘The End of Art’ within \textit{The Death of Art} in 1984. In 1993, sixteen responses were published in \textit{Danto and His Critics}\textsuperscript{65}, and critique continued in other publications and symposia until 1999\textsuperscript{66}. The critique was for the most part made by philosophers, historians and aestheticians: since the end of art involves the end of the self-critical development of the art object through the object and thus through practice itself, post this end, the anchoring of this debate within discourse rather

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{66} These include thirteen responses in Haapala, Levinson, Rintala, eds., \textit{The End of Art & Beyond – Essays After Danto} (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), and a debate between Joseph Margolis and Danto concerning the definition and future of art within the \textit{British Journal of Aesthetics} in the same year.
than practice seems commensurate. Viewed objectively however, the tendency for post-conceptual practice to continue unabated and almost in ignorance of this parallel and not insignificant discourse concerning art’s end lends a sense of discord, the realms of art theory and practice seeming to retain concerns with quite separate projects.

This paper is unable to fully explore the extensive range of responses to Danto’s ideas, therefore the following discussion and analysis is concerned initially with the main themes and approaches of the essays in 1984’s The Death of Art, followed by those from Danto and His Critics nine years later.

The early responses to Danto’s original idea concerning art’s end in The Death of Art tend to approach the issue with a concern for defining the nature of art, what art is or does. Here, some critics question Danto’s emphasis on the notion of pre-modern art as having necessarily aimed at mimesis and as therefore based on the notion of technical mastery, on which his idea of art’s early progressive history depends. Norman Miller⁶⁷ and Joyce Brodsky⁶⁸ emphasise art’s other functions, such as self-expression or decoration, over that of representation or mimesis. Richard Kuhns⁶⁹ argues that since it is only as a history that art may come to an end, the fact that art in the sense of affect – for example in its psychological effect on the viewer – does not have a history, it cannot end. These essays’ reflection on the purpose or function of art tend to argue against the idea of art as autonomous or conceptual and situate it within the practical life of a society, the ongoing needs of which means art is itself ongoing rather than culminating as philosophy.

Other critique of this early essay reflects some of the responses to Foster’s 2009 Questionnaire on the Contemporary in expressing relief or celebration of the absence of a single discourse or theory for contemporary art, and an accompanying suspicion of Danto’s attempt to create one. Joyce Brodsky⁷⁰ views art’s having escaped theorisation as resulting potentially in a less power-centric model of art, while Norman Miller⁷¹ claims art’s structure

⁶⁸ Joyce Brodsky, ‘Only the End of Art’ in The Death of Art, 59.
⁶⁹ Richard Kuhns, ‘The End of Art?’ in The Death of Art, 45.
simply reflects the structure of the society in which it exists: in this sense for example, a pluralistic society logically results in a pluralistic style of art. In these views, the plurality and freedom of form exemplified by contemporary art does not represent the end of art so much as reflect the demands society may place on art in its various functions. Joyce Brodsky speculates that art in the absence of theory or discourse may come to serve more practical functions and exist at the service of the people, a process identified by David Konstan as the outcome of the modernist dissembling of the hierarchical nature of the academy.

In 1984 – the year of the original publication of his essay ‘The End of Art’ – Danto commenced work as the art critic for the magazine The Nation, a position he maintained for the next 25 years. Thus while he produced philosophical texts regarding the definition or ontology of art until his death in 2013, Danto was simultaneously involved in a working art life both reviewing exhibitions and analysing the nature of this activity. Within the more philosophical nature of the critique represented by the later Danto and His Critics in 1993 – which includes responses by Danto – Danto’s methodology is frequently scrutinised, particularly regarding the perceived contradiction inherent to his maintaining a working life as a critic alongside his more philosophical approach in declaring art to have ended. David Carrier, Richard Shusterman and Carlin Romano find Danto’s pragmatic approach as a critic contradicts his more traditional philosophical approach in seeking a definition for art. Shusterman believes that by remaining faithful to philosophy’s ‘hegemonic impulse’ Danto cannot re-enfranchise art philosophically since attempts to define art tend to compartmentalise it, hindering its ability to impact the realm of ordinary life. Carlin Romano also claims Danto separates art from life by maintaining a non-pragmatic theory, declaring it contradictory that Danto work as a critic while adhering to a declining view of the validity of art institutions.

In response, Danto likens his attempt to define art while maintaining a looser approach as an art critic to the seeming contradiction inherent to a description of prime numbers: while
individual prime numbers are unique and contain singular properties, they can comply simultaneously with the overriding definition of prime numbers in general. In this sense, Danto’s activity as a critic is a unique property that does not disqualify a definition of his overall activity as a philosopher. Where Romano speculates that two Arthur Dantos may exist – one that adheres to a system and one that doesn’t – Danto counters that pragmatist philosophy is not anti-system as such, and that the perceived existence of two Dantos is less a matter of ‘system versus non-system’ than ‘system versus system’. He describes the two Dantos as the same Danto trying to live in the world while putting that world in a box, thus attempting to work with system and substance together: while he believes theories and philosophies must work with the reality they are about, Danto concedes this can result in a schizophrenic state.

David Carrier finds Danto’s Cartesian approach, wherein philosophical problems are treated as historically consistent, contradicts his more Hegelian tendency to theorise art as historically contingent. In response Danto claims that while he believes concepts such as philosophy or art are not historically contingent, history does impact these concepts in relation to the various ways the human mind has thought about them at different moments in time. In this view, the essential nature of philosophy (or art) is exposed at specific moments through human work and ideas, allowing an historical view of philosophy (or art) to exist alongside an ahistorical one. Danto illustrates this idea with the fact that where science doesn’t treat the human body as something that changes over time, the science through which we examine or learn about that body is impacted by time, in relation to changes in the way we understand or represent that body historically. Similarly, Danto believes that where concepts such as philosophy or art may be essential or timeless in nature, they must be addressed historically regarding the expression of their nature.

Noel Carroll and Gary Shapiro offer examples of alternative philosophical positions that employ methodologies which may not result in the idea that art has ended. Carroll suggests that post-structuralist theory may not find the question ‘what is art?’ satisfactorily answered.

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77 Noel Carroll, ‘Essence, Expression and History: Arthur Danto’s Philosophy of Art’ in Danto and his Critics, 97.
78 Gary Shapiro, ‘Art and its Doubles: Danto, Foucault, and their Simulacra’ in Danto and his Critics, 130.
by the use of indiscernibles, and postulates that positions based on more socio-ideological understandings of art may not find it to be at an end. Shapiro contrasts Danto’s Hegelian approach with Foucault’s sense of history as archaeological rather than teleological, wherein events, cultures and materials of the past are characterised less in the sense of continuous evolutionary development and more as individual units interrupted by breaks. Shapiro believes an application of this concept to the field of art, where the discovery of sharp breaks and changes are expected, would allow the conception of a ‘living art’ enabled by repetition and simulation rather than foreclose on art’s possibilities. Danto however claims post-structuralist theories (for example those of Derrida) tend to apply only to the works their theories generate, and that they have no application to, for example, ancient Chinese art: for Danto this means they are not universal theories, and while they probably don’t aim to be universal, this is something Danto is attempting to locate. He disagrees that Foucault’s conception of history is one of archaeology, claiming instead that where he himself is interested in the history of art, Foucault is interested in the philosophy of historical discontinuity. Danto likens Foucault’s view of history to Thomas Kuhn’s idea of the history of science as a series of independent revolutions rather than something continuous and developmental, stating that where Shapiro brings the concept of commensurability from science into art, art may be no more able to deal with the idea than science was.

Danto based his theory of the end of art around the final indiscernibility between art objects and real, everyday ones in contemporary art, or the end of art as a specifically visual concern, and several critics scrutinise his reliance on this idea. Richard Wollheim wonders if Danto’s indiscernible pairs are temporarily indiscernible or if they remain so for all time, since once a viewer is made aware of that which is a work of art and that which isn’t, they may no longer find the objects indiscernible. If information, belief or a background of theory can impact one’s perceiving an object as art, Wollheim claims the status of a pair of objects as indiscernible applies only to the first stage of perception, in the initial encounter with the pair. Danto finds this concern irrelevant, countering that the differences between real Brillo boxes and Warhol’s Brillo Boxes would not become more evident through protracted looking, and disputing the fact that prior knowledge as to an object’s status as art would

79 Richard Wollheim, ‘Danto’s Gallery of Indiscernibles’ in Danto and his Critics, 35.
encourage ‘deeper’ looking, allowing the discovery of the previously indiscernible difference. For Danto the difference between indiscernible objects lies outside the objects themselves – in this case, within their being defined as art or not. When art cannot be defined in terms of what meets the eye he believes it falls to theory to make the definition, therefore for Danto it is within the realm of theory or philosophy that the difference between indiscernible pairs exists rather than that of connoisseurship.

Danto ends his response to the critique in *Danto and His Critics* with an emphasis on the fact that the end of art is less a vexing question of what to do for art than one which reveals the ‘true’ question – that of the philosophical nature of art – and that the discovery of this question liberates art from the requirement to fulfil this nature further. However Danto goes on to point out that a philosophical task for art will remain as long as the categories of ‘art’ or ‘artist’ remain, since the existence of such categories raises questions regarding who is an artist and who isn’t. From this it seems that what could be referred to as the ‘project’ of the end of art remains incomplete, since thirty years post Danto’s declaring art to have finally ended, the categories ‘art’ and ‘artist’ defiantly remain. The wedge that frequently separates the realm of art theory from practice within contemporary art, where questions around what art is no longer seem to hold vital application to its practice, is perhaps related to a gap between the realms of philosophy and art. Where the gap between these related disciplines appeared to close somewhat with conceptual art’s attempt to escape the object and return of art to a concern with concepts and ideas, within contemporary art such practice no longer seems essential or even possible, as indicated by the generally ambivalent response to Foster’s question regarding the need for a definition or theory of contemporary art in 2009.

In *Danto and his Critics*, Noel Carroll claims Danto’s reliance on Hegel’s thought in declaring the end of art’s history prevents the possibility of any future counter-examples to his theory of art: in this sense, if Danto shows that modernism has run its course and the developmental history of art is over, this in itself makes an essential theory of art possible.\(^\text{80}\)

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\(^\text{80}\) Noel Carroll, ‘Danto as Systematic Philosopher or comme on lit Danto en francais’ in *Danto and his Critics*, 16.
This relates to a point made by Richard Kuhns in the earlier *The Death of Art* that a declaration of art’s ending in philosophy is just a way for philosophy to ‘eat up art’:

One way to understand this claim would be to say this: the dialectic of artistic development is essential to what art is and how it functions for us in our cultural lives; but that claim in itself might be put forward by the fat philosopher preparing the stages of art in the past as dishes for his gormandizing in the present.  

Similarly, in 2003 Hal Foster explained that according to Danto, when Warhol perfected the, ‘Duchampian question of “what is art?”’, he:

...intentionally or not, brought art into philosophical self-awareness. But by the same token art no longer had any philosophical work to do: its essential rationale fell away, and henceforth it could do *whatever* – to be evaluated, if at all, by the philosopher-critic according to its degree of philosophical interest.  

With bracketed suspicion, Foster adds, ‘(we see, then, who is privileged in this account)’.

A sense that the idea of the end of art is an invention on the part of philosophy, constructed in relation to an age-old contestation for supremacy between the disciplines of philosophy and art, is evident here. Kuhns continues, ‘There is, it seems to me, a mistake that underlies Hegel’s particular argument that art is at an end. The mistake is embedded in the assumption that art is subservient to the theories that make it meaningful’  

A sense that it is only theory – in particular Hegel’s theory – that makes the idea of the end of art possible is echoed by Geulen’s treating the idea as a ‘rumour’ instigated by Hegel, in his tendency to claim not a totalitarian end to artistic production but, ‘the end of a possibility of a reflection on art or aesthetics that does *not* involve the end of art’  

Similarly Berel Lang, editor of *The Death of Art*, claims it is strictly within Hegel’s philosophy that history is linked to consciousness and culture, making them contingent. Describing the idea of the end of art as possible only within such a view, Lang refers to a statement by Nietzsche that, ‘even to

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81 Kuhns, ‘The End of Art?’ 42.
82 Foster, ‘This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse’, 130-143.
83 Kuhns, ‘The End of Art?’ 43.
84 Geulen, *The End of Art*, 86.
entertain the thought of the possibility of something can transform us. Here, it would seem the mere mention by ‘philosophy’ that art had ended has repercussions for art, and that by simply entertaining the thought, tangible results for its subject are produced.

A view that theory, philosophy or aesthetics impact art’s direction, or that Hegel’s end of art is simply an idea applied over art’s otherwise vital existence, is a view that I believe weakens art. A stronger position would be to focus on those moments when an artist (for example Rauschenberg or Warhol) makes a work that raises questions around the currently accepted conditions of art’s production and existence that compels a philosopher (for example Danto) to respond to it philosophically. In this approach, theory does not set out the conditions for art’s direction or a claim for art’s having ended: rather, the questions that artists themselves raise through their work provide problems that exact philosophical engagement. Rather than impose ideas on artworks, philosophers such as Hegel and Danto respond to the challenges artworks raise: this view of art enfranchises it, positing it within an equal, participatory and reflective relationship with philosophy over a supplementary or contested one. In this view, it was artists themselves who questioned art’s essentialism via the modernist, self-reflective project within their practice, and while the notion of art’s ending may hold negative connotations, the notion of this end requires contextualisation within the realm of practice if due respect to and empowerment of ‘art’, as a realm, is to be achieved.

While much critique of Danto or Hegel’s end of art centres on the contestation of art as necessarily developmental or historical – for example Joyce Brodsky or Normal Miller’s suggestion that art holds a more practical role in society over that of its philosophical development, or Richard Kuhn’s suggestion that art as affect does not have a history – Hegel had already accounted for the disparity of these views in the introduction to his Aesthetics. Preceding Joseph Kosuth, Arthur Danto and Peter Osborne, Hegel denounces ‘aesthetics’ as inadequate to account for a discussion of ‘fine art’:

The name ‘aesthetics’ in its natural sense is not quite appropriate to this subject. ‘Aesthetics’ means more precisely the science of sensation or

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85 Berel Lang, Appendix in The Death of Art, 255.
feeling...the proper expression, however, for our science is the ‘Philosophy of Art’ or, more definitely, the ‘Philosophy of Fine Art’.  

Hegel goes on to question whether art can in fact be treated scientifically: ‘the first thing that may suggest itself to us is the question of whether fine art shows itself to deserve a scientific treatment.’  

When art is influenced by subjective notions of taste, and art as beauty forms, ‘the bright adornment of all our surroundings, both mental and material, soothing the sadness of our condition and the embarrassments of real life, killing time in entertaining fashion’: when it employs deceptive modes and relies on appearances, Hegel claims that, ‘...in all these aspects – in origin, in effect, and in range – fine art, instead of showing itself fitted for scientific study, seems rather in its own right to resist the regulating activity of thought and to be unsuitable for strict scientific discussion. This line of reasoning has much in common with more recent arguments around art as pragmatic, expressive or affective rather than historical, developmental or philosophical, the context within which claims around the end of art are made.

While admitting that, ‘it is no doubt the case that art can be employed as a fleeting pastime, to serve the ends of pleasure and entertainment, to decorate our surroundings, to impart pleasantness to the external conditions of our life, and to emphasize other objects by means of ornament’, Hegel makes the further claim that, ‘in this mode of employment art is indeed not independent, not free, but servile. But what we mean to consider, is the art which is free in its end as in its means.’ This is a view of art as autonomous, wherein it does not serve pragmatic ends, does not exist in the sense of affect or self-expression, but exists much like philosophy in considerations of reality and ideals. Hegel continues this line of thought, elaborating on how a consideration of art as independent relates it to the ‘higher’ realms of philosophy or religion, however it is sufficient to note at this point that where arguments around a theory or philosophy of contemporary art are divided in relation

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87 Ibid., 258.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 261.
90 As argued by Miller, Brodsky and Kuhns in The Death of Art.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 262.
to varied opinions regarding the use or value of art today – whether it has political value, value as communication, as affect or expression or other pragmatic functions versus a view of its uselessness, it’s concern with itself and its likeness to philosophy within the modernist project wherein it ends – that these concerns were outlined at the outset of modernism itself. In this sense, a theory of contemporary art in its relation to the modern ideals of freedom or liberation should be positioned within the sense of Hegel’s view of art as a ‘higher realm’ or autonomous over that of holding more pragmatic or socio political roles.93

It is important to note here Hegel’s emphasis on the notion of art as ‘free in its end as in its means’: contemporary art may ultimately be profiled as post-conceptual or theorised in its relation to the modern via the notion of freedom. Where Lucy Lippard spoke of the conceptual movement’s attempt to ‘free’ art from its white cell, Hal Foster (disparagingly) described the ‘pluralistic’ art that followed as an institution ‘posed as a freedom to choose’ which played ‘right into the ideology of the “free market”’. Equally, Baudrillard’s description of the availability of all forms as constituting the worst enemy to form may be viewed in the sense of freedom: when contemporary art can take any form, it can be said that contemporary artists work within a state of absolute freedom. However the attainment of this freedom culminates in the end of art as the modernist self-critical investigation of its own form and results in a lack of sovereignty for artists, as described by Vidokle and Kuan Wood in chapter one.

As an artist, it is within this idea of art’s having ended that I situate my practice, having felt keenly this stifling sense of freedom in relation to practicing art. I contextually my work within the notion of art as a ‘higher’ realm, akin to philosophy, not from a compulsion toward superiority but from a genuine interest in this tradition over that of art as pragmatic, functional or expressive: it is here that I find a convincing definition of contemporary art, as the outcome of the progression of modernist movements culminating in absolute freedom

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93 Hegel goes on to note however that the realm of science itself is never completely autonomous: ‘that art is in the abstract capable of serving other aims, and of being a mere pastime, is moreover a relation which it shares with thought…science, in the shape of the subservient understanding, submits to be used for finite purposes, and as an accidental means, and in that case is not self-determined but determined by alien objects and relations; but, on the other hand, science liberates itself from this service to rise in free independence to the attainment of truth, in which medium, free from all interference, it fulfills itself in conformity with its proper aims’ ibid.
of form and the ultimate end of art. My interest in art’s developmental, historical and progressive tradition lies within its reflecting and objectifying similar processes of thought regarding the human subject within the history of western philosophy, and is not directed toward any particularly significant aim or purpose. It is within the idea of art’s having ended that contemporary art seems most alive, due to its ability to engage with a sense of radicality and the movement towards freedom of thought as instigated within the modern. It could be said that art is vital only in the sense that it does raise such questions, and the idea of the end of art – while questioning art’s vitality – is ironically perhaps the only true manner in which art may remain vital today.

The tendency for critique of Danto’s end of art to remain mired within philosophical concerns regarding the perceived incompatibilities inherent to his philosophical style may render such debate irrelevant to artists, to whom consistency of philosophical approach is of little interest: this may be one factor to account for contemporary artists’ lack of engagement with this discourse. The implications of Danto’s end of art in relation to practice connects more strongly to the earlier critique of Danto regarding definitions or the application of art, questions around what art is or does. Where the base of this concern is divided between that of art as pragmatic versus free, contemporary artists may perhaps choose to base their practice within the idea of art as autonomous or conversely situate it more pragmatically, with concrete aims and outcomes for the society in which it is situated. My own interest in art as autonomous and in relation to philosophy results in the necessity that I accept and involve the idea of the end of art within my practice.

Having in this sense attained the sensibility of art’s having ended, the question remains as to how to maintain a practice within this context, or what strategy to adopt when the demand that art be aesthetic or object-bound is beyond its ability to respond to such a demand as form. For artists who wish to engage in the seemingly impossible movement toward radicalism or the avant garde in the contemporary moment, or for artists who feel keenly the end of art in relation to such ideas, the issue of a continuing art practice is a vexed one.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE END OF ART AS CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

(Warhol) either expanded what art could be for future generations, or heralded the end of art altogether. Andy himself took both views.¹

PART 1 - End of art strategies

As an artist Danto’s response to the end of art was to give up making it, and his practice as a philosopher equipped him to make the seemingly logical shift from a studio based practice to one based on theory, mirroring his sense that modern art’s project had shifted to the realm of philosophy. Much of Danto’s early discussion around the end of art concerned the Pop art movement, the objects of which tended to embody the sense that art had entered the realm of ordinary life by attaining the perceived banality, popularity and superficiality of this realm, rendering art as a distinct visual concern over. The fact such objects were able to embody this sense meant Pop artists themselves were not obliged to engage with art theory or discourse, contrasting with the later (but almost concurrent²) conceptual art movement in which an engagement with theory became as relevant as that of practice. Where conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth attempted to practice art as philosophy, Danto’s abandonment of a studio practice can read as a conceptual artwork in itself.

The act of giving up art seems logical in the context of Danto’s theory, and he made a valuable contribution to a philosophy of contemporary art as a result of this choice. However his abandonment of practice tends instead to have reinforced the situating of the idea of the end of art more strictly within the realm of philosophy, establishing a view of Danto as complicit with this discipline. While Danto’s assessment of the development of modern art as a search for art’s essence through the object is relevant, his attempt to continue this project within the realm of philosophy by developing an essential theory of art via his (perhaps necessarily) complicated writing practice renders the project less urgent,

compromising the profundity and radicality of his end of art statement. In addition, I find Danto’s optimistic view of the freedom inherent to art’s pluralistic state at the culmination of the modernist project unsatisfying, since an inability to contribute further to the (perhaps idealistic) modernist project of self-critique constitutes a somewhat bleak outlook as a practicing artist. While Danto’s optimism may be an outcome of his attempt to practice as an art critic while commenting on the realm of art as a philosopher, an end of art practice as an artist should perhaps maintain some of the nihilism of the end rather than attempt to cloak it with an air of positivity.

The difficulty of maintaining an art practice while simultaneously questioning (or attempting to escape) such practice in its representing an institution of art has resulted in other artists giving up art historically. Marcel Duchamp gave up art as painting, or art as a ‘retinal’ concern, in 1912 while still in his early 20s, and more famously declared he was giving up art altogether in 1923 in order to play chess: ‘I don’t believe in art. Science is the important thing today. There are rockets to the moon, so naturally you go to the moon. You don’t sit home and dream about it. Art was a dream that became unnecessary.’ Duchamp seemed to feel the impossibility of practicing within the realm of art while remaining free of it: in 1913 he wrote a note wondering, ‘can one make works of art which are not works of art?’ It seems Duchamp desired an escape from art while continuing an engagement with it: despite having ‘officially’ given up art in 1923 he nonetheless maintained a secret studio practice wherein he produced his final major work, Étant donnés, from 1946 until 1966.

Warhol also gave up art, in a manner that may initially appear as the relinquishment of painting as a medium, as indicated by this quote concerning his work Silver Clouds (1966):

Since I didn’t want to paint any more, I thought...that I could give that up and do the movies. And then I thought that there must be a way that I have to finish it off, and I thought the only way is to make a painting that floats...the idea is to fill them with helium and let them out of your window and they’ll float away and that’s one less object...to move around. And, it’s the...well, it’s the way of finishing up painting.

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4 Ibid., 116.
Within the contemporary moment, the openness of the field and the tendency for contemporary artists to embrace multiple mediums would render the act of relinquishing painting and moving to film a simple shift in medium. For Warhol however, to give up ‘painting’ was to give up ‘art’, as evidenced by his later statement that, ‘(the silver pillows) meant something special to me: it was while I was making them that I felt my art career floating away out the window’. As friend, biographer and long-time Factory employee Bob Colacello recalls, ‘since he had announced his “retirement” from painting at a show in Paris in 1965, Andy saw his art as little more than the means to make money for his movie business.’ In Warhol’s move to his second Factory around this time,

...no place was set aside to paint and no Warhol paintings hung on Warhol’s walls. The man who had wanted to be Matisse now wanted to be Louis B. Mayer. Indeed, the second Factory was a little studio hoping to happen. The letterhead said “Andy Warhol Film, Inc.”

Similarly to Duchamp, Warhol appeared to have been trying to escape his profile as an artist in a move towards that of film maker, as evidenced by his statement that, ‘I felt my art career floating away’. Both Duchamp and Warhol appeared to require a new way to contextualise their practice post the official abandonment of such practice, Duchamp hiding the production of his final work within a second, ‘invisible’ studio to which nobody was invited, and Warhol switching from a studio for art to one for film.

A more convincing attempt to give up art was made by Lee Lozano in 1970 with *Drop Out Piece*. Where her earlier work had been rendered within the traditional media of painting or drawing, during the 1960s Lozano’s practice became more conceptual. Art theorist Helen Molesworth describes Lozano’s tendency to fill notebooks with instructions she was to follow, ‘ranging from how much pot to smoke (as much as possible), to what to do with all the printed announcements she received from galleries (throw them in a pile on the studio floor, or throw them out the window)’:

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8 Ibid., 60.
By the time Lee Lozano died in 1999, her last high-profile artwork could fairly be judged a success. “Drop Out Piece,” begun in 1970, had consisted of removing herself from the New York art world, of which she was a highly visible member, and eventually disappearing altogether from the public eye. Her choice of burial, in an unmarked grave outside Dallas, was arguably the work’s final flourish.\(^\text{10}\)

Thus where Duchamp and Warhol seemed unable to forgo an involvement with art beyond their giving up, the stringency of Lozano’s practice allowed her to maintain this action as a conceptual work in itself wherein she withdrew from any involvement with the art world, constituting her physical removal from New York (as the centre of this world) and a final move to her parents’ house in Dallas, Texas in 1982.

The relinquishment of an art practice in favour of a real-life one was a feature of many conceptual practices: one example is that of Raivo Puusemp, who in 1975 approached his role as mayor of Rosendale, New York as an artist and the problems of the village as an artwork, in the hope that, ‘politics, influence and concept could come together compatibly’\(^\text{11}\). In Australia, Ian Milliss became increasingly less concerned with the production of artworks within his early practice and more interested in situating art within everyday situations, to the point where he ceased producing artworks for gallery contexts altogether in the early 1970s in favour of working more politically, via an involvement with the Green Bans movement\(^\text{12}\) and union activity (with artist Ian Burn\(^\text{13}\)) in an effort to reconceive art as something that exists within the everyday work and inventions of people not normally considered ‘artists’. Here, giving up art is less a concern with escaping ‘art’ as a concept than with creating a new version of this concept, attempting to shift the notion of art (as creativity) from traditionally accepted and perhaps capitalist art institutions into the


realm of ordinary life and activism. Milliss describes (when writing of Burn) that such actions aimed towards:

...the need for a new type of art history that looks beyond the trivial pursuits in art galleries and describes the far greater cultural impact of artists who work in media that the art world simply does not recognise as legitimate, for audiences that the art world does not regard as worthwhile.\(^\text{14}\)

While conceptual artists’ impetus was the establishment of a new, more egalitarian and freer version of the concept ‘art’ than an escape from the concept altogether, their giving up of traditional art practices may nonetheless be viewed within the context of the earlier attempts by Duchamp and Warhol to escape the concept and its institutions.

The act of giving up art did not cease with the conceptual movement but has occurred more recently with contemporary artist Maurizio Cattelan, who announced his retirement from artmaking at a retrospective of his work at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2011. While exhibitions of his existing work have continued via the arrangements of collectors or institutions, Cattelan himself has ceased making new work in order to ‘let his archive take over’: ‘There will be shows without my involvement. It will be as if I were dead. Technically, that is—instead of being dead and not seeing what people will do with your work, you will be alive and you will suffer a lot.’\(^\text{15}\) Nonetheless Cattelan – like Duchamp and Warhol – remains active within the art world despite his ‘retirement’, curating exhibitions, creating fashion spreads, editing *Toilet Paper* magazine and selling objects through its online store\(^\text{16}\).

Despite the number of high-profile artists who have given up making art in the spirit of escape or an attempt to establish the concept ‘art’ within the actual life of society, the practice and reception of art via its traditional institutions continues unabated. As Baudrillard writes, ‘renunciation is the symmetrical and opposite movement to faith – as


absurd and useless. If things exist, there is no use believing in them. If they do not exist, there is no use renouncing them. In this sense, an attempt to give up art may seem ‘absurd and useless’ in that its renunciation may tend instead to entrench it further, as ‘the symmetrical and opposite movement to faith’. It is in light of this idea that the sense of withdrawal and escape inherent to the conceptual art movement may have resulted rather in the colonisation of the world by art, via the re-entrenchment of art as both object and as everyday situation, as Baudrillard describes:

Some say that art is dematerializing. The exact opposite is true: art today has thoroughly entered reality. It is in museums and galleries, but also in trash on walls, in the street, in the banality of everything that has been made sacred today without any further debate. The aesthetization of the world is complete. Just as we now have a bureaucratic materialization of the social, a technological materialization of sexuality, a media and advertising materialization of politics, we have a semiotic materialization of art.

It is in this sense that the giving up of art may be both impossible and ineffective, the concept ‘art’ itself having survived all attempts at its dematerialisation or renunciation via its colonization of reality. An additional problem with the renunciation of practice is that it tends to renders one’s ‘voice’ invisible: while one may choose, like Danto, to shift one’s efforts towards a discursive or philosophical practice in order to affect art as a concept, it is ultimately perhaps only within the sense of art as practice that one may have the most impact, the withdrawal of one’s voice resulting in the loss of this chance.

Another strategy that may seem to allow the continuation of practice while simultaneously acknowledging art’s end (or the impossibility of practice) is within the production of artworks themselves, wherein references to art’s having ended may be made more or less overtly. Particular works by artists Mladen Stilinović, Damien Hirst, Ragnar Kjartansson or

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18 Baudrillard, ‘Towards the Vanishing Point of Art,’ 105.
Fabio Mauri refer to ‘the end’ or ‘the death of art’, however no evidence exists to suggest that such work is intended to engage with a genuine belief in the idea of the end of art. An early work by Stilinović, *I Hear Them Talk about the Death of Art...* (1977) has been contextualised as a play on ‘myths and clichés’ over that of a serious engagement with or belief in the end of art\textsuperscript{20}, and Stilinović’s later work, *Three Days until the End of Art* (2002)\textsuperscript{fig7} appears to maintain a similar, somewhat ironic distance from the idea.

\textbf{Fig 7 Mladen Stilinović}

_Drei Tage bis zum Ende der Kunst/ Three Days until the End of Art, 2002_ (materials & dimensions unknown)

http://mladenstilinovic.com/works/6-2/

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Where works by Fabio Mauri frequently depict the words ‘The End’, no evidence exists to suggest that they refer to the end of art. Similarly, in speaking of his work The End at the 2009 Venice Biennale, Ragnar Kjartansson refers to recent crashes in the economy and the ‘poetic decline of manhood’\(^{21}\) alongside more ecological notions of ‘the end’ rather than the end of art itself. Damien Hirst’s work frequently refers to death, for example Death Explained (2007), The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991), I Am Become Death, Shatterer of Worlds (2006) and Monument to the Living and the Dead (2006), yet Hirst himself refers to this within the context of his personal obsession with death in general, which he identifies as, ‘a celebration of life rather than something morbid’\(^{22}\). Some objects for sale in Cattelan’s store – for example pendants shaped like tombstones – are inscribed with the words ‘the end’, yet there is equally no evidence suggesting that they refer to the end of art in light of Cattelan’s retirement. While it is possible to speculate on a connection between the prevalence of the theme of death or ‘the end’ in contemporary art and the idea of the end of art, it is difficult to find evidence of any artist consciously referring to this end in their utilisation of the motif.

Since the end of art refers to the end of the possibility for the art object to embody its ontology as part of its form, an attempt to refer to this end poetically – for example via text or the imagery within an artwork – tends to reinforce the status of art as allegorical. While Craig Owens’ investigation of the ‘the allegorical impulse’ within postmodern art was made in an effort to provide a ‘theory of postmodernism’\(^{23}\) via an emphasis on such arts’ operating allegorically in contrast with the suppression of allegory within modern art, I view this theory as more effective in relation to the way artworks are read or received by an audience. Thus where Owens situates art as allegory within the sense of postmodernism’s ‘deconstructive thrust’ fighting the more ‘totalizing’ impulse of modernism\(^{24}\), I believe a more convincing view may be situated within the response to artworks, whether modern or postmodern. This idea is illustrated by the aforementioned\(^{25}\) contrast between the


\(^{22}\) Damien Hirst in Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, On the Way to Work (UK: Faber and Faber, 2001), 21.


\(^{24}\) Owens, ‘The Allegorical Impulse’ (part 2), 79.

\(^{25}\) Chapter 2, 71-2.
Hyperallergic reviewers’ questioning of Gavin Brown about the ‘meaning’ of Jannis Kounellis’ work Untitled (12 Horses) and Brown’s reply that the work ‘wasn’t about anything’: in the realms of either contemporary art or modern art, an artwork that challenges art’s traditional forms or modes of presentation may tend to be justified as art via an attempt to locate a meaning or message within it, establishing the value of the work within its usefulness as allegory. This relates to Owens’ statement that:

Throughout its history allegory has demonstrated a capacity for widespread popular appeal, suggesting that its function is social as well as aesthetic; this would account for its frequent appropriation for didactic and/or exhortative purposes... 26

Rather than allegory contributing primarily to a definition of postmodern art, I believe its application as the tendency to ‘read’ (or resolve) otherwise confounding artworks holds more value regarding a theory of contemporary art in terms of its reception.

An attempt to escape the hegemony of ‘the contemporary’ also requires an attempt to escape the accompanying sense of art as allegorical. Therefore a practice that refers to ‘the end’ or ‘the death of art’ via the inscription of such statements onto its objects (or by symbolising or otherwise referencing the end of art in an allegorical manner) would tend to maintain this hegemony rather than question or highlight it. Responding to the end of art as a contemporary (or post-conceptual) artist requires a different approach to the art object: the embodiment of the notion of the end of art within the entirety of an artist’s practice rather than individual works.

PART 2 - My end of art practice: escaping the freedom of the contemporary

If the conditions for contemporary art practice are determined by the ideals and outcome of the conceptual period, I position my own practice at the intersection of the ideal of art’s dematerialisation – a view of art as a concept – and the perceived failure of this ideal. Danto’s optimism around the sense of freedom allowed contemporary practice is based on contemporary art having been relieved of the requirement to situate itself in relation to, or

deal with the legacy of, art history. But this freedom has resulted not only in ‘the end of art’; it has also lessened the philosophical significance of such practice. Moreover, if the modernist, self-referential project for art will remain as long as the categories ‘art’ or ‘artist’ remain (as Danto argues), the challenge for a philosophical post-conceptual practice is to confront these categories (via practice) rather than accept the freedom or pluralism of the postmodern state as multiple instances of individual self-expression.

The impossibility of making art that questions its physical boundaries when the concept has none, or of escaping the freedom of the contemporary, provides an interesting challenge to the post-conceptual practitioner. Within my practice, it is essential I acknowledge the idea of the end of art as a determining factor of contemporary art production and theorisation due to my desire to attempt a philosophical, historical art practice within the contemporary, post historical moment. This desire is born of frustration with the degree of silence or lack of debate that seems to exist around contemporary art’s conditions, wherein the question, ‘what is art?’ is frequently regarded as outdated or irrelevant, by artists and theorists alike. My own interest in art hinges solely around such questions, and contemporary art practice or reception in the non-historical sense of art’s materiality or affect is of little interest to me. To practice at the difficult nexus represented by the idea of the end of art is essential to my own will to engage with art at all, and also seems to me a necessary consideration regarding the practice and reception of the concept ‘art’ in its entirety if it is to maintain historical significance.

The lack of efficacy I sense around either renouncing my art practice or referencing the end of art allegorically has led to my formulating a different end of art strategy: an experiment wherein I continue to produce art while making the accompanying statement that art has ended. The contradictory nature of this practice embodies the contradictory sense of the growth of art practice and reception in the face of its diminished historic or philosophical value in the contemporary moment, as well as the divide that tends to exist between the idealistic, philosophical project of modernism and the open, pluralistic and frequently material nature of the contemporary art that arises from this project. The impossibility of

27 I consider this a ‘weak’ strategy, which may resonate with Gianni Vattimo’s idea of ‘weak thought’: see Gianni Vattimo, *Weak Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).
saying ‘the end of art’ and simultaneously maintaining an art practice embodies the seeming impossibility of relinquishing the concept ‘art’ within post-conceptual practice. This embodiment however is based on a sense of the concept in relation to a practice in its entirety, rather than as existing within the objects that result from such practice.

The tendency to set parameters or projects for one’s output as an artist is associated with the conceptual movement, described by Osborne in relation to Sol LeWitt’s Sentences on Conceptual Art (1969)\(^{28}\):

> In his three-dimensional projects, the use of formal numerical rules (rather than poetic intuition) to establish the relations between the elements of a series means that the determination of a work by an idea involves a withdrawal of artistic subjectivity from the production of the actuality of the work, which becomes a combination of formal necessity and chance.\(^{29}\)

Osborne picks out three of LeWitt’s sentences as pertaining particularly to this idea:

7. The will is secondary to the process (the artist) initiates from idea to completion. His wilfulness may only be ego.
28. Once the idea is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works.
29. The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.\(^{30}\)

Working via series or projects allows me to practice art while providing a sense of distance between the artworks and myself, in line with Osborne’s sense of the withdrawal of the artist as subject from their work. Where the concept ‘artist’ may be seen to form an institution of contemporary art, the withdrawal of this concept allows for critique of this institution via practice, which I hope to achieve by bracketing my practice in its entirety as a single project.

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\(^{29}\) Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All, 66.

\(^{30}\) Sol LeWitt in Osborne, ibid.
Baudrillard identifies the modernist impulse toward the liberation of art and the real world as resulting in the indexing of one on the other, ‘a deadly chiasmus for both art and the real world.’ In this sense, where ‘integral reality’ can ‘only be exchanged with itself, repeating itself to infinity’ and where, ‘art is simply what is discussed in the art world, in the artistic community that frantically stares at itself’:

Even the “creative” act replicates itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation – the true subject of a painter is no longer what he or she paints but the very fact that he or she paints. The painter paints the fact the he or she paints. In that way, at least, the idea of art is saved.

If an artist ‘paints the fact that they paint’ their practice is conducted less in the service of some independent reality and more as a quotation of practice itself (and for Baudrillard, this somehow saves the ‘idea’ of art). This provides a clue as to a method of escaping ‘the contemporary’: a conscious attempt to frame (or quote) one’s practice may relieve its objects of the expectation that they serve the ‘higher’ aim of representation. By framing the entirety of my practice as one single end of art project, I hope to ‘paint the fact that I paint’, bracketing the objects that result from my practice as quotes that simply refer to the concept ‘art’. Where ‘art’ exists within the whole of an artist’s practice – within the fact that they are an artist, making art and conducting themselves as such – rather than within the objects of that practice, contemporary art is perhaps most convincingly defined as post-conceptual, and a practice that attempts to embrace ‘the end of art’ must be viewed in the light of its whole over its parts.

As with my decorative painting project, the works in my end of art project are titled numerically and consecutively, starting (again) with number one. My end of art project officially began with #1 (Ealdwif) (2012) where I intend that it form my second ‘lifelong’ project as an artist, my thesis research represents the initial stages of this project.

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 91.
34 Ibid., 91.
35 I believe that the fact I have undertaken two lifelong projects as an artist holds theoretical significance, reflecting as it does the sense of failure inherent to conceptual art’s pure project of escape.
Fig 8 Elizabeth Pulie
#1(Ealdwif) 2012
acrylic and oil stick on linen, 120 x 100cm
photo courtesy Sarah Cottier gallery
Bracketing my practice as a lifelong ‘end of art’ project constitutes my primary creative act: since this act renders its objects of secondary concern, I am reticent to lend them significance by discussing them. In contrast with most conceptual art projects (and my previous decorative painting project) wherein strictly defined parameters tend to determine the form of their resulting objects, the main parameters I set for the objects of my end of art project are that of freedom and experimentation: while overall my end of art project reflects a modernist tendency toward critique and self-questioning, I intend that the objects in which it results reflect the freedom and multiplicity of the contemporary moment. The fact the project’s boundaries mandate freedom means my holding any particular objectives regarding the aesthetic or forms of its objects represents a compromise, since my main aim is that they represent an attitude suggestive of ‘anything-goes’. However in the event that one is compelled to create artworks in order to register the fact of one’s being an artist, decisions regarding what to make inevitably result in concerns around aesthetics and medium, rendering the existence of aims regarding artworks’ appearances inevitable.

The objectives of multiplicity and experimentation resulted in my intention to include everything I made within my thesis research – experiments, drawings, or failed works – as part of my ‘official’, numbered output, and I wanted my work in its entirety to appear to have been produced by a series of altogether different artists. I hoped these characteristics would assist in a view of the artworks as props – objects which by their existence showed I was an artist, but which (in combination with an end of art statement) pointed toward their lack of value as ‘art’. I felt that multiplicity and a lack of recognisable style would remove a sense of my personal self as the producer of my output, raising further questions around the institutions of the artist and the art object.

The progress of my work throughout my thesis research divides into two stages: the first (2012 – 2013) represents a period of experimentation remaining within the confines of painting, and the second (2013 – 2015) an attempted expansion of medium. The works in stage one point toward experimentation with form and style and an endeavour to break with my previously decorative concerns by adopting a painterly sensibility \textsuperscript{Fig. 8-10}, and introducing a sense of representation \textsuperscript{Fig. 11}. 
Fig 9 Elizabeth Pulie
#3 (Inhale) & #4 (Exhale) 2012
acrylic & ink on linen on board, each 47 x 36cm
Fig 10 Elizabeth Pulie
#7 (Inhale) & #8 (Exhale) 2012
acrylic and oil stick on board, each 20 x 15cm
Fig 11 Elizabeth Pulie
#16 (Nipple Suit) 2013
acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 120 x 40cm
photo: Document
Including sketches and work on paper within the official output of this stage \(^{fig\ 12}\) and re-using old paintings to make new ones \(^{fig\ 13}\) represent further breaks.

**Fig 12 Elizabeth Pulie**  
#5 (Figure and Ground: Guru Show) and #2 (Nipple Suit Drawing) 2012  
gouache and pencil on paper, #5: 17 x 17cm, #2: 23 x 13cm
Fig 13 Elizabeth Pulie
#6 (Reuse Landscape Triptych) 2012
acrylic and oil stick on linen on board, 2 panels 40 x 35cm, 1 panel 30 x 20cm
I held an overriding objective towards an outdated, modernist aesthetic within these early works, and aimed towards a sense of ‘ugliness’ in contrast with my previously decorative project. I wanted to emulate both the type of paintings that frequently occupy the neglected corners and foyers of public buildings, as well as work I had seen at local art and craft shows in the 1970s and 80s – slightly amateur paintings, stylistically a few decades behind the times. It is in relation to these aims that I judge the success or failure of this first stage of works: the fact the paintings are of varying standard points conversely to their overall success in relation to my projected aim to include all work within my numbered output.

My employment of painting and emphasis on a modernist aesthetic represent an attempt to escape what may be described as contemporary tropes: while all mediums, formats and styles are technically allowed within the pluralism of the contemporary, it may be said that some are more popularly considered representative of ‘contemporary art’. These would include mediums such as installation, photography, video, performance or sound – mediums made possible in the wake of conceptual art’s escape of traditional formats and which tend to form a canon of contemporary art. Both in my decorative and end of art project, my utilising painting represents an effort to break with ‘the contemporary’ by exploiting the final remnants of a view of painting as outdated: here, recurring analyses of the ‘death of painting’\(^{36}\), speculation around its resurrection or extension\(^{37}\), and the exclusion of painting in ‘new media’ categorisations tend to reinforce a view of painting as a medium that was at some point surpassed and which may therefore require validation as a ‘contemporary’ art form. While all formats are possible within the contemporary moment, it is those that are most allowed, or that are typical of the ‘most successful’ contemporary art that I wished in general to avoid\(^{38}\).

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\(^{38}\) As a strategy, this resonates with points made by Thomas Lawson in ‘Last Exit: Painting,’ in *Theories of Contemporary Art*, ed. Richard Hertz (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 143-55.
In addition to my use of the painted medium, my avoidance of the contemporary within the first stage of my thesis research resulted in an aim to make work which was as uninterpretable, opaque or dense as possible, despite the impossibility of this aim. Within my decorative painting project, my inability to make paintings that were adequately received as decoration may be read in light of the popular and overwhelming impulse to treat works of modern or contemporary art allegorically, and while I cannot ultimately control the way my work is received, the overriding aim for these painted works is to resist any indication that they explore, deconstruct, question or interrogate any particular theme, problem or idea.

The second stage of works constituting my thesis research aim equally to avoid a contemporary aesthetic, while representing a broadening of medium to include experimentation with craft and textiles – however, similarly to the medium of painting, a craft-like sensibility can only approximate an anti-art stance in the contemporary moment. My experimentation with textiles was initiated by my participation in the Sydney College of the Arts Graduate School Conference Exhibition (2013), one of the themes of which was feminism. The work I produced was based on one I had made ten years earlier, Banner – Female Form (2003)\textsuperscript{fig 14}: a stylised, decorative view of a woman’s groin and legs assuming an assertive stance, printed on a number of banners and installed in the streets of Sydney’s central business district for the exhibition Art and About (2003).

This work represents my closest previous attempt to consciously embody a feminist sensibility: the groin-and-legs format fit the restrictively narrow pictorial space dictated by the banners’ dimensions, and I had liked the idea of bombarding inner city streets with a stylised view of a woman’s lower anatomy disguised within a decorative x-ray view. #35 - #37 (The Female Form II)\textsuperscript{fig 15} represents an expansion of this idea into three larger, more domineering banners, the super-hero poses adopted by the figures recalling the strength and significance represented by the fight for women’s rights historically, contrasting with the stylised, decorative treatment of their physical sexuality.
Fig 14 Elizabeth Pulie
*The Female Form I (banner)* 2003
printed synthetic fabric, 200 x 80cm
Fig 15 Elizabeth Pulie

#35 - #37 (The Female Form II) 2013
acrylic on hessian, wooden poles, each 400 x 180cm
installed at Sydney College of the Arts Galleries
photo: Jamie North
Where in my decorative project I had aimed to avoid themes – especially political themes – in an attempt to create art that was empty and lacked significance, my aim that the objects of my end of art project more freely reflect the nature of contemporary art means I can rely on, if not embrace, themes as a starting point for the creation of artworks. My use of themes here is in quotation marks: bracketing my practice as an overall, ‘end of art’ project means my treatment or employment of any particular issue lacks sincerity due to my questioning the significance of art objects at all as representation. Utilising themes forms both an attempt to quote the common expectation that contemporary art demonstrate a concern with politics or activism, and acts as a starting point for making work in light of the perceived lack of necessity I feel to do so.

A sense of contradiction is embedded within the aims and outcomes of my thesis research: my stated desire to avoid contemporary tropes within my early painted work is contradicted by my later embrace of political themes, and my aim to create distance between myself and my work is contradicted by my allowing a sense of the personal within the objects of my studio research. In one sense, my considering the physical artworks incidental to my project and my desire that as a whole they embody a sense of ‘anything-goes’ renders these contradictions of diminished importance. The fact I am attempting to embody ideologies frequently conceived as competing – that of the modern versus the contemporary – may go some way to accounting for these contradictions; however they may also be explained in relation to Danto’s defence against critique concerning his working within the field of contemporary art as a critic while writing theory about that world. The reality of the life of a working artist is that one is frequently called upon to respond to situations or requests for work or ideas that may fall outside the strict parameters of one’s project, and rather than have these challenges represent a compromise (as tended to be the case within my decorative painting project), I now hope to more realistically embody contemporary practice via a readiness to respond to such requests. In addition, where ideally the objects of my end of art practice would appear to be the work of several different artists, long established perceptions regarding my project until this point may render a shift from a decorative painting practice to one encompassing forms as diverse as found photography, metal sculpture and sound art overly radical and compromise serious consideration of my project.
While formally satisfying, the final outcome of #35 - #37 (*The Female Form II*) did not match my intentions for it. I had aimed with this work to recall the radicalism and sense of protest inherent to the second-wave feminist movement by utilising materials and methods frequently employed by both activists and artists of that time, and while my use of hessian fulfilled the work’s ambitious size requirements and gestured toward the craft-like, do-it-yourself nature of late 20\textsuperscript{th}-century protest and counter-culture, the flat, painted outcome did not finally match this vision. Much of the work I have subsequently produced for my thesis research is an attempt to correct this and achieve something closer to my desired outcome, representing overall an experiment with textiles and other craft-like mediums.

In a series of work produced for the *Curating Feminism* Conference at Sydney College of the Arts in 2014\textsuperscript{39}, I employed a consciously material-based approach: while I held the overall aim that these works form a series of large foreboding heads as vague self-portraits, rather than work according to a detailed plan or drawing (as I had when making #35 - #37), I allowed the materials themselves to dictate the evolution of the final works’ form \textsuperscript{fig 16}.

I found that a short period of intense focus on a sheet of hessian would reveal a pre-existing face within its faults and folds, forming a ready-made plan upon which I could carry out the work. In my consideration of this series as an overall experiment, #43 \textsuperscript{fig 17} most successfully approximates the combination of materials and styles I had in mind.

\textsuperscript{39} Curated by Jacqueline Millner.
Fig 16 Elizabeth Pulie
#43 - #48 2014
acrylic on hessian, mixed fibre, metal and wooden fastenings
installed at Sydney College of the Arts Galleries
Fig 17 Elizabeth Pulie
#43 2014
acrylic on hessian, mixed fibre, metal fastenings
200 x 180cm
photo: Docqment
The comical, cartoon-like features in this work counter-balance a perhaps more serious, art-historical reference to geometric, hard-edged abstraction, and framing the work with a base of black fabric corrects, to a degree, the hessian’s tendency to sag and pucker, its contrast with the tidy black seam lending the work an overall formality. For this reason I intend to re-work another of this series, #44, for my thesis exhibition: where it seems unfinished in its initial iteration fig.18, I plan to add detail to its surface or frame it with fabric in the hope of correcting its sack-like formlessness.

Fig 18 Elizabeth Pulie
#44 2014
acrylic on hessian, fabric, wooden fastenings
200 x 150cm
photo: Docqment
The combination of aims I held for #35 - #37 (The Female Form II) – those of approximating a craft-like aesthetic in order to allude to the power of second wave feminism, addressing my personal relation and sense of indebtedness to that movement – are most successfully achieved with #43 and #44 from this series.

To make #57 (Bedspread) I employed a similarly material-based approach: having initially attempted to plan this work on paper and failing, I decided to keep my overall vision for the work in mind while allowing the hessian itself to dictate the final outcome fig 18.

The works’ subject matter retains a concern with feminism, referencing the third-wave’s complex relationship with issues of pornography, sexual identity and power: as a form of self-portraiture, this work indicates my own situation within this wave and personal experience with its issues. The subject of #57 (Bedspread) equally references the conditions of its own making, eventuating as it did from an invitation to create a work for an art fair held in a hotel40: here, the work references both the anonymous sexual acts conducted within hotel beds, alongside the sense of submission to commercial demands that both artists and artworks are subject to by the phenomenon of the art fair.

I aim that the other works in my thesis exhibition (in production at time of writing) develop my use of a craft-like aesthetic via experimentation with materials and technique, based on themes of self-portraiture and the conditions of production of the works themselves. An anticipated work (potentially titled Thesis) will reference the fact of the exhibition’s existing within the bounds of my thesis research; a large wall-hanging forming a self-portrait will refer to my project’s encompassing both theory and practice as well as my personal relationship to the idea of the end of art; a planned hessian painting will re-work an earlier painting, Josie (2005) fig 19, a portrait of my maternal grandmother, as a ‘genetic’ self-portrait.

40 This work was exhibited on the bed in Sarah Cottier Gallery’s room at the Spring 1883 art fair at the Establishment Hotel, Sydney 2015.
Fig 19 Elizabeth Pulie
#57 (Bedspread) 2015
acrylic, wool, diamantes, jute on hessian
180 x 200cm
photo courtesy Sarah Cottier gallery
Fig 20 Elizabeth Pulie
Josie 2005
gouache and pencil on polyester
40 x 30cm
photo: Docqment
While the work in my thesis exhibition arises materially and formally in the context of an experiment to break with the flatness of painting and embrace of a craft-like, feminist aesthetic, it also represents an attempt to conceptually combine the formality of a research-based, academic approach to art-making with a sense of personal self-expression. Here, in combination with my end of art thesis, I aim that the work resulting from my research broaches to an extent the divide commonly perceived to exist between theory and practice.

Despite my focus on fibre-based works, I have maintained (and will continue to maintain) a concurrent involvement with two-dimensional work in the form of collage and painting\textsuperscript{20, 21} in line with my objective to emphasise an openness of medium: a recent experiment with performance art via my re-performing of Lee Lozano’s work \textit{Decide to Boycott Women} (1971), represents a further opening of my end of art project to new media\textsuperscript{41}.

The material-based approach I have utilised when working with fibre has come to inform my painting and collage work, frequently resulting in more interesting outcomes than that allowed by the more constrained approach of my previous project. Where a sense of the personal may enter my end of art work regarding theme, it also tends to enter the work in relation to process: for example over-weaving smaller areas when I become bored with completing a large one can result in a satisfyingly haphazard result. While such methods may seem obvious regarding most artists’ processes, it is only within the constraints of the freedom of my end of art project that I have come to realise the potential of this way of working.

\textsuperscript{41} Performed at Marrickville Garage as part of \textit{Second Comings}, March 2015, curated by Jane Polkinghorne and Sarah Newall.
Fig 21 Elizabeth Pulie

#59 (Potential Reaction to the Idea of the End of Art) 2015
acrylic and collage on board
42 x 30cm
Fig 22 Elizabeth Pulie
#56 (Self Portrait) 2015
acrylic, oil, ink on board
61 x 46cm
photo: Document
Fig 23 Elizabeth Pulie
#50 (Fucksake) 2014
acrylic on hessian, fibre, cloth, fimo
100 x 100cm
photo courtesy Sarah Cottier gallery
Fig 24 Elizabeth Pulie
#41b (Weaving) 2014
bamboo, mixed fibres
340 x 150cm
photo: Jamie North
Fig 25 Elizabeth Pulie
#58 (Thesis) 2015
ink on card
60 x 40cm
PART 3 - Saying ‘the end of art’

Making a statement that art has ended forms an equally important part of my project and thesis research, counter-balancing the more typical contemporary tropes of my studio practice. The blunt, unequivocal nature of the statement contradicts the sense of freedom and openness inherent to contemporary art, echoing the contradiction implied by the modernist demand for a theory or philosophy of contemporary art alongside the post-modern celebration of the lack of such theory. Just as respondents to Foster’s Questionnaire on the Contemporary equally defended and denied the value of a philosophy or definition for contemporary art, the two halves of my research thesis, viewed as theory and practice, may seem at odds with each other. However the various contradictions and impossibilities inherent to my end of art studio project – maintaining an open project while avoiding the openness of contemporary art, attempting to work within an anti-art medium when all mediums are acceptable, or employing an allegorical approach while disavowing it – render the axiomatic nature of an end of art statement essential.

My attempt to make an end of art statement is as experimental as my studio practice since I am unsure how extensively, overtly or subtly it should be made: for example while I could include a reference to the end of art within the titles of all future works and exhibitions, I believe my consecutive titling of the works adequately emphasises their existing within its bounds. My end of art statement has for the most part been made within this thesis, as well as in papers I’ve presented at various conferences and symposia since commencing my research.42 Mentioning ‘the end of art’ in response to casual queries regarding the subject of my research has had considerable impact, tending to lead to discussion regarding contemporary art with individuals of varied levels of experience with its theorisation. I make an end of art statement primarily to maintain a convincing contemporary practice rather

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42 The papers I have contributed to the following all included references to, or analyses of, the idea of the end of art: Conquest of Space/Science Fictional symposium: ‘Baudrillard’s Science Fiction and Contemporary Art’ UNSW Art and Design (2014); New Materialism graduate school conference: ‘Materialism and Contemporary Art’s Parole’ Sydney College of the Arts, the University of Sydney (2014); Aesthetics After Finitude conference: ‘Human and Aesthetic Finitude’ UNSW Art and Design (2015); Reason Plus Enjoyment conference: ‘Seduction of the End of the End’ University of New South Wales (2015); AAANZ Annual Conference: ‘Lee Lozano’s Decide to Boycott Women (Re-performed): from the Conceptual to the Post-Conceptual moment’ GOMA, Brisbane (2015).
than to raise awareness or alter the conditions of contemporary art’s theorisation, and to this end tend to refer to it more incidentally outside theoretical contexts.43

While the greatest volume of critical activity concerning Danto’s end of art originates from within the final decades of the last century, the idea is still referenced and critiqued within current discourse. In 2002, preceding his Questionnaire on the Contemporary, Hal Foster concedes that, ‘our condition is largely one of aftermath...we live in the wake not only of modernist painting and sculpture but of the post-modernist deconstructions of these forms as well’44. While admitting to a certain end of art history within the contemporary, Foster aligns Danto’s acceptance of its plurality with neo-liberal values, ‘in the sense that its relativism is what the rule of the market requires.’45 Writing in 2013, Peter Osborne describes Danto’s thesis as, ‘an inverted (and disavowed) acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the prevailing philosophical discourse on art’46 – in the absence of a philosophy for contemporary art, Osborne claims Danto turns against contemporary art itself, characterising it as the cause of this condition, as an art form that merely makes a claim to ‘the hallowed signifier “art”’.47 For Osborne, Danto’s theory is simply a negative judgement on contemporary art’s validity as art, which he describes as a judgement ‘against contemporaneity itself.’48 Speculating that the apparent legitimation crisis of contemporary art may be ‘oversold’, Osborne declares that, ‘the market provides sufficient legitimation of its own: “creative industry”’.49 Thus where Foster negatively assesses Danto’s view of contemporary art as an alignment with neoliberalism and the market, Osborne claims contemporary art’s legitimation by the market renders its ‘legitimation crisis’ oversold, a fact which he believes undermines Danto’s apparent need to critique it.

Osborne’s claim that contemporary art does not require legitimation when Danto attempts to provide a philosophy for it is at odds with both his own statement that ‘contemporary art

43 Simultaneously however, treating the end of art as a simple fact that underlies my practice seems to lend it greater power than expounding upon or defending it. In my brief email correspondence with Arthur Danto before he died, he advised me to, ‘just go ahead with the end of art, as a commonplace’.
44 Foster, ‘This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse,’ 125.
45 Ibid.
46 Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All, 6.
47 Ibid., 7.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
is badly known\textsuperscript{50} and the considerable effort he makes to develop his own philosophy. While an end of art statement does connote negativity, Osborne’s accusing Danto of an attack against ‘the contemporary’ is contradicted by the extent of Danto’s increasing involvement with contemporary art and artists until his death in 2013\textsuperscript{51}. Danto remained open to and critically considered all contemporary projects despite his end of art declaration, and while he admits that a sense of negativity did inform the initial instance of his theorisation, a familiarity with his work in its entirety makes apparent the degree of care and respect he holds for art’s significance historically.

A case can be made against Osborne here: where he concludes that aesthetics is essential (if ‘insufficient’) to a philosophy of contemporary art and characterises conceptual art’s fundamental drive toward dematerialisation as, ‘a misunderstanding of art’s conceptual character’, Osborne’s denial of conceptual artists’ aim of escape and his return of contemporary art to a (partial) concern with aesthetics tends to preclude the engagement of contemporary practice with theory. Where conceptual art’s questioning of the conditions of its production gave artists a degree of sovereignty over their activity (if only fleetingly), to return art to a concern with aesthetics or the visual tends to render artists once again mute. In this instance, art as discourse remains firmly within the realm of philosophy, as a place where theorists (such as Osborne himself) may ‘construct the contemporary’ via their ideas, or Foster may carry out surveys regarding contemporary art without consulting artists. While admittedly Danto’s own theorising of the conditions of the contemporary remained within his practice as a philosopher, where a potential exists for art practitioners to consider contemporary art as the end of art, it enables an engagement with discourse via practice. Rather than Danto attacking ‘contemporary art’ via his end of art statement, contemporary art practice is instead significantly weakened by Osborne’s precluding of any potential for artists to engage with a self-critical, philosophical practice by relegating art to a concern with aesthetics or allegory. Rather than an end of art statement privileging the realm of

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{51} For example, in 2010 Danto participated in Marina Abramovic’s performance event The Artist is Present at MOMA, New York and wrote the exhibition catalogue’s main essay; in 2012 he contributed a paper to the seven-hour event The Last Word at the culmination of Maurizio Cattelan’s final exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
philosophy, its potential to endow an art practice with a sense of philosophy tends in fact to result in the opposite outcome.

The significance of the concept ‘art’ within the contemporary moment may in fact be prolonged and nurtured by the critical nature of the idea of its ending. This relates to Sylvere Lotringer’s comments regarding Baudrillard’s critique of contemporary art:

...the less pertinent art has become as art, the louder it keeps claiming its “exceptionalism.” Instead of bravely acknowledging its own obsolescence and questioning its own status, it is basking in its own self-importance...it has been doing everything it could to prove that it still is art. In that sense Baudrillard may well be one of the last people who really cares about art.52

This relates to Baudrillard’s claim that, ‘it is all the more necessary to talk about art now that there is nothing to say about it’53. Critique of contemporary art tends to result in discourse concerning its nature, thus the critical overtones of an end of art statement hold greater potential in furthering discourse than does a more collusive tendency to avoid critique. An end of art statement returns my art practice to a concern with art as concept, situating it within the bearings engendered by the legacy of conceptual art. Where questions regarding the nature of art are typically viewed as characteristic of ‘the modern’, the tendency for theorists to attempt a philosophy or definition for contemporary art reveals nostalgia for such characteristics, which may be satisfied by an end of art statement.

The sense of historical stasis frequently attributed to the contemporary may symbolise a lack of futurity and therefore hope, explaining current efforts to establish a sense of the contemporary’s ongoing historical significance over its theorisation as the end. To ask the question, ‘what’s next?’ or speculate on the nature of the next art movement, form or style is common today. In 1961 Marcel Duchamp displayed a prescient awareness of the stasis inherent to the post-conceptual condition in his attempt to answer the question, ‘where do

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53 Baudrillard, ‘Art...Contemporary of Itself,’ 91.
we go from here?’\textsuperscript{54} – a sense echoed within the 2013 publication, \textit{What’s Next? Art after Crisis}\textsuperscript{55}. Liam Gillick identifies the inclusiveness typical of contemporary art as having, ‘helped suppress a critique of what art is and more importantly what comes next. We know what comes next as things stand: more contemporary art.’\textsuperscript{56} In disparaging the idea that art has ended, Foster asks, ‘what comes after these ends, or perhaps (if they did not quite occur) in lieu of them?’\textsuperscript{57}, and suggests, ‘rather than deny this aftermath, then, why not admit it and ask “what now, what else?”’\textsuperscript{58} Similarly, Smith’s third ‘current’ of contemporary art asks, ‘what kind of art may be made now?’\textsuperscript{59}

Osborne claims that the, ‘inability to think the concept of art at once philosophically and historically with any kind of futurity’\textsuperscript{60} itself precludes a philosophical grasp of contemporary art in its difference to that of the past: his thesis concludes that, ‘at its best, contemporary art models experimental practices of negation that puncture horizons of expectation’\textsuperscript{61}. Hypotheses regarding a sense of art’s futurity suggest the ideal of progress over that of stasis, yet the modernist nature of this sense of futurity tends to preclude a theorisation of contemporary art as distinct from the modern in any significant or meaningful sense. The idea of the end of art challenges such futurity, and may hold potential to more radically shift the conditions or character of ‘the contemporary’ by embracing nihilism over the optimism of futurity\textsuperscript{62}. An experiment in embracing the stasis embodied by the end of art may represent a more realistic experience of ‘the contemporary’ than its refusal; where the

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{What’s next? Art after Crisis: A Reader}, eds. John M. Hedinger & Torsten Meyer (Berlin: Kadmos, 2013). The 177 responses collected in this reader tend to mirror the pluralistic tendencies of previously cited attempts to theorise the contemporary and encompasses the usual breadth of themes, including (but not limited to) re-performance or the recycling of art, the trend to the curatorial, collaboration and participation, digitalisation, networking and new media, the reception of art, art as business, the ‘creative industries’, post-autonomous art, globalisation, etc.
\textsuperscript{56} Gillick, ‘Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place.’
\textsuperscript{57} Foster, ‘This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse,’ 125.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{59} Smith, \textit{What is Contemporary Art?} 270.
\textsuperscript{60} Osborne, \textit{Anywhere or Not at All}, 8.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 211.
question ‘what’s next?’ tends to reinforce the abyss of the end, a more wholehearted ‘end of art’ statement, while admittedly risky and of unknown consequence, may come to fill it.
CONCLUSION

One might ask why so many precautions must be taken instead of merely putting one’s work out in the normal fashion, leaving comment to the critics and other professional gossip columnists. The answer is very simple: complete rupture with art—such as it is envisaged, such as it is known, such as it is practiced—has become the only possible means of proceeding along the path of no return upon which thought must embark.¹

A concern with realism may be seen to have informed the progression of modern Western art movements, arising from a compulsion to free the concept ‘art’ from the perceived institutional distortions of its form that precluded its effective representation of reality. Where original 19th century Realists strove to depict the real life of ordinary people over the romantic, institutionalised version, Impressionists painted light in order to capture that which the eye registered in reality, Post-Impressionists reinforced the sense of reality as subjective via their individual views of the world. Conceptual artists attempted to position their activity outside the sanctioned space of the institution and its objects in order to bring the concept ‘art’ closer to the real. Where ‘art’ may be more broadly defined as ‘culture’ in the way it represents our subjectivity and world view, distortions resulting from the exclusion of particular subjects or groups by cultural institutions render the concept contested. Thus, a sense of the liberation of the concept ‘art’ is inherent to a view of modern western art as historically linear. In instances where particular cultures (world views or realities) are excluded by mainstream definitions of art, the (modernist) move to de-institutionalise or liberate the concept may be viewed as a fight against or attack on the institution and its objects with the intention of rendering the concept closer to a representation of the reality of one’s cultural worldview, or a move toward the ‘real’.²

Where Hegel determined that art ended at the outset of modernism on account of its reduced representational significance, the tendency to progressively liberate the concept from its role as representation by the movements that followed culminate in conceptual or

² Ironically perhaps, this tendency toward realism reflects the mimetic impulse of pre-modern art, despite the fact that modern art forms grew from a challenge to the necessity of this impulse.
pop art’s signalling the end of art as a visual concern altogether, in the ultimate indiscernibility between art objects and real ones as theorised by Danto. It is in this way that contemporary art marks the end of art, where, ‘art today has thoroughly entered reality’\(^3\) – this idea is illustrated by the common story of the cleaner who inadvertently discards a work of art by mistaking it for garbage on the museum floor\(^4\) or the tendency for museum audiences to perceive recording hygrothermographs (or other functional equipment within the museum) as art due to their resembling readymades or conceptual artworks. When art is indiscernible from real life it is finally liberated as a concept, a fact which paradoxically tends to reinforce the authority of the institution, since if art truly did exist everywhere and in everything it would – finally and irrevocably – end. In the face of the loss of this concept within the ‘real’, institutions are obliged to protect it ever more fiercely, a fact that reflects the failure of conceptual art’s ultimate attempt at liberation. In the instance that the institution validates all attempts at art’s escape, the hegemony of ‘the contemporary’ tends to occlude an outsider position, rendering a sense of radicalism or self-critique impossible and resulting in a loss of sovereignty in the role of the artist.

The historical stasis that appears to accompany the end of the modernist project of self-critique results in attempts to reinstate a sense of radicality or historical significance to the realm of contemporary art via a search for its definition, philosophy or discourse. Hence, the current desire to define contemporary art in itself forms a feature of the contemporary moment. Nostalgia for criticality and radicalism – traits of the modern – informs these attempts, a fact made apparent when their discourse pits the contemporary against the modern as a new or improved moment or historical position. However, ambivalence toward, avoidance, or outright rejection of the ideological, utopian thinking perceived as marking the failure of ‘the modern’ thwarts this nostalgia: whether critical or radical thought is possible in the absence of utopian ideals is a philosophical question beyond the scope of this paper, but it is a question that contextualises my thesis research and practice as a contemporary artist working with an awareness of the end of art.

\(^3\) Baudrillard, ‘Towards the Vanishing Point of Art’, 105.
Despite official characterisations of ‘the contemporary’ as marking the end of ideology, narratives or historical progression, it can be said that, at the very least, the concept ‘art’ continues to represent a space for potentially critical or radical thought. Even in the face of the current impossibility for the art object, or art as form, to embody radicality or critique within the all-encompassing embrace of ‘the contemporary’, the potential for the concept ‘art’ as a space for radical thought – even if only as a dream – means a space for art itself may be left open. This potential is illustrated by the openness of art institutions toward the idea of the end of art, made evident by the considerable number of symposia and publications that gave serious consideration to Danto’s idea in its initial iteration. While in 2010 Cuauhtémoc Medina made unforgiving critique of contemporary art in e-flux, he nonetheless concludes his critique with an analysis of the field’s potential for radicality, claiming that, ‘despite the way art is entwined with the social structures of capitalism, contemporary art circuits are some of the only remaining spaces in which leftist thought still circulates as public discourse.’ According to Medina, ‘if we should question the ethical significance of participating in contemporary art circuits, this sole fact ought to vindicate us: in this sense, when institutions of contemporary art allow for self-critique they form a final space for radical thought, at a time when, according to Medina, ‘academic circuits have ossified and become increasingly isolated, and where the classical modern role of the public intellectual dwindles before the cataclysmic power of media networks and the balkanization of political opinion.’

Medina describes the project for contemporary art as an ‘uncomfortable inheritance’:

...we would need to consider the possibility that our task may consist, in large part, of protecting utopia—seen as the necessary collusion of the past with what lies ahead—from its demise at the hands of the ideology of present time.
In describing the ‘genealogy’ of this inheritance, Medina quotes Dada artist and historian Hans Richter’s description of Dada as having been, ‘the vacuum created by the sudden arrival of freedom and the possibilities it seemed to offer’. Depicting this influential modern movement in terms of liberation echoes both the conceptual artists’ project of the liberation of art as a concept, as well as Baudrillard’s argument concerning the ultimate liberation of art and the real within the modern. To Medina, this inheritance obliges contemporary art to, ‘deal with the ambivalence of the experience of emancipation’: I believe that what Medina refers to as the ‘ideology of the present time’ (that from which he claims ‘utopia’ must be saved) can be seen to exist within the denial of such ambivalence, as demonstrated by attempts to provide a paradigm for contemporary art.

My thesis research is situated within the vacuum of this ambivalence as a reality for contemporary artists: a reality wherein a self-critical, ontological art practice is no longer possible due to the ultimate liberation of art as a visual form and the subsequent co-optation of all form by the institution. My thesis’ emphasis on a studio project (‘art’ in a positive sense) and accompanying end of art statement (‘art’ in a negative sense) embodies this ambivalence, potentially representing a space within the hegemony of the contemporary for self-critique and a philosophical engagement with art. While this research may risk irrelevance due to the sense of impotence surrounding attempts to escape ‘the contemporary’, a certain necessity equally informs it: the very possibility of my practice is facilitated by its contextualisation within the idea of the end of art due to my interest in art as it intersects with philosophy, or art as concept over experience or affect.

While my thesis research facilitates my studio practice I believe it also holds potential for a larger theorisation of contemporary art, satisfying equally the current search for a narrative or philosophy of contemporary art alongside the desire to avoid metanarratives or ideology. Baudrillard describes radical thought as, ‘intelligence without hope but with a

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11 Hans Richter in Medina, ‘Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses.’
12 Medina, ‘Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses.’
13 While again, the constraints of this research do not allow for a full investigation of such theorisation, the making of an end of art statement alongside the continuation of art practice may relate to several recent philosophical positions due to its raising of issues such as representation, the subject, the ‘real’ and ideology, and the extrapolation of such theory may form the basis for potential future research.
happy form\textsuperscript{14} and claims that, ‘true depressive thought’ lies with, ‘those who only speak of moving forward and transforming the world while they are incapable of transforming their own language’\textsuperscript{15}. While theorists such as Osborne desire a sense of futurity for a philosophy of contemporary art, I believe the denial of such futurity represents an opportunity for radical thought via the return of a sense of realism to contemporary art practice. Where Medina states we must protect utopia, ‘from its demise at the hands of the ideology of present time’\textsuperscript{16}, the optimism that surrounds an ideology of contemporary art in regards to a sense of its futurity is resisted by an end of art statement, providing an opportunity for radical thought and, potentially, a subsequent protection of utopia.

Medina’s demand that we resist the ‘ideology of the present time’ may thus require more serious consideration of the end of art; here, the ‘many ends of art’, speculation as to what may follow ‘them’\textsuperscript{17} or categorisations of the end of art in terms of a game\textsuperscript{18} are replaced by a view of the development of modern and contemporary art as formed by one single end. My role as an artist provides me with a privileged position from which to make a serious claim that art has ended via my thesis research, and my ability to maintain and expand my practice in light of this claim may allow me to, as Medina describes it, ‘find an advantage to the constant collision of perfume and theory that we experience in contemporary art’.\textsuperscript{19} At its most radical, an end of art statement reflects Baudrillard’s speculation that, as an extension of the logic of the conceptual moment, ‘art could do no better than to disappear without any further discussion’\textsuperscript{20}. In the absence of this particular possibility, this thesis research points to a potentially convincing theorisation for contemporary art, provides a conjunction of art theory with practice that enables the very possibility of practice, and returns a sense of sovereignty to artists.

\textsuperscript{14} Jean Baudrillard, ‘Radical Thought (1996),’ \textit{The Conspiracy of Art}, 174.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Medina, ‘Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses.’
\textsuperscript{17} Foster, ‘This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse,’ 125.
\textsuperscript{18} See David Joselit and Elisabeth Sussman, eds: \textit{Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture} (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986).
\textsuperscript{19} Medina, ‘Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses.’
\textsuperscript{20} Baudrillard, ‘Art...Contemporary of Itself,’ 91.
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<tr>
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Danto, Arthur C  

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Danto, Arthur C


de Duve, Thierry


Dickie, George


Duchamp, Marcel


Duchamp, Marcel

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Foster, Hal


Foster, Hal


Foster, Hal


Foster, Hal

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Fried, Michael  

Fukuyama, Francis  

Fukuyama, Francis  

Garrels, Gary ed.  

Geulen, Eva  

Gillick, Liam  

Gillick, Liam  

Golub, Marko  

Greenberg, Clement  

Groys, Boris  

Haapala, A; Levinson, J; Rantala, V; eds.  
Harman, Graham  

Harman, Graham  

Hedinger, J & Meyer, T eds.  

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich  

Heidegger, Martin  

Hirst, Damien & Burn, Gordon  

Hutcheon, Linda  

Joselit, David & Sussman, Elisabeth eds.  

Kalm, James  

Kaprow, Allan  

Kellner, Douglas  


|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

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Ritzer, George (ed.)  

Robinson, Walter  
‘Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism.’  
Artspace online magazine, accessed July 20, 2015.  


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
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</table>
Vattimo, Gianni  

Vermeulen, Timotheus & van den Akker, Robin  

Vidokle, Anton & Kuan Wood, Brian  

Warhol, Andy  

Warhol, Andy & Hackett, Pat  

Woodward, Ashley  

Woodward, Ashley  

Wyma, Chloe  

Zizek, Slavoj  

Zurbrugg, Nicholas ed.  
## APPENDIX A

**CODED RESULTS OF HAL FOSTER’S QUESTIONNAIRE ON ‘THE CONTEMPORARY’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>No. responses</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art is postcolonial/global/involves the peripheries and can’t be defined from a centre</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art must be defined in relation to contemporary issues, it shows us our world as it is now</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of contemporary art reflects the structure of neoliberalism/capitalism</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need to define/interrogate contemporary art, it’s good to have the discussion</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art has a strange temporality/is both in and out of time/is not linear/is a multeity of times</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather than one broad definition, we need to define contemporary art via specific artist’s works, histories and locations</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is value in contemporary art’s lack of a definition, its uncertainty is a good thing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art resists paradigms/we don’t need a paradigm/grand narrative for it</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art exists as a multitude of times/histories/modernities/we need a comparative history of contemporary art</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art is globalising/homogenising/the extension of western culture to dominate other cultures</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art must be defined in its relation to the past/the future/as a way of understanding other temporalities</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much contemporary art is the latest iteration of the modern/is modern art in a globalised/diverse world</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art is a contradictory field, it is defined by antinomies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The category ‘contemporary art’ was invented by the art market/can be defined in its relation to the art market</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Contemporary art’ as a category/definition of art has been around a long time/is outdated</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is difficult to historicise the present/contemporary art is too present/in a state of becoming to be historicised</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing the multeities and specific instances of contemporary art may lead to it becoming a nominal term/obscure its meaning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional art history can’t account for contemporary art</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art can be defined by the rise of the biennale/international temporary exhibitions</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art criticism is threatened by the heterogeneity of contemporary art, and needs to reinvent itself</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX A continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>No. responses</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The pluralism of contemporary art is not a negative feature/holds possibility</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art’s multitude of forms and practices is considered a crisis, thus the search for a paradigm</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fact that many contemporary artists are alive and available as a resource has implications for historizing contemporary art</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The homogeneity of contemporary art is a positive thing as it gives a voice to the periphery/challenges the mainstream</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art is directly related to/the result of the conditions of post modernism/we can use the arguments/paradigms of post-modernist discourse to address contemporary art</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The study of contemporary art has increased enormously in the recent past, so it needs a rigorous definition</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art does not lack form, means of defining it do exist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art can be defined by its shift towards the image/visuality/Involves visual studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All art was once contemporary, contemporary art must be defined in relation to contemporary art of the past</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralism in art is not a new thing/art has lacked unity since the early 80s</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reception of contemporary art is important in defining/historicising it/artwork as 'affect'/role of the viewer/participatory</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary art’s provenance is yet to be proven/contemporary art is too subject to the whims of fashion/the market to be confidently theorised</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need to define/interrogate contemporary art otherwise it may become meaningless/vacuous/must take it seriously</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists/other art practitioners don’t identify what they’re doing with ‘the contemporary’/don’t historicise their practice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: Elizabeth Pulie End of Art images 2012—2015

#1 (Ealdwif)
2012
acrylic & oil stick
on linen
120 x 100cm

#2 (Nipple Suit Drawing)
2012
gouache & pencil
on paper
23 x 13cm

#3 (Inhale)
2012
acrylic & ink on linen on board
36 x 47cm

#4 (Exhale)
2012
acrylic & ink on linen on board
36 x 47cm

#5 (Figure & Ground Guru Show)
2012
gouache & pencil on paper
17 x 17cm

#6 (Reuse Landscape Triptych) 2012
acrylic, ink & oil stick
on linen on board
2 panels 40 x 35cm
1 panel 30 x 20cm

#7 (Inhale)
2012
acrylic & oil stick
on board
15 x 20cm

#8 (Exhale)
2012
acrylic & oil stick
on board
15 x 20cm

#9a (Inhale)
2012
acrylic & medium
on canvas
3 panels
each 15 x 15cm

#9b (Exhale)
2012
acrylic & medium on canvas
3 panels
90 x 77cm

#11 (Exhale )
2012
acrylic & oil stick
on canvas
90 x 77cm

#12 (Inhale Smoke I) 2012
acrylic & oil stick
on canvas
100 x 80cm

#13 (Exhale Smoke II) 2012
acrylic & oil stick on canvas
100 x 80cm

#14 Inhale (Lines I) 2012
acrylic & oil stick on canvas
100 x 80cm

#15 Inhale (Lines II) 2012
acrylic & oil stick on canvas
100 x 80cm
APPENDIX B: Elizabeth Pulie End of Art images 2012—2015

#16 (Nipple Suit)
2012
acrylic, oil stick, ink on linen
107 x 51cm

#17 (Stone Villa)
2012
acrylic & oil stick on board
21 x 15cm

#18 (Stone Villa)
2012
acrylic & oil stick on board
21 x 15cm

#19 Seaweed
2012
acrylic & oil stick on board
21 x 15cm

#20 Burn
2012
acrylic & oil stick on board
21x15cm

#21 (Jan 13 Study I: Mishka Fundraiser)
2013
acrylic & oil stick on canvas board
30 x 25cm

#22 (Jan 13 Study II) 2013
acrylic & oil stick on canvas board
30 x 25cm

#23 (Jan 13 Study III)
2013
acrylic & oil stick on canvas board
30 x 25cm

#24 End of Art (Toilet Door)
2013
acrylic on wooden door
180 x 70cm

#25 (EP 25 study)
2013
acrylic on canvas board
41 x 30cm

#26 (Vector)
2013
acrylic & pencil on linen
160 x 120cm

#27
2013
acrylic & oil stick on canvas board
40 x 30cm

#28
2013
acrylic & oil stick on canvas board
40 x 30cm

#29
2013
acrylic & oil stick on canvas board
40 x 30cm

#30
2013
acrylic & oil stick on board
50 x 40cm
APPENDIX B: Elizabeth Pulie End of Art images 2012—2015

#31  
2013  
acrylic & oil stick on board  
50 x 40cm

#32  
2013  
acrylic & oil stick on board  
50 x 40cm

#33  
2013  
acrylic & oil stick on board  
50 x 40cm

#34  
2013  
acrylic & oil stick on board  
50 x 40cm

#35 (The Female Form II)  
2013  
acrylic on hessian, wooden pole  
400 x 180cm

#36 (The Female Form II)  
2013  
acrylic on hessian, wooden pole  
400 x 180cm

#37 (The Female Form II)  
2013  
acrylic on hessian, wooden pole  
400 x 180cm

#38  
2013  
acrylic on hessian, fimo, metal rods  
180 x 300cm

#39  
2013  
acrylic on hessian, fimo, metal rods  
180 x 80cm

#40  
2013  
acrylic on hessian, fimo, metal rods  
180 x 300cm

#41a (sanded board Stonevilla)  
2013  
acrylic on board  
21 x 15cm

#41b (weaving)  
2014  
bamboo, mixed fibres  
340 x 150cm

#43  
2014  
paint & mixed fibre on hessian, metal rings  
186 x 94cm

#44  
2014  
paint, mixed fibre on hessian, cane rings  
200 x 118cm

#45  
2014  
mixed fibres, fabric, acrylic on hessian, wooden rings  
260 x 200cm
APPENDIX B: Elizabeth Pulie End of Art images 2012—2015

#46
2014
acrylic, mixed fibre on hessian, wooden rings
200 x 180cm

#47
2014
acrylic and mixed fibre on hessian, metal rings
200 x 150cm

#48
2014
acrylic and mixed fibre on hessian, metal rings
100 x 150cm

#49 (ICAN fundraiser)
2014
paper, hessian, fibre, calico, board
42 x 30cm

#50 (Fucksake)
2014
acrylic on hessian, fibre, cloth, fimo
100 x 100cm

#51 (for Jack)
2014
collage & fabric on board
21 x 14cm

#52 (Stonevilla)
2014
collage on boxboard, fabric, wood
21 x 15cm

#53 (for Soo)
2014
collage on boxboard, mixed fibres
44 x 32cm

#54 (floor work)
2014
paint & applique on hessian
154 x 114cm

#55 (MEN)
2015
paint & diamantes on hessian
88 x 58cm

#56 (Self Portrait)
2015
acrylic, oil, ink on board
61 x 46cm

#57 (Bedspread)
2015
acrylic, wool, diamantes and jute on hessian
180 x 200cm

#58 (Thesis)
2015
ink on card
60 x 40cm

#59 (potential reaction to the idea of the end of art)
2015
collage & acrylic on board
42 x 30cm