



John Akomfrah, *Listening All Night To the Rain*, 2024 (film still) © Smoking Dogs Films, courtesy British Council

Lecture 1 - The Contemporary Condition – Cracks and Crises

Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

'to be contemporary is to perceive the darkness of the present'

– Giorgio Agamben

The Contemporary Condition

...there's no time like the **present**.

What do we mean when we say that something is contemporary? And what does — or perhaps should — the designator “contemporary art” refer to?

...an immediate response would be that **contemporary art** is an art of the **present**, that it somehow addresses and **expresses the present**.

But what is this present? what is our, or more objectively, the present?

When did it begin? ...and how far does it extend spatially?

When and where does it end...and why do these questions matter?

Contemporaneity

Contemporaneity refers to the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together in the same cultural space of heterogeneous clusters generated along different historical trajectories, across different scales, and in different localities.

With the overall aim of questioning **the formation of subjectivity in time** and **the concept of temporality** in the world now, it is a basic assumption that art can operate as an advanced laboratory for investigating processes of meaning-making and for understanding wider developments within culture and society.

histories
(past)

a confluence of temporalities

futures

Contemporary Dialogues

Coexistent Perspectives

the role of
contemporary media
and computational technologies

and how art and design practice
makes epistemic claims

three broad lines of inquiry for investigation
(ecological precarity, social fragmentation, and global uncertainty)

Reading the Present through the Past...

Four Venice Biennale exhibitions. 2019-2026. How does the art world name the present?



2019

May You Live in Interesting Times

Ralph Rugoff



2022

The Milk of Dreams

Cecilia Alemani



2024

Foreigners Everywhere

Adriano Pedrosa



2026

In Minor Keys

Koyo Kouoh

2019

May You Live in Interesting Times

Ralph Rugoff

A supposedly ancient Chinese curse that turns out
to be invented.

Crisis, uncertainty, and the era of “fake news.”



2022 | The Milk of Dreams

Cecilia Alemani · after Leonora Carrington's book of fantastical tales



**Bodies and their
metamorphoses**



Social Fragmentation

**Individuals and
technologies**



Global Uncertainty

Bodies and the Earth



Ecological Precarity

Alemani's three themes → this lecture's three crisis zones

Venice Biennale 2024 – everything everywhere all at once



“The expression Stranieri Ovunque - explains Adriano Pedrosa - has several meanings. First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners— they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner.”

The title comes from neon works by Claire Fontaine, after a Turin collective that campaigned against racism.

2026

In Minor Keys

*“shift to a slower gear and tune into the
frequencies of the minor keys”*

Koyo Kouoh (1967–2025)

9 May – 22 November 2026

9.5 — 22.11.26

DI/BY KOYO KOUOH

IN MINOR KEYS

BIENNALE ARTE 2026

**VENEZIA
GIARDINI / ARSENALE**

The End of History and the Last Man

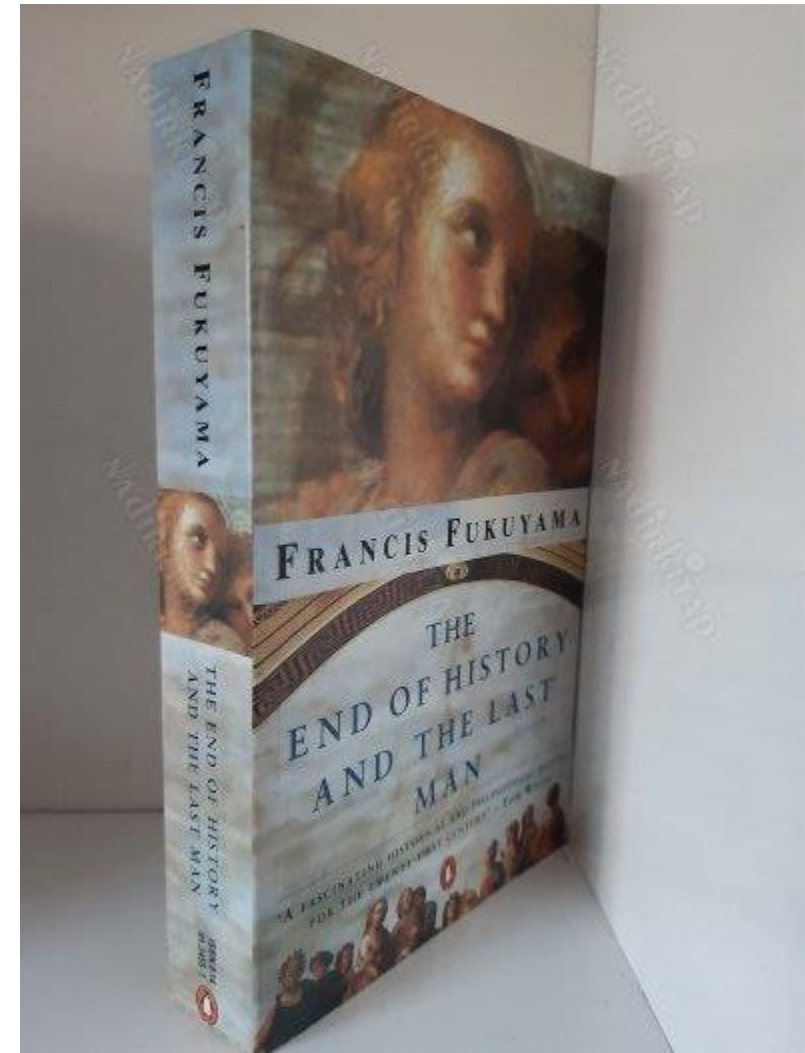
Francis Fukuyama

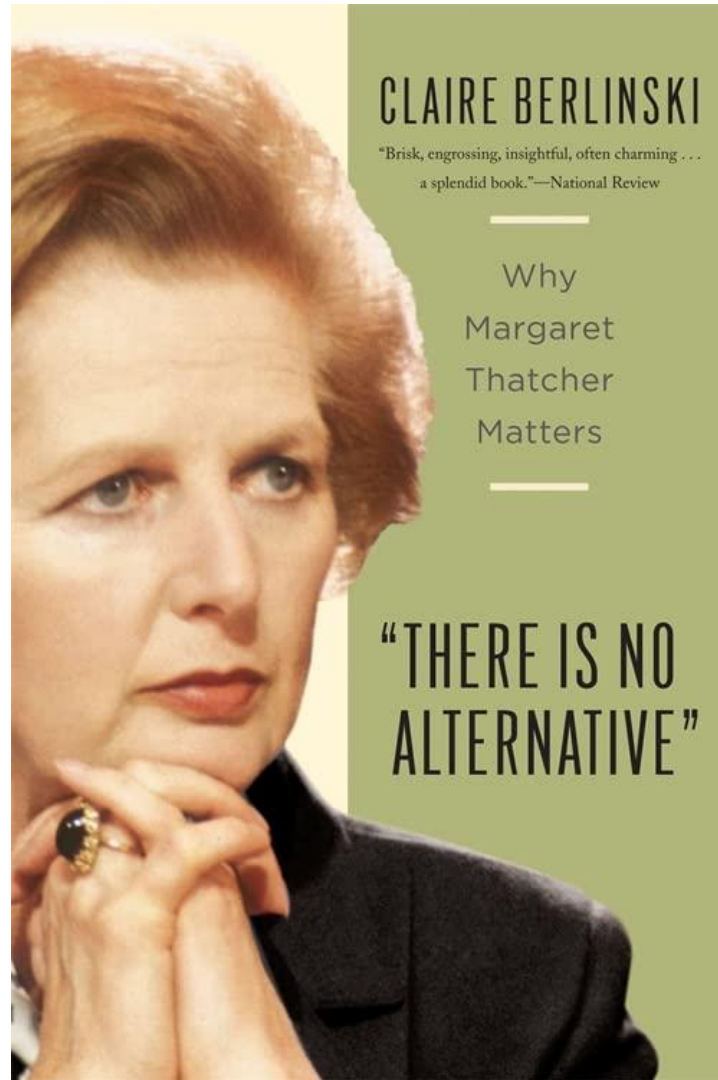
In his 1992 best-selling book *The End of History and the Last Man*, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama argued that **the dominance of liberal democracy** marked the end of humanity's political and ideological development.

End of Ideological Evolution

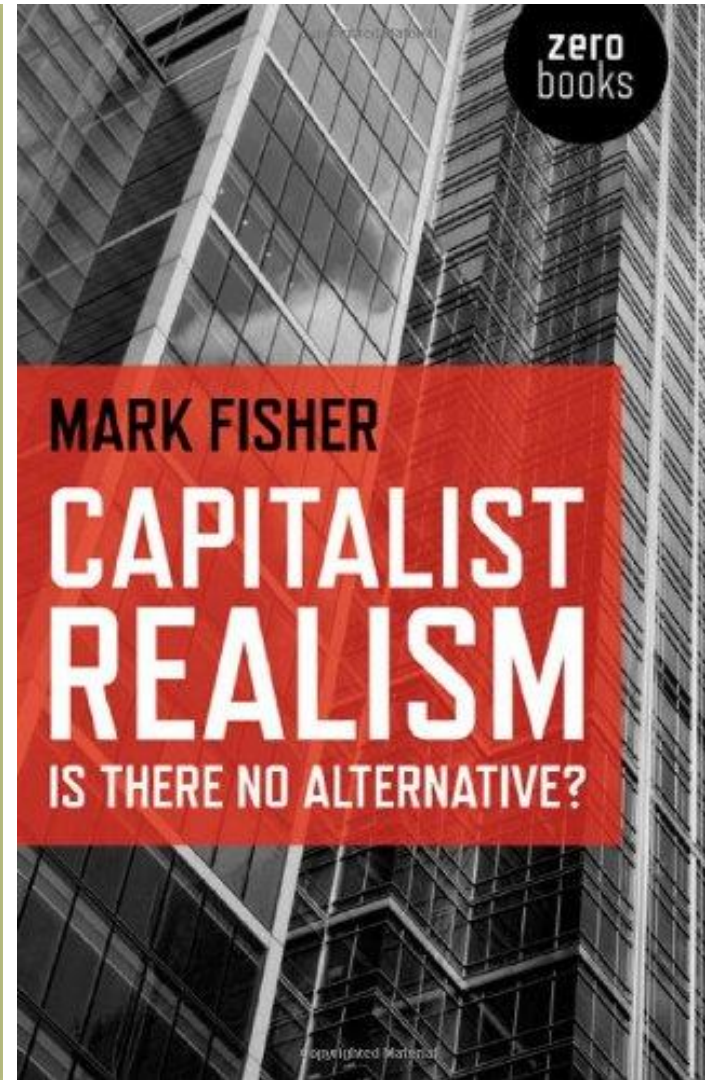
Triumph of Liberal Democracy

The Universalization of Western Values





Postcapitalist Futures



Is there no alternative?

The Society of the Spectacle

Guy
Debord

Critical Editions



The Consumer Society

Myths and Structures

Jean Baudrillard



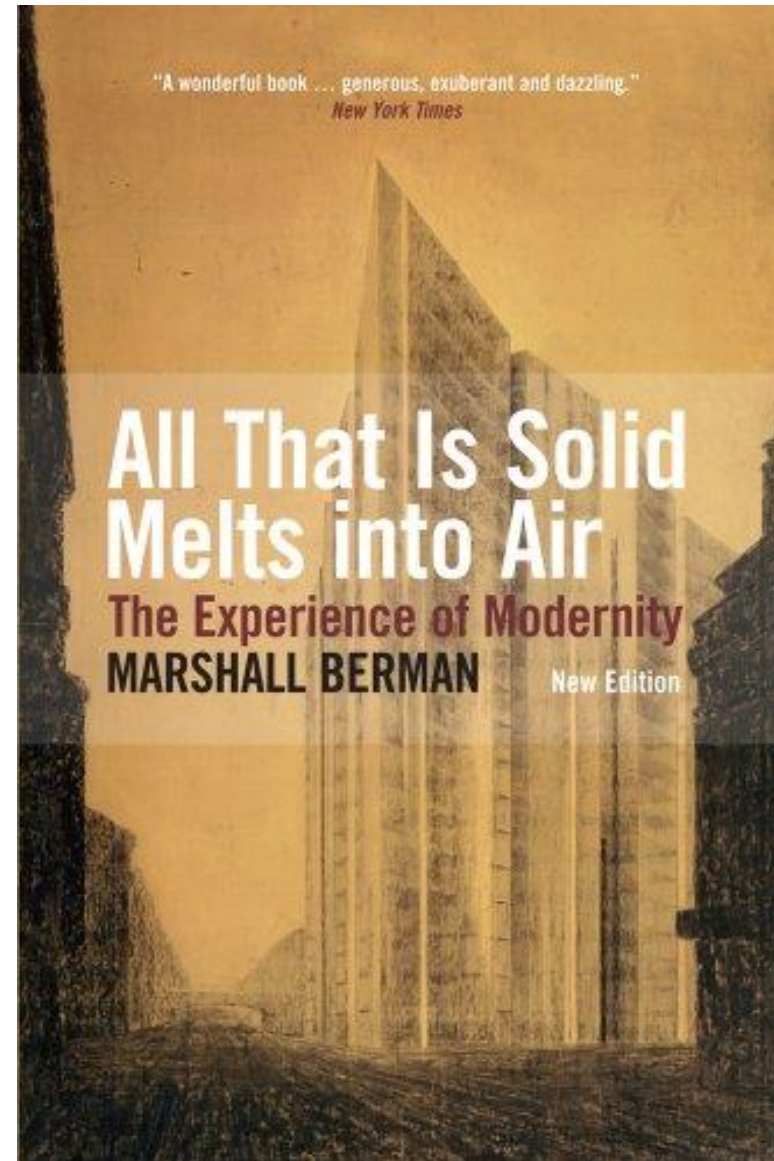
Modernism

Modernism is an art historical term used when people speak about modern art or certain forms of design.

Modernism is, in short, the philosophical idea which frames modern art.

Modernist forms of art and design arose as part of Western societies attempt to come to terms with

Modernity (socio-political context).



Postmodernism

What does the term postmodernism (**social context**) refer to?

- as a result of modernity?
- the aftermath of modernity?
- the development of modernity?
- the rejection of modern

POSTMODERNITY POSTMODERNISM

SOCIAL

CULTURAL

Modernity

- Progress
- Optimism
- Hegemony
- utopianism

Postmodernity

- Exhaustion
- Pessimism
- Heterogeny
- dystopianism

Postmodernism tends to be defined as **the period after modernism** and as the 'condition' whereby established values are rapidly eroded by new technological advances. **Post-modernism endorses pluralism** but is by no means resolved at this time. This in itself is very post-modern: Living without fixed laws and standards.



Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, (1863)

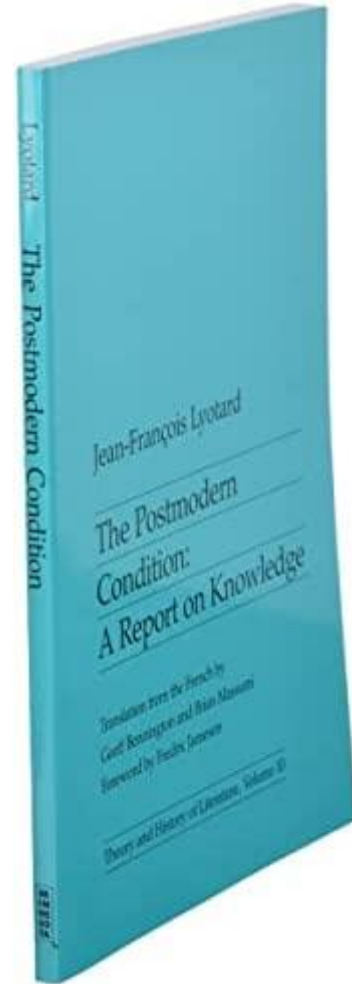


feminist parody of Manet's "*Le Dejeuner sur L'herbe*," Mara McAfee (1976)

The Postmodern Condition A Report on Knowledge

Theoretical interest: The collapse
of the '**grand narrative**'.

Lyotard's philosophy promotes a
heterogeneous approach – diverse in
character or content – an approach
which fosters a multiplicity of possible
perspectives. (**petits récits**)



Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924–1998)

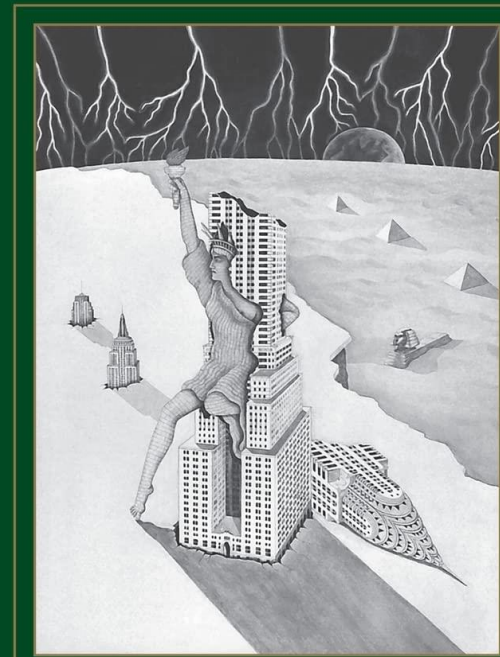
POSTMODERNISM

OR,
THE CULTURAL LOGIC
OF
LATE CAPITALISM



FREDRIC JAMESON

The **CONDITION** of POSTMODERNITY



DAVID HARVEY

modernism

singularity

modern knowledge rests on its
appeal to grand narratives

Essentialism

The Grid

postmodernism

plurality

knowledge is specific to **language-games**

**embraces local, plural and heterogeneous
knowledges.**

Anti-essentialist

Threads within Fabrics

Grids and Threads within Fabrics

between **Modernism**
and **Postmodernism**

**Evolving Narrative
Perspectives**

- Feminist method and theories have instead offered a socially concerned alternative to the increasingly mechanized evolution of art about art.
- The 1970's might not have been **pluralistic** at all if women had not emerged during the decade to introduce **the multicolored threads of female experience into the male fabric of modern art.**



Spatial Element (1979), Elsi Giaouque

Postmodernism, Pluralism and Perspectivism



A Single Multiplicity – Molar/Molecular

40-part Motet (2001), Janet Cardiff

From Control to Subversion: How John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* Disrupts Power Structures

The Girl Chewing Gum (1976)

John Smith

There is ... a fascination with language here, in the way that description of a scene can be changed into a series of commands to the things in that scene by adding certain words to a descriptive sentence. The temporal shift that is required is also achieved by literally moving the words in time, slipping them back so that they occur before, rather than after, the events on the image track they describe. For much of the time the actions being directed are obviously spontaneous, and the commands obviously not commands, but every now and then a person moves into frame and appears to respond in a deliberate manner to directions. At these points the viewer slips involuntarily into credulous mode. (Nicky Hamlyn in *John Smith Film and Video Works 1972–2002*, Bristol 2002, p.46.)



‘exclusion of the visible’ - ‘discourse’ and ‘figure’

Who speaks for the image? 1976 → 2019



John Smith, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)
The voice appears to command the image.



Francesca Panetta & Halsey Burgund, *In Event of Moon Disaster* (2019)
A synthetic voice fabricates history.

From modernist critique of authority → the collapse of evidential trust

In what ways do contemporary art and design subvert control through the interaction between narrative/discourse and image/form?

after postmodernism?

what next?



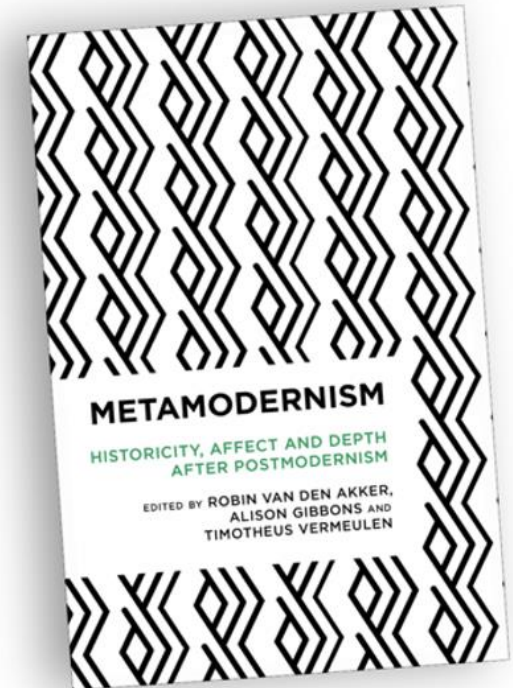
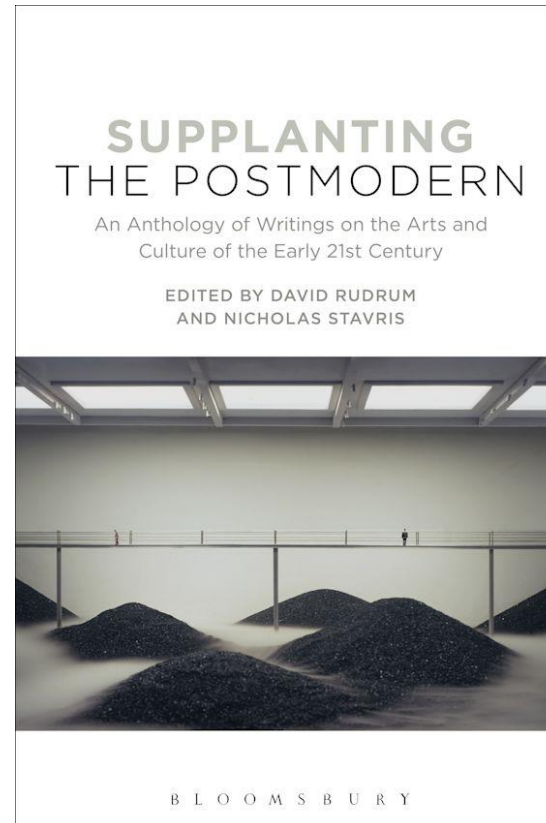
"What passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human [...] is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic."

— David Foster Wallace

metamodernism

Metamodernism refers to a broad range of developments in art, culture, society, philosophy, as a historiographical between-ness that appears after and gestures **beyond postmodernism**, and at the same time attempts to meaningfully render emerging periodized post-postmodernism coherent.

One definition, in the domain of culture, characterizes the metamodern as an oscillation between aspects of both modernism and postmodernism; others see it as an integration of these as well as premodern (indigenous and traditional) cultural codes.



The New Sincerity

post-postmodernism

New Sincerity is a trend in music, aesthetics, literary fiction, film criticism, poetry, literary criticism and philosophy that generally describes creative works that expand upon and break away from concepts of postmodernist irony and cynicism.



ANTINOMIES OF ART AND CULTURE



MODERNITY, POSTMODERNITY, CONTEMPORANEITY

TERRY SMITH, OKWUI ENWEZOR, AND NANCY CONDEE, EDITORS

*In the aftermath of **modernity**, and the passing of the **postmodern**, how are we to know and show what it is to live in **the conditions of contemporaneity**?*

This shift from modernity to an era of contemporaneity is connected to the realisation that time changes with the events that fill it, and that time itself has a history and politics.

Time is constructed and reconstructed, multiple, and asymmetrical.

“History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now .”

Walter Benjamin

The term “**contemporaneity**” should not be understood merely as a periodising category nor “**the contemporary**” as the historical style of such a period. Rather it operates as a designator of the changing temporal quality of the historical present, which is not simply a coming together in time, but of times.

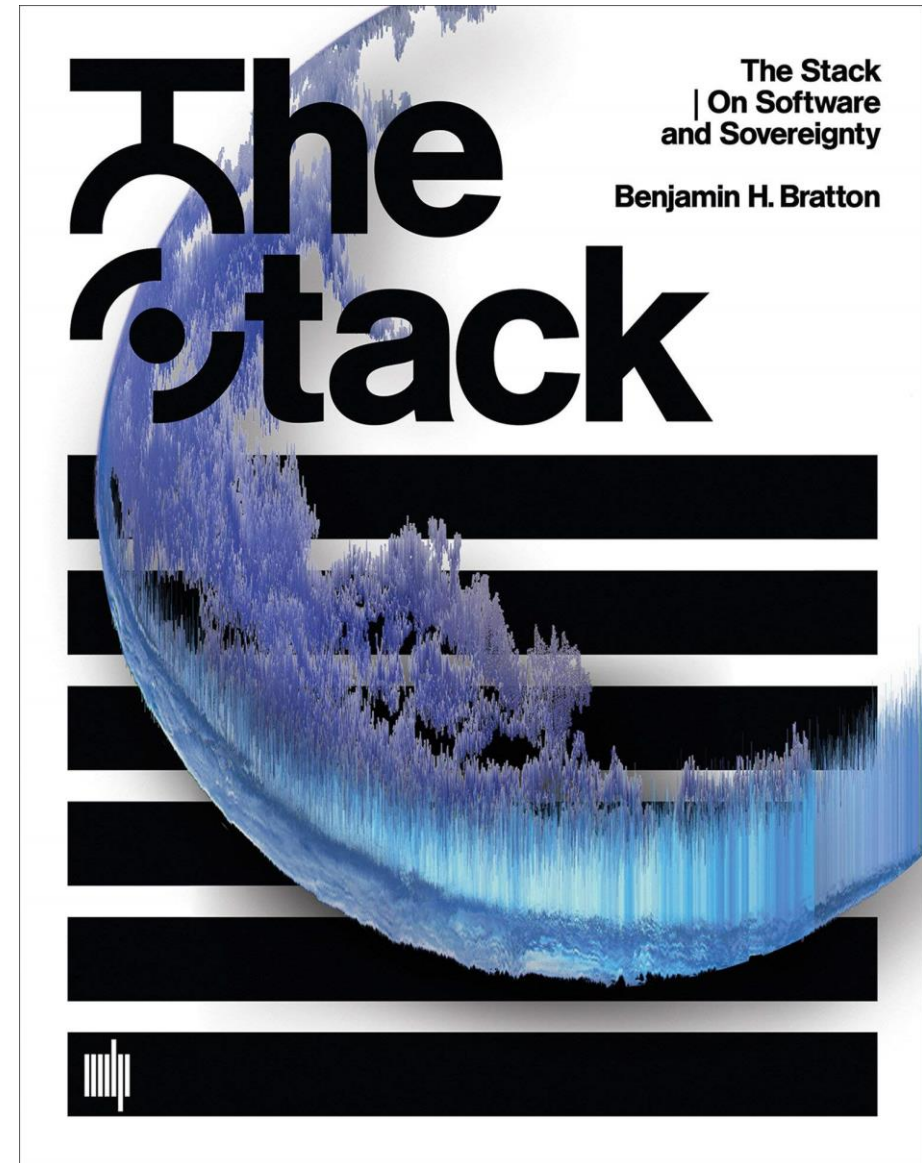
During this period, we have also gradually replaced the term “modern art,” and for a period “postmodern art,” with “contemporary art” as descriptor of the art of our historical present.

This can be detected in the fact that a large number of art museums and newly established international biennials define themselves as institutional agents of “contemporary art” rather than “modern art.”

The Stack

- Our overall hypothesis is thus that contemporaneity —understood with Osborne as the coming together of different, but equally “present” temporalities or “times”— is a decisive element of the globalization of our historical present.
- We propose to investigate this contemporaneity, this temporality of globality itself, with closer attention to the ways in which informational and computational technologies have helped, and still help, to make it possible.

Geoff Cox & Jacob Lund



Cracks and Crises of the Contemporary Condition

Beyond the 'isms': Why Time No Longer Adds Up

“Modernism”, “Postmodernism”, and “Metamodernism” give the illusion of sequential order.

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*).

Post-Contemporary?

The future happens before the present.

after Armen Avanessian & Suhail Malik (eds), *The Time Complex. Post-Contemporary* (2016)

1

From presence to prediction

Time is no longer organised around a lived “now”. Futures are modelled, priced and acted on in advance — and the present is shaped by them.

2

The time complex

Time is produced by systems — markets, networks, algorithms — running faster than human perception. We experience their results, not their workings.

3

The problem for art

If “contemporary art” is an art of the present, it may be addressing the wrong tense. Malik: art needs to exit “contemporary art”.

In practice: derivatives · predictive policing · credit scores · recommendation feeds · AI

Where in your daily life has the future already been decided for you?

Two futures — and what the “post” means

The future cancelled

Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014)

“the slow cancellation of the future”

Nostalgia · hauntology · endless retro

The future pre-empted

Avanessian & Malik (2016)

the future arrives first

Prediction · pre-emption · the algorithm

What does the “post” mean?

After

A new period following the contemporary
— and the risk of yet another ism.

Beyond

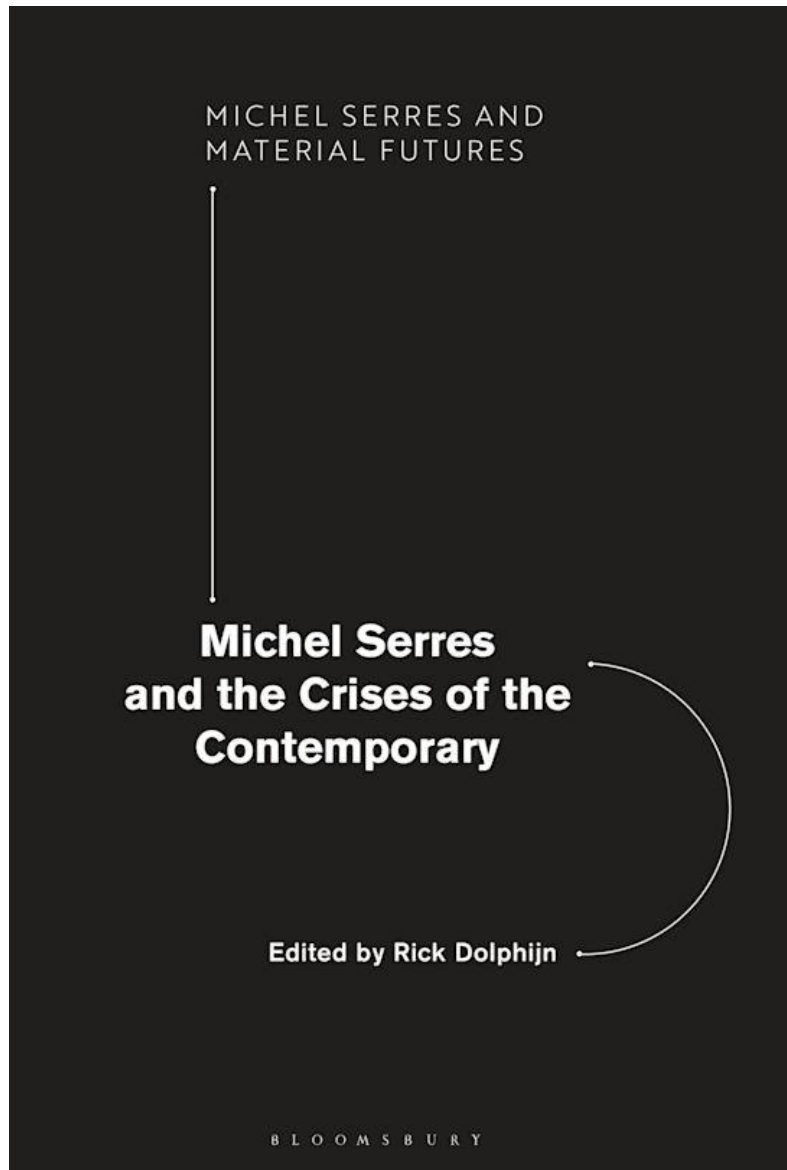
The present displaced as the tense that
organises culture.

Post-dated

Like a cheque: dated in the future, acted
on now. The future decided before it
arrives.

...or neither? *Serres: time as a crumpled handkerchief — folded, so distant points touch.*

Follow the thread: *In Event of Moon Disaster* (a past made by machines) · Ginsberg (gardens designed for future pollinators) · Forensic Architecture (images made for machines) · Herndon & Dryhurst (training future AI)



Crises of the Contemporary Condition

- Rick Dolphijn, draws on **Michel Serres**, to define crisis not merely as a negative or destructive event but as a moment of judgment, decision, and transformation.
- Crises reveal the limitations of existing structures and invite the possibility of new ways of thinking, being, and organizing society. In the contemporary condition, crises—particularly the ecological crisis—are central to understanding the complexities of the present moment.
- They expose the fragility of current systems while also opening up spaces for creative and philosophical engagement that can lead to renewal and transformation.

Key Aspects of Dolphijn's Concept of Crisis:

- Crisis as a Moment of Judgment and Decision
- Crisis as Structural Breakdown
- Ecological Crisis as the Core Crisis
- Crisis as a Call for New Institutions and New Thinking
- Crisis and the Breakdown of Dualisms
- Crisis as a Creative Force



Crisis as a Creative Force

Potential for Renewal: Dolphijn, following Serres, views **crisis not only as a destructive force but also as a creative one**. Crises crack open existing systems and reveal their flaws, but in doing so, they also create space for something new to emerge. Crises are moments of potential where transformation and renewal become possible.

Creative Reconfigurations: In art, philosophy, and social practice, crisis can lead to new forms of expression and new ways of understanding the world. Artists, thinkers, and institutions that engage with crisis creatively are able to reconfigure existing frameworks and offer alternatives to the status quo.

Michel Serres describes time as not a line, but a crumpled handkerchief — folded, tangled, non-linear.



...the cracks let the light in

The Cracks of the Contemporary

Cracks in the contemporary represent critical points of disruption where the dominant systems of thought, governance, or culture break down. These cracks open up possibilities for resistance, creativity, and new ways of thinking, serving as opportunities to challenge and transform the present. They reflect the fragility of the contemporary world and its inherent instability, while also offering a space for reimagining the future.

Cracks as Moments of Revelation: cracks can describe moments when the contradictions or problems within the contemporary world become visible. These cracks are often where power, politics, or ideology fails to fully maintain control, allowing people to see the instability of the current system.

Cracks as Sites of Creation: Through these ruptures, there is the potential for creation. The cracks allow new forms of life, thought, or art to emerge, ones that are not constrained by the same structures that governed the past. The creative potential of the cracks is central to understanding their function in the contemporary.

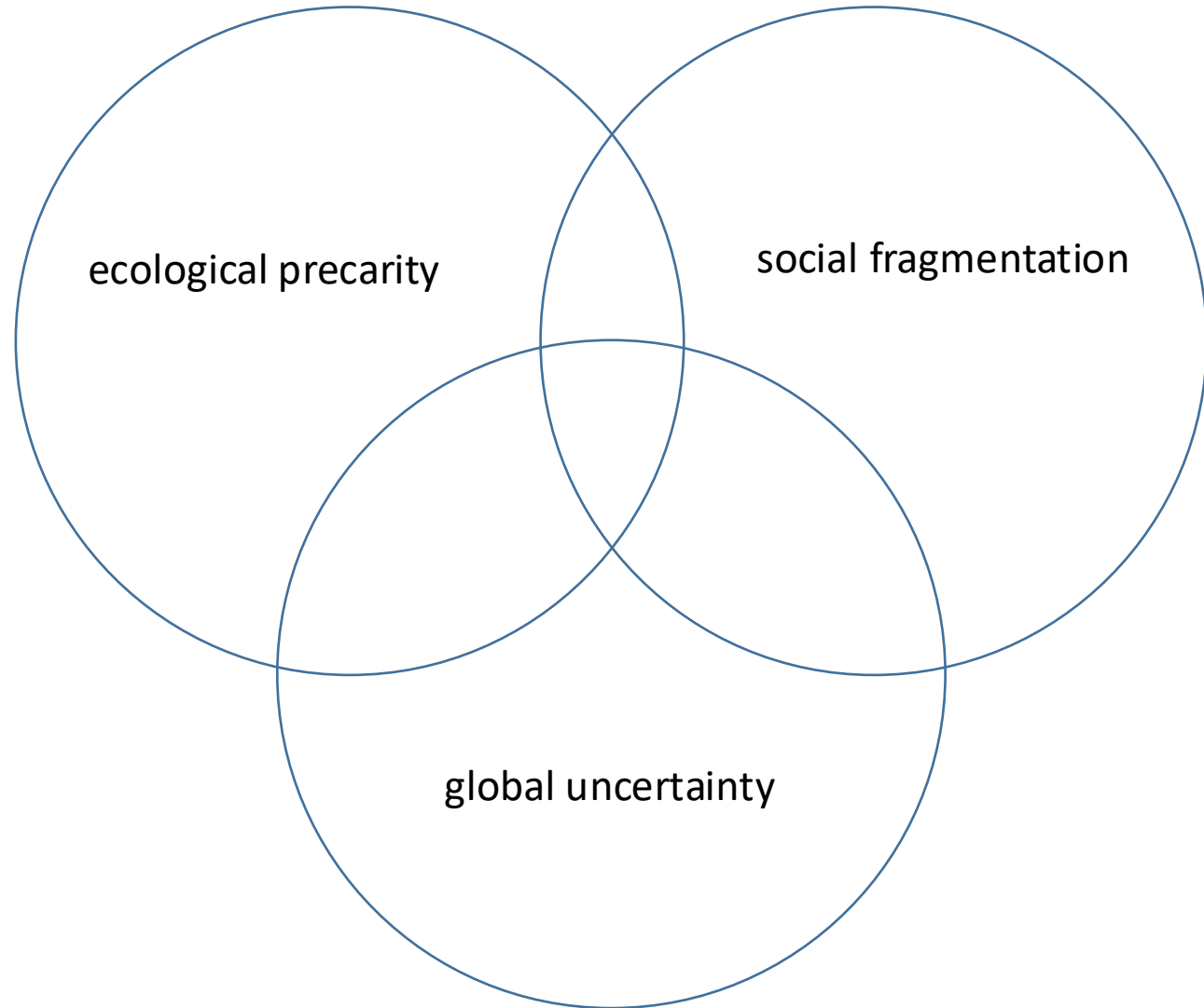
Cracks and Philosophy/Art: By engaging with the cracks, philosophy and art create space for new concepts, forms, and ideas that break away from the constraints of the present.

DOLPHIJN, R. (2017). "The Cracks of the Contemporary". In: Vanina HOFMAN and Pau ALSINA (coords.). "Art and speculative futures". Artnodes. No. 19, pp. 16-20. UOC

The Contemporary Condition – Three Zones of Crisis

- **Ecological Precarity** (climate breakdown, extraction, extinction)
- **Fragmentation** (identity, inequality, polarisation)
- **Global Uncertainty** (war, migration, digital chaos, AI)

In the **contemporary**, we are not just **living after** modernism or postmodernism — we are living **through** a series of overlapping crises.



CRISIS ZONE 1 : ECOLOGICAL PRECARITY

- **What is Ecological Precarity?** (Anthropocene, more-than-human entanglements, extractivism)
 - **Theorist Anchor:** Donna Haraway (*Staying with the Trouble*), Anna Tsing (*Mushroom at the End of the World*)
1. Artist: **Otobong Nkanga** – extractivism, material flows
 2. Artist: **Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg** – speculative ecology, synthetic nature
 3. Artist/Designer: **Studio Drift** – *Fragile Future*, nature and technology
- Strategy Summary: Situated Practice, Systems Thinking, Nonhuman Ethics
 - Reflection Prompt: What ecological stakes shape your discipline?

Artist: **Otobong Nkanga** – extractivism, material flows

Blue, Bling: On Extractivism

Nkanga's work explores extractivism — how materials are removed from their land and context, often through colonial or capitalist processes.

Her installations and performances often draw attention to how we relate to landscape, to soil, to body, and to the invisible economies of value.

This speaks directly to ecological precarity — but also to histories of violence, migration, and care.



Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Galerie In Situ - fabienne leclerc, Paris

Artist: **Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg** – speculative ecology, synthetic nature

***Pollinator Pathmaker* (2021–ongoing)**

Description:

This living artwork is designed by an artwork algorithm to create gardens optimised for pollinators rather than humans. It subverts traditional landscape aesthetics to centre multispecies design.

Justification:

Ginsberg's practice rethinks ecological design by **reconfiguring perspective** — it's not about fixing nature, but listening to it. Her work aligns with posthuman ethics and calls for rewilding aesthetics.



***Pollinator Pathmaker* (2021–ongoing)**

Artist/Designer: Studio Drift – *Fragile Future*, nature and technology

Fragile Future is an installation which brings together art and nature, with a design concept which employs light as a medium. The artists share, “*Fragile Future* fuses nature and technology into a multidisciplinary light sculpture. Aptly named, this work can be seen as a utopian vision of our planet’s future. Two completely opposite evolutions, nature and technology, make a pact to survive...”

The installation merges not only concept but also aesthetics of fragility (of the dandelions) versus strength (of the frames), and transience and permanence. The work signifies the consumerist, ‘fast’ culture of our commercial economies, the ephemeral yet lasting character of nature, contrasted by the permanent and wasteful nature of man-made waste.

They continue to discuss saying, “We synthesise the evolution of nature with the juxtaposed rapid evolution of technical developments in our age. *Fragile Future* is about conveying emotion through the symbolic ingredient of light; light that forms the basis of all life.



Fragile Future (2007) is made using dandelions, LED lights and bronze framing

CRISIS ZONE 2 : SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION

- **What is Social Fragmentation?** (Postcolonialism, platform capitalism, identity politics, precarity)
 - **Theorist Anchor:** Achille Mbembe (*necropolitics*), Sara Ahmed (*affect and institutional diversity*)
1. Artist: **Yinka Shonibare** – identity, postcolonial hybridity
 2. Artist: **Simone Leigh** – Black feminist sculptural practices
 3. Artist/Designer: **Theaster Gates** – social practice and collective repair
- **Strategy Summary: Embodiment, Relational Aesthetics, Counter-narratives**
 - **Reflection Prompt: Who is visible, who is erased, and how is meaning made?**

Artist: Yinka Shonibare – identity, postcolonial hybridity



Yinka Shonibare — *The Swing (After Fragonard)* (2001)

- Shonibare's work uses Dutch wax fabrics — often wrongly associated with “authentic” African identity — to explore colonialism, hybridity, and global circulation.
- By dressing mannequins in Victorian garb made from this cloth, he unsettles national narratives and highlights postcolonial entanglements. The work is playful but sharply critical.
- Shonibare's use of costume, pose, and material speaks to how identity is performed, constructed, and mythologised.

Yinka Shonibare — *The Swing (After Fragonard)* (2001)

Description:

Recreation of the Rococo painting using a headless mannequin in Dutch wax fabric. Evokes colonial histories, trade, and class through playful subversion.

Justification:

Shonibare's work reveals how **aesthetic pleasure can conceal histories of violence**. It's a clear intervention in global art history, challenging ideas of authenticity and identity through materials and performance.

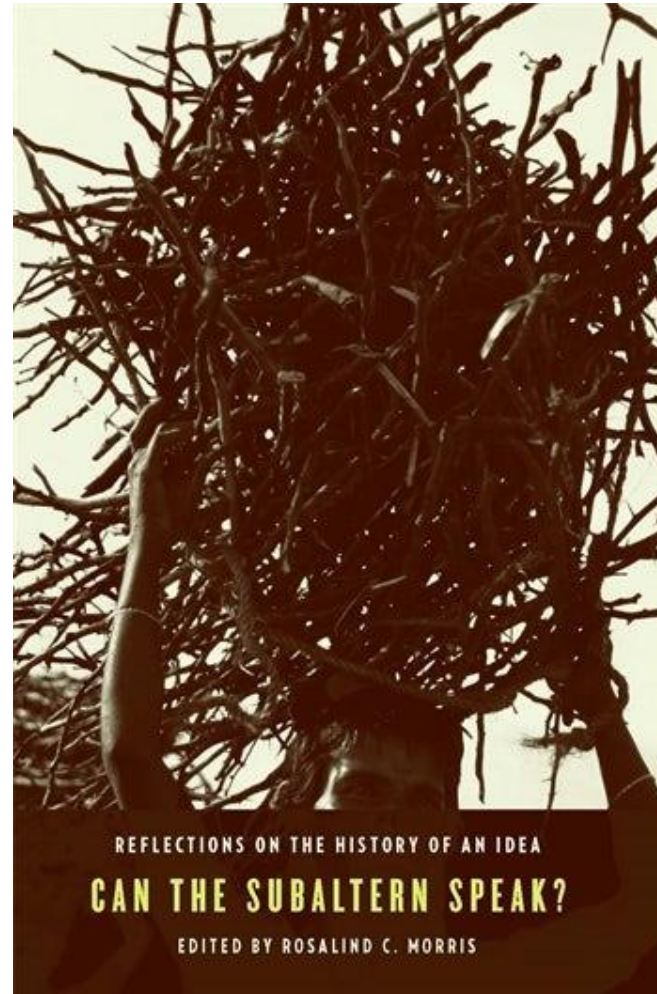
In your own practice: where does identity reside — in materials, gestures, representations?



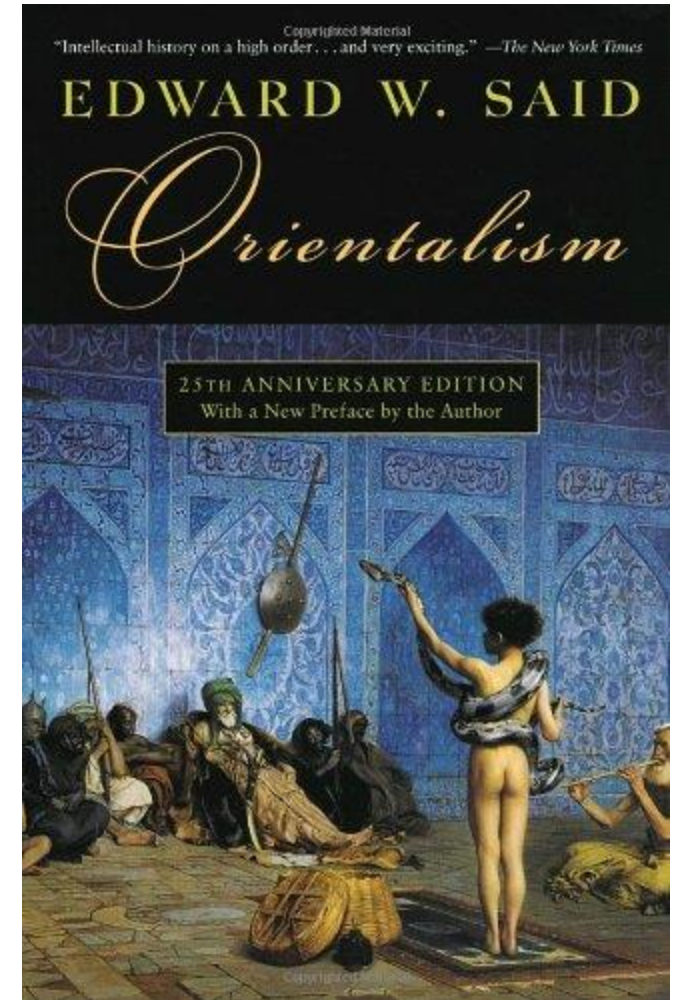
Postcolonialism



How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You? Yinka Shonibare (1995)



Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak



Edward Said

molar / molecular - D&G (Deleuze & Guattari)

In mechanics, **molar** properties are those of a mass of matter, as opposed to its parts -- atoms or **molecules**.

For **Deleuze and Guattari**, molarity is the site of coded wholes. It is a productive process: a making-the-same. Its attractor state is that of stable equilibrium. It is the mode of being, rather than becoming. The principal revolutionary objective of their writing is to break down molar aggregates in favor of molecularity, and the "microphysics of desire." They call for becoming rather than being, for becoming-other rather than being the same. For them, becoming-other is thoroughly political.

The **molar body** is defined by its **self-similarity** across its **variations** , or rather, its invariant self-identity . It seeks to make an **either/or from the both/and**.

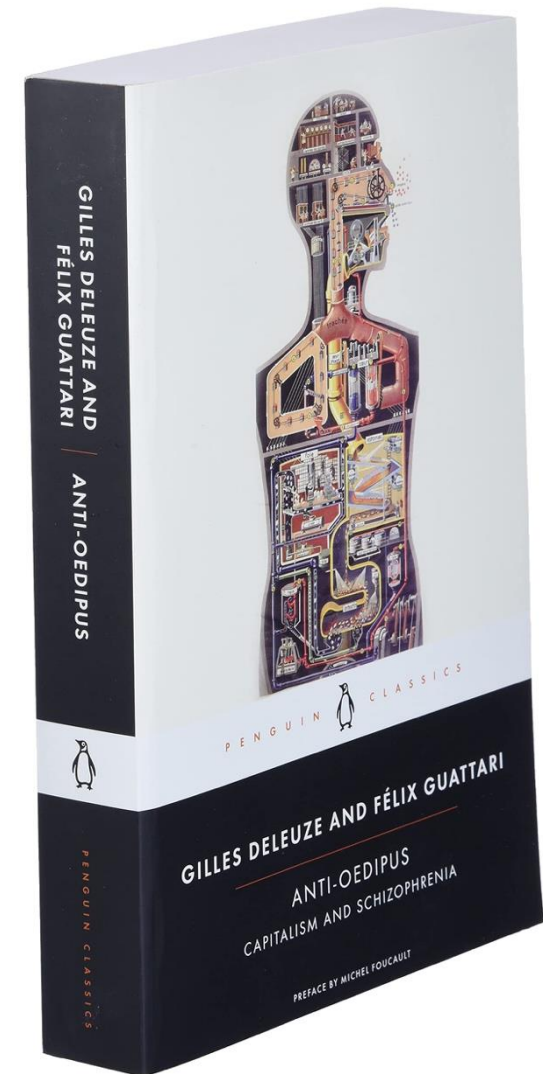
Oedipus, phallocentrism, and personhood are all molar wholes. The **rhizome**, **pack**, **haecceity**, **singularity** , event.. all are molecular.

"Becoming is an equilibrium-seeking system at a crisis point where it suddenly perceives a deterministic constraint, becomes " sensitive" to it, and is catapulted into a highly unstable supermolecular state enveloping a bifurcating future." (Massumi, p.95)

"There is no becoming-man because man is the molar entity par excellence, whereas becomings are molecular...Man constitutes the majority, or rather the standard on which the majority is based: white, male, adult, 'rational,' etc., in short, the average European, the subject of enunciation. " (**A thousand Plateaus**, p 292) (see the critique of this concept in **Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies**, pp 173-183)

Haecceity: the property of being a unique and individual thing.

Rhizome: A **rhizome** is purely a **network of multiplicities** that are not arborescent (tree-like) with properties similar to lattices.



Capitalism and Schizophrenia

Minority and becoming open an opportunity of moving toward the border of the discourse, to protest against the tyranny of language and order, and to dismantle the power. They portray a movement of molecular forces which subverts the violence that exists in the majoritarian social structure.

becoming-minoritarian

Minority, or 'minoritarian' according to Deleuze and Guattari, is a political action. It challenges power and domination; it resists the violent coercion of law and the predominant norms; it deterritorializes itself from majority. Minority does not refer to quantitative. It is a substantial position that lacks power; it looks for **escape-lines** (*ligne de fuite*) from institutions, political order and social structure. Minority is not a static position nor is it a quality or characteristic. It is a process of ever-changing identities, of potentiality, of becoming (*devenir*). Becoming minority, becoming a woman, becoming a little girl, becoming other or becoming an animal – **all represent forms of molecular politics that subvert molar identities and steady positions**. They trigger uncontrollable movements and **detrterritorializations**, and they are characterised by an existence of an abiding change, by continuous metamorphosis.

Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature (1975), *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), and elsewhere. In these texts, they criticize **the concept of "majority"**.

Artist: Simone Leigh – Black feminist sculptural practices

- Leigh centres Black women's bodies, care work, and historical memory through sculpture and installation.
- Her use of ceramics and architectural forms draws from African traditions and diasporic histories.
- There's a double labour here — both material and emotional. The work holds space for experiences that are often marginalised or erased.
- Leigh helps us rethink social fragmentation — not just as breakdown, but as a call for new structures of solidarity and care.

Brick House (2019) Description:

A monumental bronze bust of a Black woman with a domed torso referencing African architectural forms. Merges body, shelter, and cultural history.

Justification:

Leigh's work addresses **the invisibility of Black women** in historical and institutional narratives. Her forms are rooted in **care, silence, and endurance** — offering sculptural counter-narratives to dominant history.



Brick House (2019)

Artist/Designer: Theaster Gates – social practice and collective repair

Theaster Gates — *Dorchester Projects* (2009–ongoing)

Description:

Gates transformed abandoned buildings in Chicago into vibrant community archives, libraries, and cultural spaces using salvaged materials and participatory programming.

Justification:

His work **redefines the artist as facilitator** — building literal and symbolic infrastructures for community. It speaks to fragmentation as both a wound and a site of possibility.

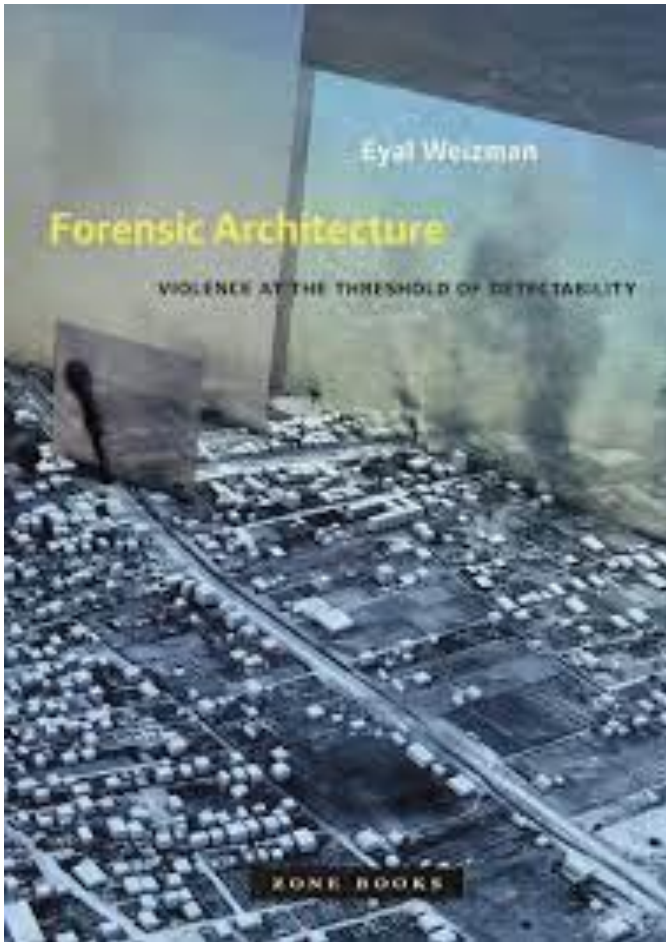


Dorchester Projects (2009–ongoing)

CRISIS ZONE 3: GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY

- **What is Global Uncertainty?** (Data regimes, surveillance capitalism, state violence, disinformation)
 - **Theorist Anchor:** Hito Steyerl (*poor image*), Wendy Chun (data politics), Forensic Architecture
1. Artist: **Forensic Architecture** – image politics, spatial evidence
 2. Artist: **Hito Steyerl** – visual noise, digital precarity
 3. Artist: **Ai Weiwei**– political aesthetics, identity, dissent
 4. Artists: **Holly Herndon & Mat Dryhurst** – AI, training data, addressing the future
- Strategy Summary: Evidence, Interruption, Disruption
 - Reflection Prompt: How does global instability shape the visual and material logics of art/design?

Artist: **Forensic Architecture** – image politics, spatial evidence



Forensic Architecture — *Triple-Chaser* (2019)

Description:

Collaborative investigation into tear gas use by the Safariland Group. Uses synthetic image training and spatial analysis to uncover supply chains and political violence.

Justification:

Forensic Architecture embody **truth as aesthetic practice**. They model how design, media, and spatial intelligence can expose state-corporate complicity under conditions of global opacity and denial.



A post-contemporary method: *images made for machines, not viewers.*

Artist: **Hito Steyerl** – visual noise, digital precarity

Steyerl's films and installations explore how images circulate in digital capitalism.

She coined the term ***poor image*** to describe low-resolution, endlessly shared media — degraded but highly active.

Her work critiques how power operates through image regimes: surveillance, propaganda, entertainment.

Steyerl's practice is deeply critical — but also ironic, performative, and layered.



Creative Cracks in the Crises of the Contemporary Condition

Hito Steyerl – *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013)

Description: In this satirical, multi-layered video, Hito Steyerl addresses the politics of visibility in the digital age, critiquing surveillance technologies, image recognition software, and the overwhelming presence of digital images. The video presents absurd "instructions" on how to become invisible in a world where every aspect of life is subject to digital capture.

The Crack: Steyerl's work creates a crack by revealing the pervasive nature of surveillance and how digital technologies are used to control and commodify individuals. Her work dissects the notion of visibility as power, opening up a space where audiences can question the systems of surveillance capitalism and their impact on privacy, freedom, and agency. Steyerl highlights how technology both enables visibility and enforces invisibility (of marginalized voices), prompting viewers to reconsider their role in the digital world.



Artist: Ai Weiwei – *Sunflower Seeds* (2010)

- Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* is a deeply layered artwork that:
- Engages with **mass production** and **labour politics**
- Raises questions about **authenticity**, **individuality**, and **the collective**
- Touches on themes of **surveillance**, **censorship**, and the **global art economy**
- Visually references **Maoist propaganda** while critiquing systems of control

These themes align with the **Global Uncertainty** particularly:

- Authoritarianism and state power
- Globalisation and economic precarity
- The tension between visibility and voice in contemporary art
- Political aesthetics in relation to collective identity and dissent



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Ai Weiwei – *Sunflower Seeds* (2010)

Description: Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* installation consisted of 100 million hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds spread across the floor of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. The seeds, produced by 1,600 artisans in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen, represented the mass production and uniformity associated with China's industrial complex, while also invoking individual craftsmanship.

The Crack: Ai Weiwei's work creates a **crack** in the contemporary by exposing the contradictions within global capitalism, mass production, and Chinese political power. The seeds symbolize collective labor but also raise questions about individuality, exploitation, and the dehumanizing effects of mass production. By juxtaposing handcrafted seeds with the overwhelming scale of industrial production, the work **opens up a space for critique** of both the Chinese state and global consumer culture.



“The seed is a household object. But multiplied and hand-painted, it becomes a question.”

Holly Herndon & Mat Dryhurst – *xhairymutantx* (2024)

An artist's image, deliberately altered so that future AI models learn a different "Holly Herndon."

Art addressed to the future, not the present.

cf. Steyerl, How Not to Be Seen (2013): escaping machine vision vs. steering it



Whitney Biennial 2024



Listening to the present — seminar

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?*