

Preparing for the Palliative Turn
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Around 2009, when contemporary art conclusively became an object of theoretical investigation, possibly because it was nearing its end, Boris Groys described its contemporaneity in a striking fashion: 'The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future [...] Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future.' The contemporary quite simply differs from other eras through lack of temporal movement. Time was conceived as a synthesis between a past, present and future, while the contemporary simply didn't connect past or future with the present. The contemporary now merely revolves around itself in a desire to become materialized as contemporaneous. This is what Fukuyama's *End of History* implies: the contemporary does not advance, it simply spins out in broadening circles, revolving around itself it spreads towards the end point, a liberal market economical democracy which covers the rest of the planet. Globalization is a spatialization of the contemporary's movement towards significant immutability.

This forms a difference between contemporary art and modernism, which wanted to move forward, towards a society and culture to come. It could help society progress, improve the situation. Contemporary art can't do this, because its function is already from the outset palliative; to help people relate to the end point, namely the contemporary.

On a larger scale, it helps by spreading the political system, mainly in the form of biennials and fairs, continuously reduced to their core, capitalism. But its definite, palliative task is fulfilled every time art demonstrates that it has the same driving forces as the rest of society, namely for and of freedom. Freedom emerges through the description of the contemporaneous as disconnected from both past and present. Which is why, according to Groys, contemporary art is obsessed with rewriting history.

The point has been that history can be rewritten in an infinite number of ways since the contemporary isn't conditioned by time. History illuminates our time, without dictating the conditions of our freedom. History only exists as representation, not as fact. And the same undeniably goes for things that exist within the contemporary: individuals, politics claim, but only those who can be represented in the form of interest groups within the system. Freedom lies in representation not representing what it actually is. Neither does the future define the content of the contemporary as it lacks a telos. So, we must prepare ourselves for all kinds of futures - which, nevertheless, only are thinkable within the contemporary as long as they do not differ from its fundamental principle, that is to say economic growth. (The economy does not let us predict the 'future' - thus nothing can change. Economy provides no new conditions, as content is so vague, it essentially offers pretexts for action.) Considering that contemporary thought has become thoroughly economized one might say that the art world is 'a kind of experimental ground for the hammering-out of a certain ideal of freedom appropriate to the current rule of finance capital'. Art cannot do much more than operate palliatively, making life without time a little more comfortable.

A climate catastrophe is difficult to contemplate in a contemporary manner as it provides an image of the future that differs from the contemporary, and because it must be thought of as representing an actual reality within the contemporary. How would this present, which only compromises 'unproductive, wasted time', as Groys declares, produce its own damnation? From freedom? Absurd. The contemporary is its own bubble. Our mentality is that of the motorist, driving in the cockpit, where impressions, conversations and music don't come from outside and the miles drearily pass by. Outside, time passes, but not inside the car. The so-called Krautrock music, inspired by the highway, anticipated what would become the contemporary condition. And Starman, Elon Musk's car-satellite in space, is a perfect interpretation of contemporary thinking. Now every car that passes represents the monad of 'the contemporary', which without windows reflects everything past and future, without being limited by it.

And if, in this situation, we claim a 'palliative turn in art', one must adhere to certain nuances. We must at least leave the individual and the private behind and replace them with some kind of universals. It is what art does, not what artists do, that should change or be reconsidered.

It is not a number of people dying, but humankind or the anonymous within us, that is, something that is neither fact nor representation, but an outstanding cultural creation. The palliative turn must be a turn to processing the loss of the universal anonymity and of art as its expression. That processing could still be part of anonymity and art, a last time but this time forever.

Boris Groys, *Comrades of Time*, *e-flux journal* #11, December 2009,
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/>

Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber's description of the art world. See their text 'Another Art World, Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity', *e-flux journal* #102
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/102/284624/another-art-world-part-1-art-communism-and-artificial-scarcity/>