

final version

Time, History and Materials

Orpheus Institute seminar, Canterbury Christ Church University, Jan 26th 2019

Can music be contemporary?

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The answer to the question *Can music be contemporary?* at first appears to be quite simple. However, the answer might not be so straightforward. It depends how the term “contemporary” is defined. What I’m referring to in this context follows recent attempts by a number of artists, critics, and philosophers to add criticality to the concept of “contemporary art”. In particular, the question is posed in response to the philosopher Peter Osborne’s claim that “contemporary art is postconceptual art” (2013, 2). Properly speaking, I am asking whether or not “music” can be ontologically conceived as postconceptual art. What is at stake is either the concept of “music” itself, as it has been historically received as one specific art among others; or, as we shall see, a generic system of contemporary art that is exclusionary of certain forms and practices.

In *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Osborne (2013, 2) argues that the phrase “contemporary art” lacks a critical meaning or clear referent, which is problematic. His argument is that contemporary art needs to be rendered “critically intelligible” if we are to gain any critical knowledge of it – that is, in opposing a colloquial definition of contemporary art that refers to the empirical totality of all art that is being produced *now*, which is to some degree an anti-historical notion. (This “rendering critical” is what he sets out to do in the book).

Rather than functioning as a category of historical periodization (as is the case with the academic subject Contemporary History), historical contemporaneity “stops [or at very least, problematizes] telling the sequence of events like the beads on a rosary”, to use

Benjamin's words from his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1968, 263). In his famous essay, of course, Walter Benjamin criticised what he identified as the tendency of historicism to treat the past as a sequence of isolated, homogeneous events. The historical materialist, in contrast, sees history as heterogeneous and malleable, a site where elements of the past and present combine to actively construct a future.

For Osborne and others,¹ the contemporary describes: 1) a subjective mode of being in time through a particular relationship to the present; and 2) a historical present that is the product of a temporally complex historical situation or layering of multiple temporalities and histories. This is what Osborne describes as a "disjunctive unity of present times" (2013, 14). That is, the disjunctive (spatially distributed) times or temporalities that constitute *our* historical present are brought together, or "unified" under the conditions of global capitalism.

As Osborne identifies, within contemporaneity's new temporal logic of (negative) inclusivity, there are no overriding historical narratives, nor aggressive breaks with the past, as if history (and historical time) is a series of isolated and empty events considered at a distance. Rather, the temporalities of the modern and the contemporary coexist, albeit, as Osborne states, "in fiendishly complicated ways." (2014, 23) The present (or the contemporary), in this respect, extends in all directions: it retroactively incorporates the times of the past and is futural in orientation. Again, echoing Benjamin's historical materialism through an acknowledgment of the messianic qualities of the past and its potential for reactivation in the present.

getting to postconceptual art

Before discussing the stakes of trying to consider music from the perspective of a generic category of contemporary art, if indeed it can be, it's worth spending some time to retrace why, for Osborne, contemporary art is "postconceptual" art.

¹ Notably Giorgio Agamben, Juliane Rebentisch, Terry Smith, and Lionel Ruffel.

Postconceptual art is what Osborne claims to be the most reasonable classification when one attempts to grasp contemporary art's critical conceptuality from "the dual standpoint of a historico-philosophical conception of contemporaneity and a rereading of the history of twentieth-century art" (Osborne 2014, 25). It is a historically determined condition of art that stands in opposition to "aesthetics" in any standard philosophical (and consequently, art historical) sense of the term.

Osborne's contention (and philosophical motivation) is that "aesthetics", which has come to be known as *the philosophy of art* since Kant, does not account for the conceptual character of much contemporary art. In this respect, Osborne's "historical ontology of art" (2013) is a counterfactual argument that aims to describe an alternative to the received progression *modern, postmodern, contemporary*, to critically register the impact of the anti-aesthetic practices of the 1960s and 70s. Instead, what is proposed is a progression that reads *formalist modernism, conceptual art, postconceptual art*.

It is worth noting that the negation of the postmodern as an aesthetic (even historical) category is a necessary outcome in a philosophical system of art that does critically register the anti-aesthetic art of the 60s and 70s. In Osborne's (2013, 43) words, the periodisation of the postmodern is misguided because it

fails to endow the complexly interacting set of what were initially conceived as 'post-formalist', anti-Greenbergian artistic strategies of the 1960s with either sufficient conceptual determinacy and distinctness or adequate historical effectivity. In particular, it fails to register both the critical priority of conceptual art within this field and the historical and critical significance of its postconceptual legacy.

This failure to comprehend the postconceptual legacy of conceptual art is ontologically significant for contemporary art and must be reconciled if "contemporary art" is, in fact, to be an epistemologically meaningful referent or art-critical category.

To be brief – necessarily so, as there is much to say about postconceptual art and its relationship to time and history, and I would like to get on to the problems posed by musical material – it is necessary to outline what Osborne identifies as the main factors that determine postconceptual art: 1) Art's necessary conceptuality; 2) Art's ineliminable – but radically insufficient – aesthetic dimension; 3) The critical necessity of an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials; 4) An expansion to infinity of the possible material forms of art; 5) A radically distributive – that is, irreducibly relational – unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time; and 6) A historical malleability of the borders of this unity.²

The first three of these points (which *are* the rereading of the conceptual art project from the standpoint of the present), I would suggest, have been demonstrated in music long before the anti-aesthetic practices of the Conceptual **visual art** of the 60s which emphasised the aesthetic-conceptual dialectic internal to the modern artwork: in the work of the Italian Futurists at the turn of the 20th century, Russolo's 1913 *Art of Noises* for example; serialism and 12-tone, etc. This is demonstrated by the sensuous nature of music's materiality – what is objectively heard and what is subjectively perceived – on the one hand, and a reliance on scores, compositional practice, textual analysis, performance instruction, technical/practical production and dissemination on the other. At this stage it is tempting to consider music as a prime example of the postconceptual condition of art's inescapable conceptual and aesthetic nature. Osborne himself concedes this in a chapter on New Music in his most recent book, *The Postconceptual Condition* (2018). Problematically, however, appealing to the generic category of art, he sets up something of a straw man by conflating medium specific instances of New Music in non-musical spaces with sonic art (Osborne 2018, CITE).

Greuny's contention - "music" is not postconceptual

² Reproduced from Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, 48.

However, in the latter half of Osborne's postconceptual ontology we find a problem for this medium specific category of music (or, for that matter, the possibility of any medium specific form of "contemporary art" that could be deemed critically intelligible in Osborne's sense). I refer to the fourth and fifth points: that postconceptual art withstands "An expansion to infinity of the possible material forms of art" and "A radically distributive – that is, irreducibly relational – unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time." This is what led the philosopher of music, Christian Greuny, to announce that "music doesn't appear to be in a postconceptual state at all" (2017). Under these terms, "music", in its historically determined condition as a specific medium that deals in specific materials and forms, and confronts *musical* problems, cannot be considered "contemporary art". Critically speaking, "music" cannot be contemporary in Osborne's philosophy: postconceptual music is a misnomer.

In rebuttal, Greuny suggests that what Osborne is referring to as "material" is theoretically shallow and essentially reaffirms the point that artists are free to realise their conceptual ideas across any number of media. In any case, he argues, the blurring of medial boundaries in postconceptual artworks is not case-in-point for a generic, singular "art" as such. Nor, even, are shared problems, such as the tension between the aesthetic and conceptual character of all art which lies at the centre of Osborne's postconceptual ontology. While it is accepted that artists can and do work across any number of media (sometimes at the same time), issues posed by each specific medium problematise the notion of a generic artistic material, from which a unified (and postconceptual) "art" could emerge (Greuny 2017, 4).

Greuny's attempt at reconciliation is to substitute "material" for "place",³ both geographical and institutional, nuanced by Umberto Eco's notion of the semiotic *code* and its impact upon the early 20th century trope that language "was a systematically structured whole." (Greuny 2017, 5) The replacement of "material" with "place" stems from his scepticism towards Osborne's claim that what art counts as "contemporary" can be entirely divided between philosophical and empirical questions. In regard to place, Greuny writes: "When related to material, place primarily denotes the situatedness of the artist, which is never universal.... What is possible and necessary at one place might be possible but not convincing in another and impossible in a third." (pp. 4-5) This is the spatial – and perhaps we could say contemporary? – equivalent to what Adorno describes as modernist artistic material's law of movement, according to which "not everything is possible in every age" (Adorno 1949, 31). "Contemporary art" in this respect would never be a vacuous reference to an empirical totality of "new" artworks, because artistic material that is spatially determined is critically contemporary in its relation "to one's place in the artistic field in all its dimensions." (Greuny 2017, 5)

Though Greuny's argument is compelling, Osborne is enough of an Adornian to concede that the artwork is determined by the available material (which is not given *a priori*, but is historically determined).⁴ And, perhaps overlooked by Greuny as there is no reference in his paper, is Osborne's conception of the contemporary as a geopolitical fiction, meaning any designation of what is "contemporary" is relative to one's geographic and institutional location (Osborne 2013, 22). Here they seemingly agree. However, the next step in Greuny's theory of contemporary art diverts from Osborne, and points toward a dynamic system of *the arts* where "musical work" can be rightly called contemporary music.

³ Georgina Born's recent research project is an example of this: *Music, Digitization, Mediation* (2010-2015) examined the wide-ranging changes to music and musical practices afforded by digitization and digital media (historical significance) through emerging scenes and formations of genre across a number of Global locations (spatial significance). Born is also in agreement with Osborne that cultural forms must be considered "within the framework of competing philosophies and politics of time." (Born 2015, 374)

⁴ See the chapter "Art, Society and Aesthetics" in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

Rather than appealing to semiotics per se, Greuny's invocation of Eco's notion of code serves as a structural model for what he terms the "global artistic universe": this is Greuny's answer to the question of what *contemporary art* might be. In semiotics, a code refers to a set of sub-structures within the system of language, *the global semantic universe*, which was once perceived as more or less a wholly unified structure. Eco, on the other hand, sees the ability to isolate specific codes within the language system as proof that the apparent "unified structure" is but a regulative *fiction*, which is necessarily altered every time sub-structures are described or modified, and proves that there is no comprehensive, all-encompassing structure as such (p.5).

Applied to the current situation of the arts, the the global artistic universe is similarly a dynamic yet fictitious structure that, in reality, points less to a unified and universal "art" and towards a complex system of ever-changing and interacting codes, or a system of arts in the plural. As Greuny maintains, "A survey of the world of the arts does not reveal a uniformly ordered structure nor a center with an enormous periphery with frayed edges." (2017, 6) Within this universe, Greuny contends, some boundaries are easily dissolved while others remain hard to cross. What is made clear is that postconceptual work is one of many potential forms of contemporary art.⁵ To accept this, of course, would be to refute Osborne's speculative proposition that "contemporary art is postconceptual art", in which subject and predicate are interchangeable. If postconceptual art does not account for all art that is considered critically contemporary, the proposition enters into a more traditional form of limited movement: the distinction between subject and predicate would therefore not be interchangeable. I.e., postconceptual art *may be* contemporary but *not all* contemporary art would be postconceptual in the way Osborne has conceived it.

⁵ Terry Smith (2015) has also argued that Osborne's philosophy of contemporary art is ambitious, and that postconceptuality does not account for an entire philosophy of art. It is instead an aspect of contemporary art.

My question for Greuny would be one of periodisation, as in: if contemporary art does not refer to an empirical but undoubtedly unquantifiable totality of work made now because of a critical conception of spatially determined artistic material, does “contemporary art” stop being contemporary? This is what Osborne refers to as the “afterlife” (2013, 31) of the work, which must retain a certain historical malleability.

Conclusion

There are clear tensions in these competing theories of contemporary art, and Greuny’s nominalism, his doubt that artistic material can be universal, will never allow for the generic contemporary art Osborne advocates. The two share certain similarities, however, in that the definition of the contemporary itself is spatially determined and varies widely depending on where one’s analysis begins. Both throw up their own problems in the answer to my question, *Can music be contemporary?*, which leads on to my wider PhD project. For Osborne, music as “music” cannot properly adhere to the transmedial and generic character of the postconceptual, leaving the phrase “contemporary music” without any corresponding reality in an art-critical sense.

Within Greuny’s global artistic universe, music can exist as music alongside postconceptual practices and be contemporary given that the material with which artists create is not given a priori, but is continually constructed and spatially determined among an interacting system of equally constructed practices, regulated by the fiction of “art as such”. But does then contemporary music (or dance, or literature) remain contemporary, or does it lose its contemporaneity as it succumbs to the continuum of history? The temporal aspect of the global artistic universe needs to be clarified to become more than the global artistic present. The futural orientation he adopts by appropriating Eco’s dynamic system accounts for some, but, taking inspiration from Osborne, a historical ontology of *the arts* must be developed to explain what happens in

the afterlife of contemporary art. After all, the temporal logic of contemporaneity extends in all directions and excludes none.

I agree with certain aspects of both systems and disagree with others. In reference to Osborne, I think there is something to be rescued in the specific arts (without the Greenbergian connotations of that term) and that music in certain respects foreshadows the postconceptuality he advocates. Greuny seemingly agrees here, but his view of what is contemporary fails to account for any retroactive classification or historical resistance. While this is an ambitious undertaking, my PhD intends to make a modest contribution by developing a historical ontology of music from the perspective of the present hoping to begin working out some of these problems. Perhaps in this way, granted not in Osborne's sense, "music" can be contemporary and at least epistemologically post-conceptual.

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