

Lecture 1 – The Contemporary Condition: Cracks and Crises

Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000) · Lecture transcript · Friday 2nd October 2026

About this transcript

This is a written-up version of Lecture 1, following the slide deck in order. It is based (more or less) on my speaking notes, with the connecting arguments filled in, so it reads as spoken rather than as an essay.

The slide numbers in each section heading match the deck on the module site. Where a clip was shown in the lecture, the transcript marks the point with **[Clip]**. Quotations are kept short: they are signposts to the original texts, which you should read for yourselves rather than cite from this transcript.

The lecture asks one question throughout: *what does it mean to make work in, and about, the present?* Everything else is a route towards answering it, and the seminar questions and essay question at the end pick it up again.

1. What is the contemporary? (slides 1–5)

The image on the opening slide is a still from John Akomfrah's *Listening All Night To the Rain* (2024), made for the British Pavilion at that year's Venice Biennale. Hold on to it. A woman in a red coat stands in a river, surrounded by the remains of a bed and children's bicycles. Domestic objects, a damaged landscape and a body that seems to be waiting are all held in one frame, and several different times sit together in the image. That is roughly what this lecture is about, and we will come back to the image at the end.

Let's start with a deceptively simple question: what is the contemporary? The philosopher Giorgio Agamben says that 'to be contemporary is to perceive the darkness of the present'. The contemporary person, for Agamben, does not turn away from the difficulties of their time. They look into them closely enough to see what is emerging there. Peter Osborne adds that contemporaneity is not just about 'now'. It describes the coexistence of different presents that do not fully fit together. So the contemporary is not one thing. It is layered, uneven and sometimes contradictory. For artists and designers, that means we don't simply live in the contemporary. We shape it, question it and sometimes disrupt it.

What do we mean, then, when we say something is contemporary? And what does, or should, the label 'contemporary art' refer to? The immediate answer is that contemporary art is an art of the present, art that somehow addresses and expresses the present. But what is this present? When did it begin? How far does it extend across the world? Where does it end, and why do these questions matter? There's no time like the present, as the saying goes, but it turns out to be surprisingly hard to say what the present actually is.

The term this module uses for that difficulty is **contemporaneity**. Contemporaneity describes the temporal complexity that follows when different histories meet in the same cultural space. Those histories have developed along different trajectories, at different scales and in different places, and now they share a present. Our present brings together the grand narratives of modernity, the imagined communities of nation-states and many cultural clusters. Global interconnection both challenges and reinforces the hierarchies that modernity built.

This makes the contemporary a double category. It is a *periodising* term: it names our era, the time we live in. It is also an *experiential* term: it names a particular relationship to time and history. For some writers that relationship is an experience of losing history, or of losing a sense of the future. Underlying this whole module is a basic assumption: art can act as an advanced laboratory for investigating how meaning is made, and for understanding wider developments in culture and society.

The module follows three lines of inquiry, set out on slide 5:

1. **A confluence of temporalities**: how pasts, presents and futures meet in the work we make.
2. **The role of contemporary media and computational technologies** in producing the present we live in.
3. **How art and design practice makes epistemic claims**: how creative work produces knowledge, not just objects.

All three run through the three 'zones of crisis' we will reach later: ecological precarity, social fragmentation and global uncertainty.

2. Reading the present through four titles (slides 6–10)

One practical way into the question of the present is to look at how the art world names it. Every two years, the curator of the Venice Biennale chooses a title for the main exhibition. Biennial titles are crude, but they are useful barometers: each is one person's attempt to name the present in a single phrase. Read the last four in sequence and notice how the mood shifts.

2019: *May You Live in Interesting Times* (Ralph Rugoff). The title borrows a supposedly ancient Chinese curse. In fact the curse is invented: there is no Chinese source, and the phrase seems to have circulated through British political speeches in the 1930s. Rugoff chose it knowing this. The title performs its own theme, using a fabricated proverb to name an era of fake news and fabricated truths. The Biennale's then president, Paolo Baratta, suggested that 'interesting times' could mean challenging or even menacing times. He also read it as an invitation to see events in their full complexity, at a moment when oversimplification, driven by conformism or fear, seemed to be winning. Keep the fake proverb in mind, because the problem of manufactured truth returns later in the lecture.

2022: *The Milk of Dreams* (Cecilia Alemani). This edition was postponed by a year because of the pandemic, so the pandemic sits inside this sequence. The title comes from a book of fantastical tales by the Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington, which imagines a world where life is constantly reinvented through imagination and anyone can be transformed into something or someone else. For the first time in the Biennale's history, most of the artists were women and gender-nonconforming. Alemani organised the exhibition around three themes: the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; and the connection between bodies and the Earth. Those three themes map almost exactly onto the three zones of crisis this lecture works through: social fragmentation, global uncertainty and ecological precarity. The zones are not an arbitrary structure. They describe a recognisable shape in current practice.

2024: *Foreigners Everywhere* (Adriano Pedrosa). The Italian title, *Stranieri Ovunque*, comes from a series of neon works by the collective Claire Fontaine, named after a Turin group that campaigned against racism. Pedrosa explained that the phrase works in two directions. Wherever you go, you will meet foreigners; and wherever you are, you are always, deep down, a foreigner yourself. Pedrosa was the first Latin American curator of the main exhibition. He centred self-taught, folk, Indigenous and queer artists, and included a historical section on twentieth-century modernisms from the Global South.

That matters for what follows. It rewrites modernism, the next topic in this lecture, as plural and global rather than one Western story. It is also contemporaneity in Osborne's sense: many times and histories coexisting. Not everyone was persuaded. The 2024 edition opened amid protests and unrest, and some critics left it unsure whether art could still draw people together in a world in crisis.

2026: *In Minor Keys* (Koyo Kouoh). The current Biennale runs until 22 November 2026, so you can still see it this term. Kouoh developed the exhibition from late 2024 until her sudden death in May 2025, and the Biennale chose to realise it as she had planned, with the team she had assembled. Her statement invites visitors to slow down and tune into the frequencies of the minor keys. She described those minor keys as small islands: distinct worlds within oceans, with rich ecosystems and social lives shaped by wider political and ecological forces.

After three titles naming crisis and scale, this one proposes a *method*: slowing down and listening. It is worth carrying forward. When we reach the idea of 'becoming-minoritarian' in the second crisis zone, ask yourself whether Kouoh's 'minor' works in a similar way, as a position and a way of paying attention rather than a matter of numbers. That is a connection for you to test, not a claim about Kouoh's sources.

A question to keep in mind: if you had to title 2026 in one phrase, what would it be?

3. The end of history, and the end of the future? (slides 11–13)

If the present is hard to define, one influential answer in the 1990s was that history itself had ended. In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama argued that the fall of the Soviet Union marked the end of humanity's political and ideological development. Liberal democracy had won. On this view there would still be events, but no new ideological evolution, only the gradual universalisation of Western values. It is worth asking how that claim looks from 2026.

Fukuyama's thesis has a close relative in Margaret Thatcher's slogan 'There is no alternative', often shortened to TINA. The phrase was used to present market capitalism not as a choice but as a fact of nature. Twenty years later, the cultural theorist Mark Fisher turned that slogan into a question in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009). Fisher described a pervasive sense that capitalism is the only viable system, so deeply embedded that it has become hard even to imagine anything else. He borrowed a line attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Notice that capitalist realism is, among other things, a crisis of the *future*. If no alternative can be imagined, the future becomes more of the same. Fisher will return later in the lecture with a phrase from his later book *Ghosts of My Life* (2014): 'the slow cancellation of the future'. That set-up matters for the debate about the post-contemporary.

The slide pairing Fisher with *Postcapitalist Futures* signals that this is not the end of the story. Many artists, designers and theorists are now working precisely on imagining alternatives, which is one way of reading the creative responses to crisis later in the lecture.

Two earlier texts sit behind these debates. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) argued that in modern consumer societies, social life is increasingly mediated by images: we relate to one another through representations rather than direct experience. Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society* (1970) argued that consumption had become a system of signs, in which we buy meanings and social distinctions as much as objects. Both are essential background for anyone working with images, media or design. They describe a world in which the line between reality and representation has started to blur, a theme that becomes much more urgent with digital and synthetic media.

4. From modernism to postmodernism (slides 14–22)

To understand why 'contemporary' became the word for the art of our time, we need a quick tour of the two terms it replaced. This is deliberately a whistle-stop tour: these are signposts, not full histories.

Modernism and modernity. It helps to separate two words. *Modernity* is the social and political context: industrialisation, urbanisation, science, the nation-state, the belief in progress. *Modernism* is the art-historical term for the art and design that tried to come to terms with that experience. Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982) takes its title from Marx and describes modernity as an experience of constant upheaval, at once exhilarating and destabilising. Modernist art and design, broadly up to the 1960s and 1970s, responded with new forms that broke with the past.

Postmodernism and postmodernity. The same distinction applies after modernism. *Postmodernity* names the social condition, and *postmodernism* the cultural one. Is postmodernism a result of modernity, its aftermath, its development or its rejection? There is no settled answer, and that uncertainty is itself typical of the postmodern. On the slide, the contrast is drawn as a set of moods: modernity is associated with progress, optimism, hegemony and utopianism, and postmodernity with exhaustion, pessimism, heterogeneity and dystopianism.

Postmodernism is usually dated from around 1968 and defined as the condition in which established values are rapidly eroded by technological change. It endorses pluralism without resolving it, and learns to live without fixed laws and standards. In culture, postmodern works may look like modernist ones but their purpose is different. Postmodern art does not replace modernism. It constantly refers back to it, by breaking its principles and aesthetics.

The pairing on slide 16 shows this clearly. Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), one of the founding works of modern painting, shows a nude woman picnicking with two clothed men. Mara McAfee's feminist parody (1976) reverses the roles: now the man is nude and the women are clothed. Nothing about the composition is new; what changes is who is looked at and who does the looking. The parody quotes modernism in order to expose the gendered assumptions built into it.

Lyotard and the end of grand narratives. The key theoretical text is Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979; English translation 1984). Lyotard defined the postmodern as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. Grand narratives are the overarching stories that claim universal validity and explain all of human life: progress through science, the emancipation of humanity, the march of reason. They present their political or cultural views as absolute truths beyond criticism, and they have a totalising effect, reducing culture to universal codes. In other words, you have to believe the metanarrative.

Science is a good example. It was once relied upon to produce universal, certain truths. Now it is better understood as producing truths that are useful for specific purposes. And while science gave us medicine, increased food production and global communications, it also gave us pollution and weapons of mass destruction. Lyotard proposed that modern knowledge rests on grand narratives, whereas postmodern knowledge is specific to particular 'language games'. It embraces local, plural and heterogeneous knowledges, what he calls *petits récits*, or little narratives. As Christopher Butler puts it in his short introduction to postmodernism (2002), the basic postmodern attitude is scepticism about any kind of overall, totalising explanation.

Two other books on slide 18 extend this argument into economics and geography: Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). Both read postmodern culture as an expression of changes in capitalism itself.

The grid and the thread. Slide 19 summarises the contrast. Modernism is associated with singularity, grand narratives and essentialism. Postmodernism is associated with plurality, language games and anti-essentialism. The final pair is a visual metaphor: the grid and threads within fabrics. In her essay 'Grids', the art historian Rosalind Krauss argued that the grid declares the modernity of modern art. By discovering the grid, artists such as Mondrian and Malevich placed themselves in the present and declared everything else to be the past.

Feminist art and theory offered an alternative to the increasingly self-referential evolution of modernist 'art about art'. It has been argued that the 1970s might not have been pluralist at all without women artists bringing their experience into the predominantly male fabric of modern art. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker's work on women artists is an essential starting point here. Elsi Giauque's *Spatial Element* (1979), made of linen, silk, wool and metal frames, literally replaces the grid with threads. It belongs to a history of textile art that modernism tended to dismiss as craft.

A single multiplicity. Janet Cardiff's *40-Part Motet* (2001) is a useful image to end this section. Cardiff recorded each of the forty singers in a performance of Thomas Tallis's *Spem in alium* separately, and plays each voice through its own speaker, arranged in an oval. You can stand in the middle and hear the whole choir, or walk up to a single speaker and hear one voice. It is a single multiplicity: a whole that is also made of distinct, audible parts. We will come back to that idea with Deleuze and Guattari's terms 'molar' and 'molecular' in the second crisis zone.

[Clip] *40-Part Motet*.

5. Who speaks for the image? (slides 23–25)

To see how these ideas work in moving image, we turn to John Smith's short film *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976). Smith filmed an ordinary street in Dalston, east London, and laid over it a voice-over that seems to direct everything we see. The narrator tells people to walk, look, cross the road. At first, we believe him. But the commands are slipped in just before the actions they describe, so the voice appears to be in control when it is really only describing. The filmmaker Nicky Hamlyn notes how, for most of the film, the actions are obviously spontaneous, and yet every so often someone moves as if responding to instructions, and the viewer slips back into believing.

[Clip] *The Girl Chewing Gum*.

The most striking thing about the film is the relationship between sound and image: between the voice-over and the action it appears to direct. That immediately raises questions of authorship and authority. There is the authority of the (male) narrator over the people on screen, and the authority of the soundtrack over the image track.

On one level, the film belongs to a modernist tradition in cinema. If modernism means the desire to expose the illusions of mainstream narrative film, so that we relate more critically to what we see and hear, Smith is doing exactly that. This idea of cinematic modernism became central to film studies after Peter Wollen's 1972 essay contrasting the 'cardinal sins' of narrative cinema with the 'cardinal virtues' of counter-cinema, exemplified by Godard after 1968. A key technique is the Brechtian separation of elements, such as Godard's severing of sound from image and voice from body.

Voice-over is a particular case. In documentary and in film noir, very different genres, it does a similar job: it certifies what we see as true (or, in noir, as one man's version of the truth). By exposing the gap between voice and image, Smith opens up another perspective, which we might call postmodern. That doesn't mean 'coming after' modernism. It means drawing out tendencies already present inside modernism. Lyotard put this provocatively: a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism, in this sense, is modernism in its nascent state, and that state is constant.

Lyotard also offers two useful terms: **discourse** and **figure**. Discourse is the realm of language, signs and meaning: what can be read. The figural is what resists being reduced to signs: the sensual, visual excess of an image that language cannot fully capture. Lyotard argues that Western modernity opposed the visible and the readable, turning things into signs to be deciphered and shutting out the figural. The postmodern, by contrast, attends to the figural in the space of representation. In Smith's film, the voice-over is discourse claiming control, but the street keeps exceeding it. People do things the narrator didn't predict, and the image refuses to fully obey. We'll meet a parallel idea later: Deleuze and Guattari's 'molecular', which resists the rigid systems of the 'molar' in much the way the figural resists discourse.

Now jump forward 43 years. In *In Event of Moon Disaster* (2019), the artists Francesca Panetta and Halsey Burgund, working at MIT's Center for Advanced Virtuality, used deepfake video and synthetic speech to show President Nixon delivering a real speech. It was the contingency speech written in 1969 in case the Apollo 11 astronauts died on the Moon. The speech was never needed, and never delivered, until a machine delivered it fifty years later.

Put the two films side by side. In 1976, the voice *appears* to command the image, and the critical work is to expose that authority. In 2019, a synthetic voice *fabricates* history: the voice no longer just certifies the image, it can manufacture the past. We have moved from a modernist critique of authority to a collapse of evidential trust. That shift echoes the fake proverb of the 2019 Biennale, and it sets up the third crisis zone, where artists use images as evidence against power.

A question to take into the seminar: in what ways do contemporary art and design subvert control through the interaction between narrative or discourse, and image or form?

6. After postmodernism: what next? (slides 26–30)

If postmodernism was defined by irony, scepticism and the collapse of grand narratives, what came after it? Since around 2000, critics have proposed a series of answers.

[Clip]

Metamodernism is one of the most widely discussed. The term was popularised by the cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker around 2010, and developed in collections such as *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism* (van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, 2017). David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavrakis's anthology *Supplanting the Postmodern* (2015) gathers many other attempts to name the culture of the early twenty-first century.

Metamodernism describes developments in art, culture and philosophy that come after postmodernism and gesture beyond it. It names a historiographical 'between-ness'. In one influential definition, the metamodern *oscillates* between modernist and postmodernist attitudes: between hope and doubt, sincerity and irony, enthusiasm and knowingness. It doesn't resolve the tension; it moves back and forth within it. Other writers see metamodernism as integrating modern and postmodern codes with premodern ones, including Indigenous and traditional cultural forms.

A related idea is the **New Sincerity**, a trend across music, literary fiction, film, poetry and criticism. It describes works that build on postmodern irony and cynicism but also break away from them, risking direct emotion, earnestness and even sentimentality. The novelist David Foster Wallace is often cited as an early voice, arguing in the 1990s that irony had become exhausted as a critical tool. Think of works that know all the postmodern tricks but still want you to feel something.

[Clip]

These labels are useful, but be wary of them. Each 'post-' or 'meta-' proposes a new period that neatly follows the last. As we'll see shortly, that sense of tidy succession may itself be the problem.

7. Contemporaneity: a condition, not an ism (slides 31–35)

There is another way to answer 'what came after postmodernism?' Instead of proposing another ism, some theorists argue that we now live in a *condition*: contemporaneity.

The collection *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (2008), edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, poses the question directly: in the aftermath of modernity, and with the postmodern passing, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity? This is a question about individual lives and social belonging now, and about how they can be represented, in speech, texts, artworks and exhibitions.

The editors start from the intuition that the time of postmodern doubt about modernity may have run out. That leaves two possibilities. Perhaps the large-scale world-making projects of modernity have returned, in multiple and contradictory forms. Or perhaps overarching frameworks have lost their power altogether, leaving us exposed to the present. Smith argues that the prediction of a global postmodernity replacing modernity never came true. The situations of decolonised Africa, post-Soviet Europe, contemporary China, the Middle East and the United States are better described by their *contemporaneity*: their coexistence and friction in the same present, without any single universal story winning out. Enwezor, in the same book, argues that the whole world now exists in a 'postcolonial constellation'. The cover image, from Zoe Leonard's *Analogue* project, makes the point visually: second-hand clothing bundled for export in Brooklyn and sold on the streets of Uganda, one set of goods moving through very different presents.

This shift from modernity to contemporaneity rests on a realisation that time changes with the events that fill it. Time has its own history and politics; it is constructed and reconstructed, multiple and asymmetrical. Walter Benjamin anticipated this in his theses on the philosophy of history: 'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.' Benjamin's word for that 'now' is *Jetztzeit*, which means something richer than simply 'the present'.

So 'contemporaneity' should not be understood just as a label for a period, and 'the contemporary' is not a historical style. It names the changing temporal quality of the historical present, which is not simply a coming together *in* time, but a coming together *of* times.

We can see this shift in institutions. Over the past few decades, contemporary art has gradually replaced modern art (and, for a while, postmodern art) as the name for the art of our historical present. Many art museums and the new international biennials define themselves as agents of contemporary art rather than modern art.

The research project behind this lecture's framing, led by Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, adds a technological dimension. Following Osborne, they understand contemporaneity as the coming together of different but equally present times, and they see it as a decisive element of globalisation. Their hypothesis is that informational and computational technologies have helped to make this global present possible. Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (2015) gives that idea a shape. Bratton argues that energy grids, cloud computing, mobile software, smart cities, universal addressing systems and robotics are not separate technologies but layers of one accidental megastructure: a planetary-scale computational system he calls the Stack. The present we share is, in part, the present that the Stack synchronises.

This brings us to the slide titled 'Beyond the 'Isms': Why Time No Longer Adds Up'. Modernism, postmodernism and metamodernism give the illusion of an orderly sequence. But we never live in one era cleanly. The contemporary is full of overlapping, contradictory timelines; Peter Osborne calls this the 'disjunctive unity' of contemporaneity. The isms are useful maps, but they don't capture what it feels like to live now.

Keep that warning in mind for the next section, because the newest label, the 'post-contemporary', risks repeating the same move.

8. Post-contemporary? (slides 36–37)

If contemporaneity is about many times coming together in the present, a group of theorists has asked a provocative question: what if the present is no longer where time is organised?

The key text is *The Time Complex. Post-Contemporary* (2016), edited by Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik. Their central claim, put simply, is that the future now happens before the present. Increasingly, the future is calculated in advance and acted on before it arrives.

A loan is refused because of a predicted default. A feed shows you what you are predicted to want. Policing is deployed to where crime is forecast. Derivatives trade on futures that have not happened yet, and AI systems are trained on patterns in order to anticipate what comes next.

If that is right, then an art defined by its presentness, which is what contemporary art names, may be addressing the wrong tense. Malik goes further: in a series of lectures at Artists Space in New York in 2013, he argued that art needs to exit contemporary art altogether.

A question to sit with: where in your daily life has the future already been decided for you?

Two futures. It is worth placing this argument next to Mark Fisher, whom we met earlier. Fisher, borrowing a phrase from the Italian theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, described 'the slow cancellation of the future'. Twenty-first-century culture, he argued, has lost the ability to imagine anything genuinely new, so it recycles the past: nostalgia, retro styles, hauntology. Avanessian and Malik argue almost the opposite. The future isn't missing; it is colonising the present through prediction, pre-emption and the algorithm. Both are diagnoses of a broken relationship with the future, but they break it in opposite directions.

Or is there a third answer? The philosopher Michel Serres described time not as a line but as a crumpled handkerchief: folded, so that points that seem far apart can touch. On that view, the future is neither cancelled nor stolen. Time is folded, and different pasts, presents and futures press up against each other. That also protects us from treating the post-contemporary as simply the next ism after metamodernism, which is exactly the trap the previous section warned about.

Which diagnosis fits your discipline? Filmmakers might recognise Fisher's world of remakes and reboots. Designers and games makers might recognise Avanessian and Malik's world of data-driven, user-predicted products. Most of us probably live in both.

9. Cracks and crises (slides 38–40)

So far we have been talking about time in fairly abstract terms. Now we move to what living in this present actually involves, and the word that keeps coming up is *crisis*.

The philosopher Rick Dolphijn, drawing on Michel Serres, edited a collection called *Michel Serres and the Crises of the Contemporary* (2019). Dolphijn reminds us that crisis is not only a negative or destructive event.

The Greek root, *krisis*, means a moment of judgment and decision. A crisis is the point at which something has to be decided and things can turn in a new direction. Dolphijn draws out several aspects of crisis:

- crisis as a moment of judgment and decision;
- crisis as structural breakdown, revealing the limits of existing systems;
- ecological crisis as the core crisis of our time;
- crisis as a call for new institutions and new ways of thinking;
- crisis as the breakdown of old dualisms, such as nature and culture;
- and crisis as a creative force.

In the contemporary, crises are no longer temporary disruptions; they have become ongoing conditions of life. That produces a pervasive sense of instability and uncertainty. But crises also expose the fragility of current systems, and in doing so they open space for creative and philosophical work that can lead to renewal. Contemporary art and philosophy become key sites for engaging with crisis, and for imagining a future beyond the constraints of the present. For Serres, the ecological crisis in particular calls for a new relationship between humanity and the planet: a recognition of interdependence, moving from exploitation towards stewardship.

Recall Serres' crumpled handkerchief. If time is folded rather than linear, crises are places where the folds become visible.

The cracks of the contemporary. In a 2017 essay, *The Cracks of the Contemporary*, Dolphijn describes cracks as critical points where dominant systems of thought, governance or culture break down. Cracks work in three ways:

- **as moments of revelation**, when the contradictions in the contemporary world become visible and power or ideology fails to maintain full control;
- **as sites of creation**, where new forms of life, thought or art can emerge that are not bound by the structures that governed the past;
- **as spaces for philosophy and art**, which, by engaging with the cracks, create room for new concepts, forms and ideas.

The caption on that slide puts it simply: the cracks let the light in.

Three zones of crisis. In the contemporary, then, we are not just living *after* modernism or postmodernism. We are living *through* a series of overlapping crises. This lecture groups them into three zones:

1. **Ecological precarity:** climate breakdown, extraction and extinction.
2. **Social fragmentation:** identity, inequality and polarisation.
3. **Global uncertainty:** war, migration, digital disorder and AI.

The zones overlap, as the diagram on slide 40 shows. They are not just external conditions; they shape how we make, feel and think as artists and designers. For each zone, we'll look at a theoretical anchor and three or four practitioners whose work opens a crack in it.

10. Crisis Zone 1: ecological precarity (slides 41–45)

Ecological precarity covers the Anthropocene, the idea that human activity is now a geological force; our entanglement with the more-than-human world; and extractivism, the removal of resources from land and communities for profit. Two theoretical anchors help here. Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) asks us not to escape into either despair or technological fixes, but to stay with the difficulty and build new kinships across species. Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) follows the matsutake mushroom through damaged forests and global supply chains to show how life persists in the ruins of capitalism.

Otobong Nkanga: extractivism and material flows. Nkanga's work explores extractivism: how materials are removed from their land and context, often through colonial or capitalist processes. In *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014), a piece of malachite, a copper mineral, appears to float above an open palm. Her installations and performances draw attention to how we relate to landscape, soil and body, and to the invisible economies that give materials their value. This speaks directly to ecological precarity, but also to histories of violence, migration and care. Ask yourself: how do the materials you work with carry histories or ethics? What does it mean to use a material today?

Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg: speculative ecology and synthetic nature. Ginsberg's work explores synthetic biology and speculative futures, imagining ecosystems that don't yet exist. *Pollinator Pathmaker* (2021–ongoing) is a living artwork designed by an artwork algorithm that creates gardens for pollinators rather than for people. It decentres the human point of view and asks what a non-human-centred design would look like.

Ginsberg's practice is not about fixing nature, but about listening to it. It aligns with posthuman ethics and calls for a rewilding of aesthetics. The work is aesthetic and ethical at once, which reminds us that ecological design is also philosophical. What happens when you design *with* rather than *for*?

[Clip] *Pollinator Pathmaker*.

Studio Drift: nature and technology. *Fragile Future* (2007) is a light sculpture made from real dandelion seed heads attached to LED lights and held in bronze frames. The artists describe it as a pact between two opposite evolutions, nature and technology, made in order to survive, and as a utopian vision of the planet's future. The work sets the fragility of the dandelions against the strength of the frames, transience against permanence. It also comments on the fast culture of consumer economies: the fleeting but renewable character of nature against the permanent, wasteful character of human-made waste. Studio Drift's *Materialism* series takes a different route, breaking everyday objects down into blocks of their raw materials to make visible the hidden substances of contemporary life. Practices such as Faber Futures, which uses bacterial pigments to create sustainable textile dyes, sit at the same intersection of ecological thinking, innovation and material critique.

Strategies. Across this zone, three strategies stand out: *situated practice* (working from a specific place, material or community), *systems thinking* (tracing the flows that connect materials, economies and ecologies) and *non-human ethics* (taking the interests of other species seriously).

Reflection: what ecological stakes shape your discipline? How might your tools or media be reimagined as part of a broader planetary ethics?

11. Crisis Zone 2: social fragmentation (slides 46–53)

Social fragmentation covers the afterlives of colonialism, platform capitalism, identity politics and precarity. Two theoretical anchors: Achille Mbembe's idea of *necropolitics*, which describes how power decides who may live and who may be exposed to death; and Sara Ahmed's work on affect and institutional diversity, which shows how institutions can declare a commitment to diversity while leaving their underlying structures unchanged.

Yinka Shonibare: identity and postcolonial hybridity. *The Swing (After Fragonard)* (2001) recreates Jean-Honoré Fragonard's Rococo painting *The Swing* (1767) as a sculpture: a headless mannequin on a swing, kicking off a shoe, dressed in a European period costume made from Dutch wax fabric.

That fabric is often assumed to be authentically African, but its history runs through Dutch manufacturing, Indonesian batik and West African markets. It is a product of colonial trade. By dressing mannequins in Victorian and aristocratic clothing made from this cloth, Shonibare unsettles national narratives and makes postcolonial entanglements visible. The work is playful but sharply critical. It shows how aesthetic pleasure can conceal histories of violence, and how identity is performed, constructed and mythologised through costume, pose and material. Earlier works such as *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1995) use the same strategy. In your own practice: where does identity reside – in materials, gestures or representations?

Postcolonialism. Two foundational texts sit behind this work. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) showed how Western scholarship and art constructed the Orient as Europe's exotic other. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' asked whether the most marginalised people can be heard at all within dominant systems of representation. Okwui Enwezor's 'postcolonial constellation', which we met earlier, extends this to globalisation. It is often said that globalisation has abolished the distance between cultures, leaving no outside vantage point, or that it homogenises culture in the service of advanced capitalism. Enwezor asks what remains of art's critical independence in that situation.

Molar and molecular. To think about resistance within fragmented societies, the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari offer two useful terms from their two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. In physics, molar properties belong to a mass of matter as a whole, and molecular properties to its parts. For Deleuze and Guattari, the *molar* is the realm of coded wholes and fixed identities: it makes things the same, seeks stable equilibrium and favours *being* over *becoming*. The *molar* turns both/and into either/or. Oedipus, phallocentrism and the fixed idea of personhood are molar wholes. The *molecular* is the realm of flows, multiplicities and becoming: the rhizome (a network with no central root), the pack, the singular event. Their political aim is to break down molar aggregates in favour of the molecular, and becoming-other rather than staying the same. Remember Cardiff's *40-Part Motet*: one choir, made of forty audible voices. (For a critique of these concepts from a feminist perspective, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*.)

Becoming-minoritarian. For Deleuze and Guattari, a 'minority' is not a matter of numbers. The 'majority' is a standard: in their words, the average adult, white, rational European man. 'Becoming-minoritarian' is a political action. It challenges domination and the norms of law, and looks for lines of escape from institutions and social structures. It is not a fixed position but a process of changing identities and potential.

Their book on Kafka (1975) develops this through the idea of a 'minor literature': writing that works inside a major language but bends it from within. This is where Koyo Kouoh's *In Minor Keys* is worth recalling. Is the 'minor' in her title also a position and a method, rather than a quantity? That is a connection for you to test.

Simone Leigh: Black feminist sculptural practices. Leigh centres Black women's bodies, care work and historical memory in sculpture and installation. *Brick House* (2019) is a monumental bronze bust of a Black woman whose torso takes the form of a domed building, drawing on architectural forms from across Africa and the diaspora. It merges body, shelter and cultural history. There is a double labour here, material and emotional. The work holds space for experiences that are often marginalised or erased in historical and institutional narratives. Leigh's forms are rooted in care, silence and endurance, and they offer sculptural counter-narratives to dominant history. She helps us rethink social fragmentation not just as breakdown, but as a call for new structures of solidarity and care. What traditions or bodies of knowledge inform your practice, and how are they made visible?

Theaster Gates: social practice and collective repair. In *Dorchester Projects* (2009–ongoing), Gates transformed abandoned buildings on Chicago's South Side into community archives, libraries and cultural spaces, using salvaged materials and participatory programming. The labour is literal and symbolic: laying bricks, restoring record collections, working with local groups. Gates redefines the artist as a facilitator who builds infrastructure for community. His work troubles the boundary between art and life, aesthetics and policy, and treats fragmentation as both a wound and a site of possibility. What would it mean for your practice to be not just expressive, but structural?

Strategies. Across this zone: *embodiment* (working through bodies and lived experience), *relational aesthetics* (treating social relations as the material of the work) and *counter-narratives* (telling the histories that dominant accounts leave out).

Reflection: who is visible, who is erased, and how is meaning made?

12. Crisis Zone 3: global uncertainty (slides 54–61)

Global uncertainty covers data regimes, surveillance capitalism, state violence, disinformation and now AI. The theoretical anchors here are partly artists themselves. Hito Steyerl's essay *In Defense of the Poor Image* (2009) theorises how images circulate online.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's work on data politics shows how algorithms reproduce and amplify existing inequalities. And Forensic Architecture, led by Eyal Weizman, has developed a whole method of investigation through images and space.

Forensic Architecture: image politics and spatial evidence. Forensic Architecture is a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London. It uses spatial analysis, open-source tools and visual evidence to investigate state violence and human rights violations. It works with lawyers, activists and affected communities, turning digital images, architectural data and eyewitness accounts into what Weizman calls evidence at 'the threshold of detectability'. It is a prime example of how creative practice can intervene in global uncertainty: not just by commenting on it, but by producing tools of resistance and truth-telling.

Triple-Chaser (2019) investigated tear-gas grenades manufactured by the Safariland Group and used against civilians. There were not enough photographs of the canisters to train a machine-learning classifier to find them in online footage, so the team built thousands of synthetic images of them. Those images were never meant for human eyes; they exist to teach a future machine to see. That is a **post-contemporary method**: images made for machines rather than viewers, used critically against the systems they describe. It also answers the problem we met with *In Event of Moon Disaster*. When images can be fabricated, artists can build new forms of evidence. How might your discipline offer new modes of evidence, empathy or accountability?

Hito Steyerl: visual noise and digital precarity. Steyerl's films and installations explore how images circulate in digital capitalism. Her term *poor image* describes the low-resolution, endlessly copied and shared media of the internet: degraded in quality, but highly active. Her work critiques how power operates through image regimes of surveillance, propaganda and entertainment, and it is critical while also ironic, performative and layered.

How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File (2013) is a satirical video essay that presents absurd lessons in how to become invisible in a world where almost everything is subject to digital capture. It works as a crack in the contemporary: it reveals how pervasive surveillance is, and how digital technologies are used to control and commodify individuals. It also shows that technology both enforces visibility and produces invisibility, especially for marginalized people. Where do your images go? What platforms carry your work? Could digital degradation become a strategy?

Ai Weiwei: *Sunflower Seeds* (2010). For the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, Ai Weiwei filled the floor with around 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds, each hand-painted by artisans in Jingdezhen, the historic centre of Chinese porcelain. The work engages with mass production and labour politics, and with questions of authenticity, individuality and the collective. Sunflower seeds were a shared everyday snack, and in Mao-era propaganda the people were pictured as sunflowers turning towards the leader as the sun. Visitors were originally invited to walk across the seeds, but the gallery soon closed the surface after concerns about porcelain dust. The work touches on surveillance, censorship and the global art economy, and raises questions about value, voice and dissent. A seed is an everyday object; multiplied by a hundred million and painted by hand, it becomes a question. How do scale, labour and repetition operate politically here?

Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst: *xhairymutantx* (2024). For the 2024 Whitney Biennial, the artists Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst produced a deliberately altered version of Herndon's own image, designed so that future AI models would learn a different 'Holly Herndon'. They treat AI training data as a site of authorship. Rather than make an image for an audience now, they shape what future models will produce. This is art addressed to the future rather than the present: the post-contemporary time complex turned into an artistic strategy. Set it beside Steyerl: one tries to escape machine vision, the other tries to steer it.

Strategies. Across this zone: *evidence* (using images and data to establish what happened), *interruption* (breaking the flow of image regimes) and *disruption* (intervening in the systems themselves).

Reflection: how does global instability shape the visual and material logic of art and design?

13. Listening to the present (slides 62–63)

We end where we began, with John Akomfrah's *Listening All Night To the Rain*. Akomfrah's work is itself a coming-together of times: archive footage, landscapes, voices and music from different moments, held together in one installation. Its title proposes listening as a method. That echoes Koyo Kouoh's invitation to slow down and attend to the minor keys, and Serres' image of time as folded rather than straight. Contemporaneity is not only a condition we are in. It is something creative practice can attend to, and shape.

Let's bring the lecture together. We started with a question: what is the present? We saw how the art world has tried to name it, from 'interesting times' to 'minor keys'. We traced the stories of modernism and postmodernism, and saw why each 'post-' and 'meta-' gives a misleading sense of tidy succession. We met contemporaneity as a coming together of times, and the post-contemporary as a challenge to it: the idea that the future now arrives first. And we looked at how artists and designers open cracks in three overlapping crises: ecological, social and global.

Seminar questions

1. Is your practice working in the present, looking back through the past, or addressing a future that's already been calculated?
2. Is 'contemporary' still an adequate word for what you make?
3. Which crisis zone does your discipline sit in, and where are its cracks?

Essay Question 1: The Contemporary Condition

How do contemporary creative practices articulate or intervene in the complex conditions of late modernity, including ecological precarity, social fragmentation, and global uncertainty? What imaginative or critical strategies do they offer for navigating these crises?

As you start thinking about the essay, use the strategies from each zone as a toolkit: situated practice, systems thinking and non-human ethics; embodiment, relational aesthetics and counter-narratives; evidence, interruption and disruption. The strongest essays will not just describe artworks. They will show how a practice *does* something to the present: reveals a crack, proposes an alternative, or changes how we see and listen.