Contemporary Art and Event-Based Social Theory

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Abstract
In light of the sociological insight that it is left to the art system what counts as art, new artistic forms inevitably alter the prevailing concept of art. The article examines how artistic morphogenesis occurs in a twofold manner in the case of contemporary art: as self-referential process through new form combinatorics or asynchronous artistic operations whose artworks elude the gaze, and as other-referential relation. One of the main features of contemporary art lies in its strong reference to the present, based on a conception of operative time. Time is not understood as a sequence of past, present, future, but rather as the linking of respective presences. Contemporary art shares this understanding of time with event-based social theories. This is analysed as other-referential act of synchronization within the art system with its societal environment. Empirical evidence is provided by select works of art and by self-descriptions of the art system.

Keywords
art, contemporary art, event-based social theory, operative autonomy, self-description, system theory, time

Introduction
‘Contemporary art – precisely because it aims to be contemporary – has abolished time by compressing it into the present, and must be everywhere at once… And this competition, which races across the present moment, is rightly termed “contemporary”.’ These are the words of the Argentinian writer César Aira (2016: 108) who, like many writers before him, writes on painting and the visual arts – not least as a source of ideas, inspiration and methods for his own work. In 1967 he bought Duchamp’s Marchand du sel, and it was this encounter with the artist’s work, and the contemporary art retrospectively influenced by it, that has since provided an incomparable and inexhaustible source of productive
phantasmagoria for his writing. Following a 50-year latency period, Duchamp's conceptual innovation in the visual arts has evidently become a source of inspiration for a form of text art which stands in vibrant relationship with it.

At the same time, Aira analyses contemporary art in his essays. There are precedents and models for this as well; one need only think of Diderot’s Salon reports, and of art criticism by Baudelaire, Gautier or Schlegel. Aira (2016: 102) concludes that the artwork will prevail over its reproduction and documentation. And it will do so by transforming itself. Given that the distinctions between the work, its documentation and its reproduction are becoming ever less significant, they will at some point reach the stage where they become indistinguishable, or more precisely, where they become art without a work. John Cage (1981: 80) relates that Duchamp had already formulated this problem very clearly:

He [Duchamp] says, more or less, that one must strain to reach the impossibility of remembering, even when experience goes from an object to its double. In contemporary civilization, where everything is standardised and everything is repeated, the whole point is to forget in the space between an object and its duplication.

The centrality of the problem only becomes clear in the context of the prohibition on repetition that modern art has imposed upon itself. This does not apply to music, which as a classic time-based art is quite explicitly concerned with repetitions that are always also variations, and with recombinations that are a principle of composition. Duchamp had repeatedly emphasized that, in visual art, repetitions were a trap, and had made this a fundamental principle of his artistic practice. Above all, though, he attacked ‘retinal art’, the term he used to describe artistic forms that addressed activities of the retina, and which were therefore only interested in a painting’s visible aspect. The developmental possibilities for such art are exhausted by the compulsion to repeat, itself the result of constraining artistic form creation, which reduces it to purely visual sense impressions (Duchamp, 1968).

Since the second half of the 20th century, contemporary art has emerged as a recognized artistic form in the field of art, and we can follow Danto’s view (2014: 11) that ‘the distinction between the modern and the contemporary did not become clear until well into the seventies and eighties’. However, at stake here is not a precise periodization of historical divisions in the arts. Rather, this article addresses the question of contemporary art from a distinctive sociological perspective: in light of the sociological insight that it is left to the art system itself to determine what counts as art, we can say that new artistic forms will inevitably alter the prevailing concept of art. This study examines the case of contemporary art to demonstrate the twofold manner in which
artistic morphogenesis takes place within autonomous art: as a self-referential process that produces new artistic forms on the one hand, and as other-referential relation through which art synchronizes itself with its societal environment. The study identifies three mutually reinforcing features as decisive shifts in self-referential relations and their outcome in new artistic forms: firstly, new form combinatorics between visual, sound-based, textual, performative, temporal and spatial elements within artworks – implying a temporalization of the visual arts that both contests and overcomes the classical distinction between temporal and spatial arts; secondly, new ways of authenticating artworks and new varieties of distributed authorships; and thirdly, asynchronous artistic communication whose ‘objects’ elude the gaze.

In the section that follows, my argumentation is based on an operative concept of autonomy, which has been developed from a system-theoretical version of event-based social theory. This implies that art can negate and renew itself only as art, and one way it can do this is to continually reuse the paradoxical figure of the not (yet) art in art.

In a further step, the study concentrates on one neglected, but in my view central, quality of contemporary art, namely its strong reference to the present. As we shall see, this is based on a concept of operative time rather than the historical time of contemporaneity, still less of time as periodization. My theoretical argument is that contemporary art shares this non-linear understanding of time with event-based forms of social theory (especially as articulated by Luhmann, who follows and updates Mead, Whitehead and Husserl). And my conclusion is that this is also a semantic structure within contemporary art. The analysis of works, of self-descriptions of contemporary art and of concepts of event-based social theories shows that they do not understand time as a sequence of past, present and future, but rather as a linking together of respective presents. This concurrence will be analysed as an other-referential act of synchronization between the art system and its societal environment. For this system/environment relation I propose the term ecological synchronization.

It is widely emphasized in the literature that contemporary art is global art (Belting and Buddensieg, 2009; Kester, 2011; Smith, 2009). My final argument is that this requires – quite apart from this ecological synchronization – a globally remote synchronization. As we will see, this is not just a question of institutional distribution or media accessibility but also implies a conceptual shift within artworks. This article proposes a conception of artistic morphogenesis, and it advocates for an understanding of art as an element of society’s self-description in the shape of artistic communication.

**Contemporary Art: Phenomena and Self-Descriptions**

Recent forms of contemporary art, coexistent with other art positions, are throwing off the restrictions of the purely visual and in so doing are
changing the concept of art itself. Works of visual art now understand themselves as part of a process of performance, intervention, documentation and re-enactment that can be broadened by a literary dimension, which does not necessarily define an artwork as something inhering within a particular or unique object. This process is to be understood in terms of the artwork’s multi-dimensional continuum unfolding in time, which includes its creation, conception, production, scripting, documentation and re-use, and in which it becomes irrelevant whether it exists as an object or not. The artwork becomes in essence the account of its own coming into being. Works that are invisible, or which have not been, or may never be realized would be included in this accompanying documentation, which is inspired by literary fiction or sound art. In a context where, at least since the period of modernity at the latest, the fundamental task of art has consisted in creating new artistic forms and values, this contradicts the idea of a finished and completed ‘work’ (for varieties of the unfinished see Genette, 2010; Menger, 2006). As soon as it is completed it would no longer be new but would exist as a fabricated artefact in the mode of the past’s present, and as a museum artefact in the mode of the past.

Unlike Eco’s (1989: 21) concept of the open artwork, which is explicitly open to ‘a virtually unlimited range of possible readings’, the argument being advanced here is not one of reception aesthetics. Rather, a new combination of visual art, fiction and sound can be observed in the art position of contemporary art, reminiscent of what was once the new task of Romantic art criticism. The explicit aim of the early Romantic art critics was to act as poets in bringing out the beauty of works of visual art (Benjamin, 2008). Théophile Gautier called this method ‘transposition artistique’. It consisted in placing alongside the painting a text whose aim was to interpret the meaning of the painting and to articulate this understanding by means of poetic art: ‘Étudier une œuvre, la comprendre, l’exprimer avec les moyens de notre art, voilà que l’a été toujours notre but. Nous aimons à mettre à côté d’un tableau une page où le thème du peintre est repris par l’écrivain’ (1857: 4). It was in the art of Cubism that Gehlen saw the decisive step towards an increasing need among pictures for commentary. According to him, these were the first pictures whose visual sense was no longer accessible through their ‘suchness’, but rather ‘whose meaning had withdrawn into the process of their own coming into being’ (1986: 53ff.). According to this thesis – which can entirely be read as a modification of Romantic art criticism – abstract painting must always be accompanied by an interpretation. The latter stands alongside the picture and can either be determined by reference to the artist’s position, or through criticism, or through academic research aimed at interpreting the work.

Contemporary art adds a new form to this combinatorics by equally combining textual, visual and sound-based artistic elements
into works – even at the cost of suspending its own visibility. Thus Francis Alýs uses fables as inspiration for art videos such as *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002). In works such as *The Rumor* (1997), he uses allegories and rumours to intervene in the imagination of urban contexts without using any physical material or leaving behind any physical traces. Alýs (2011: 66) describes his own artistic method as a continual dance between words and images: it is not the poetic dimension of the fables and narratives that is critical but the act of ‘switching’: a process of medial translation that is incorporated into the very genesis of the work, which combines both textual and visual artistic elements into a community of interfusion and mutual freedom.

How then does the concrete reality of these works, typical for contemporary art, affirm and authenticate them as works of art? The traditional concept of art had spoken of the authenticity of the work, which it derived from the genius of its creator. In the 20th century, it was specifically this concept, grounded in the semantics of genius, that was challenged and declared obsolete by art’s own self-description. The artist as creative demiurge, supremely in control of his own material, could no longer be considered a source of artistic creativity and authenticity. Art surrendered its authorial authentication in a variety of ways. Surrealist and Dadaist concepts spoke of the experience of artistic acts in confrontation with materials, dream worlds, hallucinations, existing and not-yet-existing artistic forms, or forms created by semi-automatic production processes. Duchamp (1975: 140) also proposed the concept of a ‘creative act’, which produced the work and which occurred at a particular moment in time and social development, conceiving it as a relation between what is intentionally not represented, what is unintentionally represented, the viewer, and the values socially established by posterity. Here the artist is merely assigned the role of a medium rather than a sovereign agent. These artistic self-observations have, since the beginning of the 20th century, coalesced into self-descriptions, enabling them to be understood as empirical evidence of the distributed authorship of creative acts as art communication, which includes materials, audiences and time. Kester (2011: ch.1) identifies a growing interest in collaborative or collective approaches and a movement towards participatory, process-based experience as particular varieties of distributed authorship, and as decisive shifts in contemporary art.

Early on, Simmel had treated artworks as instances of cultural objectification which, as specifically effective unities, have ‘no single producer – not one emerging out of a corresponding unity of a mental subject. The elements have composed themselves as if following a logic and form-giving intention inherent to themselves as objective realities, not one which their creators have invested in them’ (Simmel, 1997: 69, emphasis in original). Within a new theoretical framework Luhmann (2000: ch. 5) formulates that artworks programme themselves. Their yardstick, which
is realized in the work, is then a combinatoric of forms that are either appropriate or inappropriate (see Wittgenstein, 1980; Lüthy, 2012). Self-programming means that the artwork constitutes the conditions of its own possibility of decision by means of the event sequences of its actualisation. The limits of what is aesthetically possible are no longer set by historical styles or established genres; rather they are determined by the actual form decisions taken by each individual work. This actualisation occurs in distinction and in relation to what is potentially possible in the medium of art (Luhmann, 1990b, 2000: ch. 3), that is, to the totality of form decisions that can be taken as aesthetic forms in the course of the art system’s autonomization. This structured complexity of the art-medium itself is the result of realized artistic forms.

In what follows, I will show that self-descriptions of the position of contemporary art presuppose these reflections, but that they now seek the source of their authenticity as artworks not only in the social or material dimension but in the dimension of time. They do this by making visible the act of artistic communication itself in its spatio-temporal present. This time is understood in terms of a social process, where every moment is unique and unrepeatable and therefore not reproducible. Thus the reality and uniqueness of a contemporary artwork are no longer authenticated by the artist and his signature but by the irreversibility of the time in which it was created and in which it renews itself from one moment to the next.

Paradigmatic forms of contemporary art would then be characterized by their realization in a particular present, which, as will be shown, they themselves produce as particular presents. Thus contemporary art no longer understands itself as the historic avant-gardes were understood, as the harbinger of a future time. The Futurist, for example, wanted to abandon the status quo, rush ahead of his own time, and celebrate a new beginning (Marinetti, 1909; Ackerman, 1969; Poggi, 2009). However, neither manifestoes, nor the precipitation of ruptures, nor the establishment of new beginnings belong to contemporary art’s semantic repertoire. This focusing on the particular present lends itself to being read in parallel with the findings of social theories, which take as their starting point theoretical assumptions that are radically related to the present as a temporal category. Though they may use different theoretical languages, event-based social theories share the view that all social operations – including, of course, artistic ones – are temporal events, which nevertheless occur exclusively in the present; a point I shall return to later on. 4 The forms of contemporary art exemplify this by describing themselves as projects or art events in order to clearly locate the new relationship between production, performance, exhibition, documentation, reception and realization in the art form’s own time, and by no longer necessarily presenting themselves as visible, enduring and unique ‘objects’. In so doing, contemporary art not only negates the idea of the creator
genius, it also emphatically questions the transhistorical ‘duration’ that is part of the classical ideal of both beauty and eternity (eternity being the concept of time related to beauty). This in turn leads to the question of how the emergence of new artistic forms can be observed.

**Art Is Autonomous in an Operative Sense/Art = Not-(Yet)-Art**

The historical avant-gardes already regarded the artwork as something that called into question the then prevailing concept of art. The constant overstepping of limits is one of the principles of the modern art’s classical avant-gardes. Transgression was a means of introducing new ways of understanding art, whether they were atonal music, abstract painting or art events as new forms of performance. For many, Duchamp’s work opened the door to contemporary morphogenesis, while for others it was an irritant. Robert Smithson, for example, a pioneer of land art and inventor of the non-site, accused Duchamp of having a mechanical conception of art, and criticized – using the pejorative terms typical of conflicting, generational paradigms – precisely those works that other contemporaries felt to be the driving force behind renewal. In the 20th century, sound art, and the new artistic forms that were inspired by it or developed alongside it, involved first of all the introduction of noises, then the interaction of sound and silence, and ultimately led to the use of chance as a compositional principle. Cage (1981: 41) described it as ‘silences as the entirety of unintended sounds. Interchanging sound and silence was to depend on chance.’ And he emphasizes: ‘My music basically consists in bringing into existence what music is when there is not yet any music’ (p. 222). Cage’s graphic notations modify the visual elements of musical notation, which are now explicitly seen as a part of the experience of music that cannot be overlooked, and which introduced a greater degree of freedom into performance – and which also, as graphic collages, are themselves a form of art (see Adorno, 2003a).

Other works, such as those of Alvin Lucier, reconceived architectural space as a musical structure. As a continuum of composition, notation, performance, reception, repetition, documentation and reproduction, music never succumbed to the fiction of being an object, and as a result has developed elements that have today become one of the most significant themes in visual art, which is why one can speak of the ‘musicalisation of visual arts’ (Hennion, 2008). Gerhard Richter’s photo paintings can be placed in a long line of ‘semi-automatic’ artworks in the visual arts, which build on already existing forms as a means of introducing non-artistic elements such as the ‘non-art’ into art. Explicitly rejecting the traditional conventions of visual art, Richter only uses non-artistic source materials as the models for his photographic painting:
'not “art” photographs, but ones taken by lay people or by ordinary newspaper photographers. The subtleties and tricks of the art photographers are easily seen through and then they are boring’ (2009: 21). Nevertheless, his works still remain imprisoned within the visual form; as a visual or a compositional element, non-art subsists within the established artistic forms.

New developments in visual art are now breaking through even these limits and are producing artworks that, as Luhmann (1995a: 98, author’s translation) puts it, ‘do everything they can not to appear as such’. In contrast to those art theoretical positions that interpret this as a dissolution of boundaries, or use a normative concept of autonomy to interpret this as a loss of autonomy, I am taking as my starting point the concept of operative autonomy, as that has been developed by the event-based theory form; this will be dealt with in detail in the next section. At this point, it is worth mentioning an analytical consequence of this theory form that has been developed by systems theory. As temporalized final elements of social systems, events retain their identity as, for example, artistic events, by the manner in which they are connected with other elements and structures of those systems. Thus an event can be identified as artistic by being a moment in a series of artistic acts, and therefore an element in the production of an artistic event: producing, viewing, quoting, (re)staging, documenting, effacing and (re)producing. One of the points of using a non-essentialist theory of the event as a theoretical concept consists precisely in the fact that the same event can also be a political operation, a legal operation, or an economic one (if it is the object of economic transactions, legal judgements or political communication) without challenging its existing artistic reality. It depends on how it is connected to other elements in the present future. Art is then autonomous by virtue of its operating as art. As Luhmann (2000: 134) puts it: ‘modern art is autonomous in an operative sense’.

It follows from this that only art itself can carry out the negation of art. ‘In this case, everything comes down to the question: whether it can actually do it, and do it as art’ (Luhmann, 1995a: 97ff., emphasis in original). The paradoxical formulation art=not-(yet)-art would then be one of the possible forms by which contemporary art can be described. And only art can demonstrate whether it can produce new artistic forms on this basis. Of course, one could argue that every morphogenesis within art begins with this determination art=not-(yet)-art, and then demonstrates whether or not it can develop innovative artistic forms on this basis. For a while these are recognized as binding artistic values, only to be dislodged again by forms of not-yet-art in art, this form that in turn leaves behind traces in the chain of artistic values that contemporary art can then refer to in gestures that either limit or renew them. It is precisely by being vehemently rejected by their contemporaries that innovative artistic forms come retrospectively to be seen to have
renewed art, as in the case of Smithson or Duchamp, and thus to have had their significance confirmed. The example also clearly shows that there is no single manner of introducing non-art into art – whether it be the privileging of chance events, of found objects, of silences, of spatio-temporal indexing, of references to non-artistic forms and their transformation into artistic forms in art – that has paved the way for contemporary art. Even Smithson’s non-sites and earthworks, which are regarded as the principal works of installation art, are influential formulations of negative ideals. They emerge from the fact that, although new artistic forms are both the motor and measure of art, they can only be specifically realized outside established art spaces. Smithson (1996: 156) reveals museums and art exhibitions as ‘cultural prisons’, ‘metaphysical junkyards’ or ‘sites of voids’ that have either been replaced by urban wastelands, deserts and off-spaces or, at the very least, transformed in their conception. Another, radically negative ideal of contemporary art is formulated in works that contain their own capacity for self-destruction. The fact that Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970) would in time become submerged, no longer visible and possibly no longer even traceable, was part of its very intent. Smithson (1996: 147) also emphasizes that art here is ‘no longer to be regarded as an “object”’. He adds, moreover, that the work only reveals itself in the ‘fluctuating resonances’ that its generative power develops and unfolds through both ‘visual and auditory scale’.

Operative autonomy also means that limits on what can and cannot count as art are determined by the art system’s own self-descriptions, which emerge not only diachronically but also synchronically, in multiple forms (Luhmann, 2000: ch. 7). As has been shown, this also means that new artistic forms inevitably alter the prevailing concept of art. In contemporary art, self-description has become both an outcome and an element of productive artistic activity, since art also generates its own theories. The abbreviation ‘beyond aesthetics’ formulates this insight as a narrative of loss in philosophical theories of art. However, Danto (2014) claims that contemporary art only really begins with art’s liberation from the crippling influence of philosophy. According to him, this had been evident since the 1970s, not only in the modern art produced by his contemporaries but also as a position within art that had its own distinctive features. Unlike the position taken by modernism, it could no longer be identified by styles and therefore had put a timely end to the paroxysm of styles of the 1960s. Nor does it any longer follow an historico-philosophical narrative, or indeed any master narrative at all.7 From the perspective of social theory, this liberation can be analysed as a further element of the art system’s operative autonomy. Philosophical aesthetics as a privileged instance of art’s self-description is in fact a brief and merely passing historical peculiarity in this process of differentiation, since the autonomization of art was always connected to the production of knowledge that is immanent to it, whether in the form of treatises

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written by artists and musicians, or literary self-reflections on art and the arts. Under present conditions, it is only art, and not the academic disciplines, that can determine whether or not the art system can draw on those disciplines for its own self-descriptions. What is more, contemporary art no longer recognizes any privileged authority within the art system that can determine its self-description; every authority is just one of many possible ones. Outstanding examples of art’s own study of academia include a number of works drawing on cybernetics (Smithson, 1996; Haacke, 1972, 1975, 2006; see Becker et al., 1975),

engineering knowledge and network theory (Saraceno; see Latour, 2011; Lüthy, 2014), nature and documentability of historical research (Walid Raad’s Atlas Group), forensic evidence (Eyal Weizman’s Forensic Architecture, 2017) as well as borrowings from art-specific realizations of the findings of event-based social theories in contemporary art. My argument is that by referring artistic activities and self-descriptions to academic research and concepts, art synchronizes itself with its social environment and aims to position itself as art within society.

What further interpretation can social theory plausibly offer to analyse the new phenomenon of contemporary art, which since the second half of the 20th century has given rise to new ways of engaging with artistic forms and concepts of art? It is clear from the literature that, since this time, new forms of artistic activity have been spreading which in empirical terms are primarily distinguished by their great variety of phenomena, and by the fact that they can neither be subsumed under categories of style, genre or artistic movement, nor by one particular line of genealogical descent. Instead, they can be described by a multiplicity of coexisting forms of depiction – installations, performances, conceptual art, land art, relational art, appropriation art, art videos, art documentation, sound installations, time sculptures, site- and context-specific interventions, acoustic choreographies, participative forms of performance and opera-exhibitions – which exist alongside each other but can no longer be placed within a sequence of historical narrative or periodization. More than anything, however – and this is something new – this simultaneity of multiple forms of depiction is realized within individual works. Whenever rash conclusions or simplifications are offered, whether from a critical or analytical point of view, counter-arguments quickly emerge. On second glance, Osborne’s (2013) claim that contemporary art is post-conceptual art is just as implausible as Rebentisch’s (2015: 229) claim that the ‘normative meaning’ of contemporary art consists in ‘making the historical present present to us’. For unlike law or politics, art since modernity is quite explicitly determined by transgression, and eludes any normative determination.

In what follows, I will start from the assumption that contemporary art consummates contemporary society. How does it do this as art? Or more precisely: how can the well-attested phenomena of contemporary
art be observed and described as artistic forms of renewal, if one takes as one’s basis the findings and analytical premises of event-based social theories?

**Event-Based Social Theories and Artistic Morphogenesis**

It is one of the premises of event-based theory forms that social processes unfold in time, that they always operate from moment to moment in the present and therefore have no duration; rather, all elements occurring in the social world are in a process of permanent self-renewal. As Abbott (2016: ix) puts it: everything in the social world is ‘in the process of making, remaking, and unmaking itself (and other things), instant by instant’. The same can be said of artistic forms. Art events and artworks, in the sense outlined here – that is, the wider sense that includes conceiving, producing, performing, documentation, reception, evaluation and regenerative re-use – are here regarded as sites of artistic innovation. The institutional or dispositional contexts in which they take place can explicitly act as part of the innovative artistic form, or they can belong to the other ‘things’ that obviously do not remain unchanged.

In epistemic terms, event-based social theories are anti-essentialist theories. They are interested in processes of operative implementation, and do not assume the epistemic objects they study to be pre-existing entities or substances. Rather, they pose the converse question of how these objects establish, stabilize and unmake themselves within time. The key feature of this theory form is that it takes the primacy of temporality as its starting point, that is, that it temporalizes its elements as events – hence event-based theories. Events that disappear as soon as they arise can only emerge at a particular moment in time, namely, in a particular or specious present. However, they can only constitute themselves as events by their relation to other events that they are not; for there are no prior social events outside the realm of the social. Luhmann solves this problem of how – despite having elements that are prone to decay and exactly by having elements that are prone to decay – social systems achieve continuity and self-contact, and he does this by combining Husserl’s theory (1966) of an inner consciousness of time (noesis and noema) with the theory form of self-reference and other-reference (Selbstreferenz and Fremdreferenz). However, he transposes this onto the social and broadens it with the insight that the ‘selves’ in question, which now emerge in the plural as events, processes and systems, always relate to themselves and to others, and are produced within this interplay of references. The concept of self-reference, as Luhmann (1995b: 33) puts it,

designates the unity that an element, a process, or a system is for itself. . . . The concept not only defines, but also contains a significant statement, for it maintains that unity can come about only
through a relational operation, that it must be produced and it does not exist in advance as an individual, a substance, or an idea of its own operation.

In a single act, each of the different forms of self-reference (basal self-reference, processual self-reflexivity, reflection on art as art) produces the concrete present in which it operates. In the case of basal self-reference, it does this by grasping the event at the moment of its disappearance, which becomes a relatum for the relation with the event that follows it, and by so doing constitutes a new actuality, that is, a new present. Reflexive or process-based forms of self-reference can skip over moments in time, choose from potentially possible relata, and in this way also constitute respective presents which do not correspond either to any fixed quantum of time or to any chronological timelines. The precondition for this is a reflexive concept of the present, which modifies Husserl’s distinction between protention and retention, or memory and expectation, and which in Luhmann is described as the present’s future and the present’s past.14

Artistic activities and observations are typically concerned with those forms of self-referentiality that skip over the actual moment in time; they can operate at a delay in time and generate unexpected associations. Possible relata or references can be sought in art itself in the form of already existing or anticipated fictitious artistic forms. The distinction between self-reference and other-reference is internal to art; in Husserl’s terminology, art is always noesis, though it can also be noema. This presupposes time differences, and a certain recursive organization of otherness in time. Thus references to the other can relate to art itself – albeit at another point in time – or to themes and objects that have not been considered art for a long time, as a means of using art to turn them into art, as well as art system environments internal to society; the latter I describe as ecological synchronization.15 Examples of this include Duchamp’s readymades, Cage’s silences, Minimalism’s industrial forms of production, Pop Art’s everyday mass-produced goods, survey methods borrowed from the social sciences, thermodynamic feedback models in Haacke’s real-time art, self-sustaining network models from the field of engineering in Tomas Saraceno’s work, or Tino Seghal’s ‘situations’ from interactive breaching experiments. Transgressive artistic movements work in both directions simultaneously: they change artistic forms within the medium of art and they open up new objects, new fields of knowledge, new social constellations and, in so doing, alter artistic concepts and synchronize art with its societal environment.

We can now identify certain points of focus in transgressive concepts: transgressive forms of the classical avant-garde can be defined either as hypertrophies of self-reference or hypertrophies of other-reference. An example of the former would be modern lyric poetry and literature based
on a formalist concept of art that refers only to itself; a classic example of the latter would be Italian Futurism’s concept of the avant-garde. It too aims at dissenting from art within art, but at the same time it also aims at a radical transgressive departure in the direction of politics, economy, science and the military. This led to literary involvement in war propaganda, and to calls for museums, libraries and academies of every kind to be destroyed. It would be a fundamental misunderstanding of such transgressions – which exist in renewed forms in contemporary art as ‘performances’ (a good example is Christof Schlingensief’s 2000 work Bitte liebt Österreich) – to see them as an actual dissolution of boundaries between art, politics, intimacy, law or, more recently, ‘life’. Art performances are instead characterized precisely by the fact that they are able to stage or otherwise depict any non-fictional reality, be it political, economic, intimate or emotional – but simply as performed, fictional realities in the sense of a ‘doubling of reality’ (see Luhmann, 2000: 142ff.). They are therefore neither political, legal, emotional nor intimate, but rather realities represented in the reality of art, using artistic means and a distance which is characteristic of acting and experiencing in art.

The point of contemporary art’s performances or projects also consists in the fact that the scope of the art event or the demarcation lines between performance and environment are always being challenged anew from moment to moment – in the manner of interaction systems. Often they only become clear retrospectively or are deliberately left undecided. These are the moments of transgression that renew themselves as self-referential artistic forms of depiction: a good example would be Ai WeiWei’s Fairytail of 2007.16 Audiences and socio-spatial sites are part of these performances – as, sometimes, is the artist him- or herself. In sociological terms, this can be interpreted as an experiment in ‘artistic accountability’, in the sense that what happens can be ethno-methodologically recognized, reported on and mutually affirmed as art.17

Seghal’s ‘situations’ contain scripts full of stage instructions that take on the form of encounters leaving behind no physical traces; they are played out in a strictly limited number of re-enactments, with new actors in each current situation. Dissenting art also includes institutional critiques of the monumentalization of artistic works within the art system. Part of the performance of a planned encounter in front of the gates of the Palais de Tokyo included, as an extension of the performance space, two entirely empty floors inside the Palais de Tokyo with their partition walls removed (Tino Seghal, 2016, Carte blanche à Tino Seghal). The documentation or non-documentation of time-based works is something scripted by the works themselves. Performances and ‘situations’ are therefore ephemeral, radically temporalized art forms, which are only partly documented; increasingly they combine elements of sound, dance, choreography, installation, dramaturgical and visual arts (good examples are the opera-performances or opera-exhibitions: see Lina
Lapelyte et al., *Sun & See* (*Marina*), 2019; Anne Imhof, *Angst*, 2016; *Faust*, 2017).

The dimension of time, which our meaning schematizes and makes perceptible and observable by distinguishing between before and after, is based on the actuality of the present, which it situates in the difference between the past and the future. Thus time is not always already present as a process unfolding in the sequence past, present and future (see Ross, 2012), and this linear concept of time is explicitly rejected here. Instead, time in event-based and present-based theories is conceived of as a transition from one present moment to the next, where particular pasts and possible futures open up on the horizon of the present (a formulation of Husserl’s that recurs throughout Luhmann’s work). This implies that each event creates its own future and its own past. Furthermore, in this theory form it is not only events that are transient but also – and this is its controversial epistemic innovation – structures, processes and other social entities, which are strictly temporalized and conceived as existing for particular presents. Even structures exist only in the present: ‘they extend through time only in the temporal horizon of the present, integrating the present’s future with the present’s past’ (Luhmann, 1995b: 293).

The complex layers of Luhmann’s theory cannot be presented even in outline here, and their analytical possibilities can merely be touched upon. However, another consequence of this theory should be considered. The iterative series of events and sequences of events allows us to identify a process of constant self-renewal as a basic mode of the social, and therefore also of contemporary society – and this is a finding that contemporary art explicitly makes part of its subject. It is not change that needs to be explained, but rather how dynamic stabilizations of social entities, form constructions and processual sequences can emerge as the interim results of a constant formation and dissolution in the mode of time. As examples, Abbott mentions individuals, cultural structures, patterns of conflict and other social entities. In systems theory, recursively organized sequences of events and observations, which are themselves present-based operations, contribute to the construction of dissipative structures, forms and media. All this plays out in the mode of time of the particular moment. Here is Luhmann (2013: 262ff.) again:

> time [is] not only thematically but to a far greater degree also operationally involved in the self-description of society and its world. One can no longer really maintain that identities, whether objects or subjects, are present with respect to time. They are rather constructed and reproduced in the midst of time and each at the present moment in order to generate temporal connections for a certain time.

What does this mean for an analysis of artistic events and artistic forms in contemporary art? In all the dimensions mentioned here, such
as conceiving, producing, experiencing, contemplating, documenting and re-enacting, artworks as elements of art communication are also only possible as a sequential series of events. If identities are no longer given in advance, this also applies to artworks. In order for them to function as relata in processual references operating over time in the mode of the present’s past, they need to constitute themselves as artefacts with time-binding (Korzybski, 1958) effects. For event-based and present-based processing also means that – to put it in more traditional terms – objects and subjects do not precede particular presents or instances of art communication but rather emerge in them equiprimordially.

Contemporary art realizes this as a semantic structure and thematizes its own operativity and event-based nature in a variety of different ways. And it does this most pointedly through works that inscribe into themselves their own self-destruction. Self-destruction as the dissolution of the creative process that is immanent to that process – in the sense of Luhmann’s productive nature of decay in the building of complex structures, or Abbott’s ‘unmake’ – thus removes from the experience of art its accompanying mode of perception. While the mode of perception presupposes co-presence, the mode of immanent iconicity, which underlies the experience of art, can operate at a delay in time (Bohn, 2012: 55ff.; for types of immanence of artworks see Genette, 2010: part1). When artworks no longer present themselves as objects, in that they continue to exist as artworks despite decomposing, becoming concealed, ephemeral or withdrawn from view, as several of the examples mentioned here have shown, then the experience of art, despite taking place in the mode of the respective present, is nevertheless asynchronous. The artwork is then not a unique object – something it never really was – but rather something that affirms its own uniqueness, something it traditionally shares with the modern individual by virtue of its event-based actualizations in time which refer to each other. Its singularity now no longer consists in the fact that it deals with a particularity that relates to a generality, as Simmel (2003) emphasizes in his later works, but rather in its unrepeatability.

Remote Synchronization and Self-Renewal

With the coming of modernity, a new temporal semantic was established in place of the religiously interpretable semantic of eternity (Jullien, 2001; Luhmann, 1980, 1990a), which in art corresponded to a concept of absolute and timeless beauty. By contrast, the new semantic takes as its starting point the infinite and interminable succession of the finite. Initially the concept of beauty was broadened by a time-relative concept of the beautiful in the sense of historical time (Baudelaire, 1976: 685) and finally in a successive and temporally relative concept of the beautiful in
the sense of an operative time (Herbart, 1993: 162). But over the course of the 20th century the difference beautiful/ugly lost its significance as a privileged aesthetic criterion. Nevertheless, art had not relegated the works of past periods and styles to the archive, but continued to carry them along from one present to the other within the horizon of possibilities of art events. Thus, contemporary art does not surrender the infinite succession of the finite to the interminable reception of artworks, counting on their potentially interminable readings or changes in the contexts of their reception. Rather, it could be shown that infinite succession and interminability have become features of the artefacts and events of visual art, which now conceives of itself as being event- and time-based, and which finds its aesthetic criterion in an effective combinatorics of form. By taking a far-reaching historical perspective, it renews artistic forms in particular presents and converts combinatorics bringing together different genres into new artistic forms. Form combinatorics therefore prove to be regenerative catalysts for the temporalization of visual art.

Critically rejecting Goodman’s (1976) distinction between auto- graphic art, such as sculpture and painting, and allographic art, such as music, text and the performing arts, Genette has proposed a meticulous classification of artworks’ modes of existence and actualization which more closely resembles a continuum than a dualistic ontology. Of particular interest is his concept of immanence. Music and literature also exist as artworks in the mode of immanence. If we follow Genette’s detailed classification of types of immanence, then we find a plethora of versions and a compelling interpretation of the variety of types of artistic forms, which vary in degrees of differentiation: multiple, plural, material, ideational, fragmentary, unfinished and many others. It aims to show that the work in itself cannot be determined: rather, what can be identified is only forms of actualization that refer to each other. He draws a distinction between this and the transcendental mode, which is not conceivable without the immanent mode, since it is both derived from and related to it (Genette, 2010: part 1). This means that an artwork that has been destroyed can be actualized as a reconstruction, despite the fact that it no longer exists as an artefact – such as in the case of the Temple of Palmyra. Or it can be actualized in derivative, non-material form, albeit related to the mode of immanence. An artwork that has been conceived but not completed – and this is an interesting case – would be just such a derivative, being still related to the mode of immanence by virtue of being unfinished. Thus even the act of intentionally not completing a planned work can be performed in the artwork’s derivative mode; for example, Christo’s project *Over the River* (Reichert and Christo, 2017), which has been planned for over 25 years and had already received a considerable amount of investment. Like explicit silence in music or writing art, this constitutes a remarkable artistic message.
Contemporary society has a need to synchronize each of its subsystems with its societal environment, in what I have called ecological synchronization. This can only be carried out within a particular system, as was demonstrated in the case of contemporary art. This is as true of art as it is of any other field, and presupposes that these subsystems mutually recognize each other to be autonomous. Recreating a subsystem’s indispensable position within society always involves synchronizing anew the standards of one’s own possibilities – what is legally possible in law, what is epistemically possible in (social) sciences, and what is artistically possible in art by artistic means – with the standards of other universes of meaning. Temporality exists both as succession and as simultaneity, and, as its paradigmatic works show, both modes of the temporal are realized in contemporary art.

Nevertheless, alongside its need to synchronize, contemporary society increasingly finds itself exposed to the pressure to synchronize exerted by remote synchronization. Contemporary art does not only react to this at the institutional level – by setting up biennales and museums all over the world and representing world art in the established institutions (see Belting and Buddensieg, 2009; Quemin, 2006) – but also by changing the forms of artworks themselves. By becoming constitutive components of these, documentation and derivative forms of existence do not function as acts that occur subsequently to past events but rather become, by virtue of their asynchronicity, possible structures of the experience of art itself. Even artworks that are site-specific or immobile can be actualized simultaneously in many different places in documentary or derivative form, such as Banksy’s 2018 documentation of the (planned) self-destruction of his work *Shred the Love – The Director’s Cut*, which became not only a part of an existing work but an element in the creation of a new one.\textsuperscript{18} There is no doubt that real-time telecommunication has helped make possible this constantly renewed synchronization of the asynchronous art experience, involving new risks and opportunities; but what guarantees it is the use of the mode of immanence specific to the artwork as a mode of depiction. When actualized by audiences and other artworks, this always refers to the internal structure of the art system and its endless oscillation between self-referentiality and other-referentiality.

This study has shown that artistic morphogenesis uses both self-referentiality, in the form of dissenting acts within the arts, and other-referentiality, in the sense of ecological synchronization with the art system’s own environment, to transform chance events and favourable constellations into new semantic structures, and thereby into new artistic positions. Both take place within the art system and do not interfere with the art system’s autonomy as such.

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**Notes**

1. I use the term ‘self-description’ as follows: systems of meaning produce descriptions of themselves, which are always selective self-abbreviations because of their own inherent referential excess. While they are part of what they describe, they are also prone to enter and affect the very dynamics they describe: that is, to alter the observed realities. For the art system’s self-description see Luhmann (2000: ch. 7).

2. Max Ernst – like other surrealist artists – spoke of his collages and frottages as having emerged from hallucinatory experiences and the unconscious, states of being that rendered impossible any autonomous action or reflection. At the same time, they experimented with a form of ‘automatic visual art’ (see Ubl, 2013: ch. 2).

3. Kester (2011) gives an interesting interpretation of the phenomenon of contemporary art’s turning away from artworks as produced ‘objects’, which he sees as a departure from the poststructuralist text paradigm. He replaces the ‘textual’ mode of production with the mode of ‘work’, which is inspired by ethnomethodological ‘local accomplishments’. The concept of distributed authorship also refers to Hutchins’ (2001) term ‘distributed cognition’.

4. In these theory forms, time is used as a basic theoretical concept. Among them I include the theories of Luhmann, Abbott and Bourdieu. In the rest of my analysis, I concentrate on Luhmann, whose influences are Husserl, Mead and Whitehead, while Abbott’s influences are Mead and Whitehead only. It is not the strikingly different theory architectures that should interest us here – social theory based on systems with temporalized final elements, or theoretical instruments for analysing social processes – but rather the parallels between the findings of different social theories based on a non-linear theory of time.

5. Smithson (1996: 310ff). The entire interview (1973), which was conducted at Smithson’s request, can be read as a devastating critique. He witheringly describes Duchamp’s artistic pose as that of a ‘reactionary priest-aristocrat’.

6. For a view that concurs with this on issues of the autonomy of art, see also Adorno (2003b: 334 ff.), who claims that art has no other alternative than to operate in the aesthetic realm.

7. In a formulation aimed explicitly at Hegel’s vision, Danto describes this as the end of history in terms of ‘Geschichtsphilosophie’, and it is this end that marks the beginning of contemporary art, which for him also bears the title of post-historical art (Danto, 2014: 15 and passim). Hegel, of course, envisaged precisely the opposite: not the liberation of art from its philosophical tutelage but the supersession of art by its transformation into philosophy, in the course of which it would abolish itself.

8. See Bourdieu (1996: spec. 131ff., 166ff., 227ff.); Luhmann (2008: chs 14, 18). Zilsel (1942) spoke of the art-specific knowledge of the intellectual layer of...
artist-engineers, whom he saw as catalysts of the autonomization of modern art.

9. Conversely, well into the 18th century this relationship was based on art’s structural dependency on science, and especially on mathematics and geometry. Thus, for example, music derived its metric from mathematics well into the 18th century, until finally tone came to derive its artistic and musical value from its difference to other tones. Musical tracts and literary texts show that the mathematical system was rejected by musicians and instrument-makers because of what Rousseau called its ‘l’air scientifique’, which inhibited musical temperaments (Møller Sørensen, 2005: 85; Rousseau, 1995).

10. Haacke’s real-time projects (1972: 101): ‘I find making static objects unsatisfying, because static objects stand in essential contrast to the actual process character of the world we experience. . . . More and more, I have given up illusionistic means, and have increasingly resorted to the modes of operation of physical, biological and social systems themselves.’

11. Smith (2009: 256ff.) points out that any style that does persist will do so as an anachronism. Writing from a postcolonial perspective, he emphasizes that contemporary art itself has many ‘histories’ and that ‘periodization may no longer be possible’.

12. Kuhn (1969, 1974) takes a similar view. In a clarification of his concept of the paradigm, he privileged this meaning: scientific innovations would be paradigmatic by virtue of being widely recognized models of problem-solving. For art this means that, as he explicitly points out, if the concept of the paradigm can be useful as a concept of artistic innovation, then these are pictures and artworks that are paradigm and not styles (1969: 412). Bourdieu (2017) modifies Kuhn’s concept of symbolic revolutions to explain the renewal within the field of art through Manet. Heinich (2014) tries to apply the paradigm concept to contemporary art. Menger (2016: 46) is interested in art as creative work, and takes as his starting point the artist’s creative activity as a site of artistic innovation, characterizing its seriousness in terms of persistence and the abundance of failed attempts and discarded alternatives. Quoting Valéry, he emphasizes: ‘Le travail sévère, en littérature . . . est mesuré par le nombre des refus, . . . la quantité des solutions que l’on rejette’.

13. Luhmann (1995b) can be read as a reference work for this paradigm shift in systems theory. Like Luhmann, Abbott refers to Mead and Whitehead, and formulates the position thus: ‘The world of the processual approach is a world of events’ (2016: x). It is interesting to note that event-based theories have formed into an entirely heterogeneous position at virtually the same time as contemporary art. This does not mean that all social theories since the 1970s have privileged the dimension of time and events over the cumberliness of structure. In network theory, structures and social dimensions remain dominant, and in the American context it describes itself as structural sociology.

14. The literature has frequently remarked that this three-part reflexive present was first developed by Saint Augustine.

15. By ‘ecological synchronization’ I mean those reference to a societal environment within the art system which enable the emergence of (semantic)
structures. While the simultaneity is a given before all temporality, systems do in fact produce synchronicity within the factual and social dimension: ‘Während Gleichzeitigkeit aller Zeitlichkeit vorgelagert gegeben ist, ist Synchronisation eine aktuelle Systemleistung in der Sach- und Sozialdimension. [...] Die Strukturen des Systems brauchen und können nicht auf eine voll synchronisierte Welt eingerichtet sein. Sie müssen nur in einem ausreichenden Maße die Möglichkeit bieten, Zufälle in Strukturgewinn zu transformieren (Morphogenese)’ (Luhmann, 1990a: 119, 117).

16. For Fairytale, documenta12 was actually both the institutional site of the performance and a studio where the work was produced. The work understood itself as an art intervention into the world of the ‘1001 Chinese visitors’, Kassel’s urban image, and therefore of the viewer him- or herself. The performance was never completed. The demarcation line between performers and audience and (urban) sites was deliberately suspended since all of these were part of the performance.

17. For accountability see Garfinkel (1967); for visual accountability see Neyland and Coopmans (2014). I expand the concept to an artistic accountability.

18. Banksy’s (2007–18) ‘Shred the Love – Director’s Cut’ can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRLK216hKLQ (2020-11-20).

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