

Contemporaneities

The Entangled Now of Performance

Frederik Le Roy

During the second half of the 20th century, the label ‘contemporary’ has increasingly been used to designate an artistic work’s synchronous relation to the present. Today, contemporaneity has become a prerequisite for artistic production, not only in the visual arts but also the performing arts, time-based arts that are often defined by their ontological foundation in the ‘here and now’. However, ‘contemporaneity’ as a notion and as a condition of performance is far from unproblematic or neutral and is in urgent need to be explored further. This collection of texts written by performance theorists and theatre makers examines ways in which performance and the performing arts today reflect on contemporaneity. What does the ‘contemporary’ in ‘contemporary theatre’ or ‘contemporary dance’ stand for? How do these in turn relate to the general notion of ‘contemporary art’? How do the performing arts intervene in the world they are contemporary with? And what kind of contemporaneity is produced by the performing arts? What are some of the philosophical, temporal and political assumptions underpinning the contemporaneity of performance and how do the performing arts negotiate, critique and transform these assumptions?

The rise of the contemporary is demonstrated clearly by the proliferation, since the 1980s, of museums, galleries and art centres dedicated to contemporary art. Major museums that have devoted their collections to the eponymous ‘modern art’ also started to move along with the constantly changing artistic production, taking stock of what is happening in the world of contemporary art in (often temporary) exhibitions. In case of the Tate Gallery of Modern Art in London, the ‘contemporary’ model of the temporary exhibition even became the standard format to display not only contemporary art but also its collection as a whole.¹ A parallel boom has occurred in academia, where contemporary art has increasingly and firmly been institutionalized as a field of study in art history, cementing the role of the ‘contemporary’ as a discursive category in and of itself (Grant Kester in Foster et al. 7; Bishop 16).² The rise of the contemporary, however, is not limited to the art world or to art studies . Increasingly, contemporaneity gains currency as a conceptual designator for the present time³ – a welcome alternative to notions like ‘modernity’ or ‘postmodernity’ to label

our present-day era (Wegner). Our current “regime of historicity,” to use a phrase introduced by François Hartog, is increasingly ‘contemporary’. While this turn toward the contemporary reverberates throughout academia, artistic practices play a key role in capturing and foregrounding the current historical consciousness. To quote Boris Groys: “the term ‘contemporary art’ does not simply designate art that is produced in our time. Rather, today’s contemporary art demonstrates the way in which *the contemporary as such shows itself*” (71, my italics).⁴ Art not only represents the present-day but also makes apparent, either visually or through experience, what contemporaneity, as a distinctive awareness of the present, is.

The flurry of attention to the contemporary has been limited primarily to the fields of aesthetics and art history that consider the visual arts. Only recently has this debate been carried over to the field of the contemporary performing arts.⁵ The symposium *Contemporaneities. The Entangled Now of Performance* (March 2016) where the texts in this issue originated and this collection of texts itself, is aimed at further opening up this discussion in theatre and performance studies. This all the more necessary, because the visual art’s institutional desire to trace the now is expressed in no important part by the recent interest – if not hype – to document and ‘collect’ ephemeral works of live art, effectively undercutting, at least partly, the object-centred logic of the museum by opening up those spaces that were long dedicated primarily to permanence and materiality to impermanent and immaterial works of art like performance art, theatre and choreography.⁶

Moreover, the performing arts, with their ability to experiment with ‘entangled’, ‘crossed’ or ‘disruptive’ temporalities, seem particularly apt to reflect on the current regime of historicity. The artistic moment of performance, not only produces a distinct sense of presentness, it can also become a porous event that registers *other* times. Theatrical performances, for example, have the ability to endow a past or forgotten reality with presence. The performing arts cite and reenact history, produce a sense of ‘again-ness’, appropriate old-fashioned forms, or extend the life/live of what has supposedly passed. If the contemporary today is, as Peter Osborne states and as we will see later in this introduction, a ‘contemporary’ understood as the “coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but of times (...) by a coming together of different but equally ‘present’ temporalities” (Osborne “Anywhere”, 17) than the performing art’s different contemporaneities are the space *par excellence* to investigate time today. Contemporaneities are here therefore not only understood in epochal or

discursive terms but also point towards performance as a critical practice working in and with time.

A Short History of the Contemporary

To take a closer look at the genealogy of the concept and its relation to historical consciousness, it is helpful to consider the etymological origins of the word ‘contemporary.’ Derived from the Latin ‘contemporarius’ which combines ‘con-’ (meaning ‘with,’ ‘together’) and ‘temporarius’ (meaning ‘in time,’ from ‘tempus’), the notion is linked with temporal categories like simultaneity and synchronicity. This simultaneity, the Oxford English Dictionary informs us, should be understood first as “belonging to the same time, age, or period.” Hence, contemporaneity is not the coming together of different times but refers to people, phenomena or events that live, exist or occur at the same time, in the same period, simultaneously and in synch. This original meaning of the contemporary, which is used at least since the 17th century as a neutral designator, became especially meaningful with the rise of the modern “regime of historicity” (François Hartog) at the end of the 18th century.

Philosophers of history have pointed out this modern “regime of historicity” grew out of a sense of loss: the shattering effects of the French Revolution of 1789 and the ensuing ravages of the Napoleonic wars produced the experience that the old world order – henceforth the *ancien régime* – was irretrievably lost.⁷ In this new world, tradition lost its meaning as a foundation of the present identity and the radical break between past and present meant that modern men and women found themselves, as Peter Fritzsche would have it, “stranded in the present.” At the same time, however, to witness the world in turmoil together, either through a shared physical presence (hardly any European country was left untouched) or mediated through newly emerging mass media, also had a *synchronizing effect* (Fritzsche 53). Confronted with a radically changing world, the modern became each other’s ‘contemporaries.’ Even if they are spatially apart, they are tied to the same historical time frame, moving on the same timeline towards the future.

The Western modern regime of historicity in the 19th century is a history of synchronization on different levels. For our current undertaking, three dynamics are relevant here. Firstly, the recognition of the diachronic break with the past emphasizes both the *otherness* of that past and the unique particularity of the present. It is no coincidence that modern historiography is born in this historical era. As Henry Rousso has pointed out in *La Dernière Catastrophe*, historians at

the start of the 19th century already practice ‘contemporary history’ because their discipline tried to fathom their own time - the present and recent past - either directly or through an exploration of the present’s ‘other’, i.e. the past. (31-32; 56ff)⁸ Importantly, this also gives rise to the concept and practice of periodization: the historicist investigation of historical breaks implied differing, succeeding historical ‘contemporaries’ each with common cultural, political or socio-economical denominators (e.g. industrialization, secularization, artistic styles and so on) and it is the historian’s task to show how historical phenomena are in sync with their historical contexts.⁹

Secondly, the sense of the becoming-other of the past gave rise to the conceptualization of history as a linear chronology of singular moments.¹⁰ The arrival of a panoply of apparatuses of synchronization – new communication media, mass transportation, the standardization of clock time, and especially the introduction of capitalist factory labour (Doane 221) – further escalated the image of time as a line of consecutive ‘nows’ that once they have passed, remain in and of the past. Of course, this “maelstrom of modern life” full of promises of progress and adventure was paradoxically also a time of “contradiction, ambiguity and anguish” (Berman 15), but this constantly changing time was experienced *together*, with others, as contemporaries. This modern temporality, thirdly, was also projected on time as a whole to become universalized and globalized.¹¹ Modernization inaugurated a view of the world that distinguished between modern regions and those non-Western regions that were not yet modern, still ‘in the waiting room of history’ waiting to become the West’s contemporary (Chakrabarty 8-9, 12). The temporal logic undergirding colonialism, one could argue, is synchronization.

The performing arts have arguably played a role in both promoting and establishing this modern temporality. Take for example the idea of the non-contemporaneity of past and present: while gone, history was manifestly allowed to reappear, not only in the accounts of historians but also through historical representations in the performing arts. However, as Stephen Bann has argued in *The Clothing of Clio*, while historical realism produced “life-like reproductions of the past,” this “illusion of proximity to the past” at the same time also always (re)affirmed the present as distinctly different from that past (237). To use Bann’s apt metaphor to describe this paradigm: the historic representations resembles taxidermy, in that the quest to produce “effects of resurrection” eventually shows the past “mummified,” life-like but dead, within reach but at once kept at a distance. By performing history in historical dramas and other popular forms of

“historicism in action” (Lütticken 31) like historical parades, the past could (re)appear on stage or in the theatrical space but only in its own temporal zone. The fourth wall, which was introduced with the bourgeois theatre in the course of the 18th century, in these theatrical representations marked a demarcation line not only between stage and audience but also between a past and a present world. Witnessing their history in the theatre, the spectators become ‘Zeitgenossen’ (‘fellows of the same time’). Rather than the past and present coming together, these representations tended to acknowledge the “non-contemporaneous” past (Koselleck 266).

Throughout this issue the authors will time and again question this modern notion of a synchronous contemporaneity and the related notions ‘the non-contemporaneity’ of the past, of periodization, linear chronological time of contingent nows and their colonial underpinnings.

Towards a Dialectical Contemporaneity

Continuing our short history of the contemporary, we see that from the end of the 19th century onward, the semantic field of the word ‘contemporary’ expanded. ‘To be contemporary’ no longer only means to exist at the same time or within the same time span, it also designates that something is ‘characteristic’ of that period. To qualify something as ‘contemporary,’ still according to the OED, is to say that it is ‘modern,’ ‘up-to-date’ or even ‘avant-garde.’ This semantic expansion from the more neutral ‘occurring or existing in the same period’ is significant because it is indicative of the changing use of the term in the twentieth century. To be contemporary does not just mean to be modern but to be at the forefront of modernity - the contemporary as the most modern. It is in this sense that, in the middle of the 20th century, the notion first enters into art’s critical discourse. Philosopher Peter Osborne shows that while the term ‘contemporary art’ in post-war period at first designated the ‘most recent’ or the ‘current modern’ and was thus a continuation of modern art, it gained currency towards the end of the century as an “epochal category” acting *against* modern art. (Osborne “Anywhere” 16-17; Osborne “Temporalization” 41) Especially after the “discrediting of postmodernism as a coherent critical concept ... ‘contemporary’ has begun to emerge into the critical daylight from beneath its commonplace function as a label denoting what is current or up to date” (Osborne “Anywhere” 17).

Osborne's notion of contemporaneity is an important source of inspiration for this issue on *Contemporaneities*. He argues that the current relevance of the 'contemporary' (as captured in the rise of the term 'contemporary art') does not lie in its occurrence as an 'epochal category'¹² marking a supposed stylistic autonomy as a period in art history. What makes the contemporary an important discursive category today, is that "the structuring of contemporaneity ... itself [is] changing" because "the idea of contemporaneity as a *condition* is new." (17) What characterizes this new condition of contemporaneity of which art is "a privileged cultural carrier" (27)? Instead of synchronisation, contemporaneity is a complex state of temporal co-presence, or a coming together not simply 'in' time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together 'in time' with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different, but equally 'present'* temporalities or 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*. (17)

Contemporaneity is not just the present or the current, but the interplay of different times that converge in the artwork. This interplay involves both a continuous and transformative dialogue with (art) history, and a coming together of the different social and political times produced by the globalized economy. Therefore, contemporaneity also has a 'heterochronic' quality that potentially disrupts the present rather than simply (re)affirms it. This disruption also stems from the way in which, in the experience of an artwork, the past can suddenly insist in becoming actualized, giving art its particular critical purport as a question (rather than an echo of or response) to the present.

The "disjunctive unity of present times" marks how contemporaneity is different from modernity: while the modern projected "a present of permanent transition, forever reaching beyond itself," contemporaneity, Osborne states, "fixes or enfolds such transitoriness within the duration of a conjuncture, or at its most extreme, the stasis of a present moment." (4) In his essay *From Contemporary Dance to Contemporaneous Dance. Choreographic Re-enactment and the Experience of Contemporaneity After (Post-)Modernity*, Timmy De Laet will develop an in-depth reading of Osborne's definition of the contemporary, unfolding his approach in relation to the work of art historian Terry Smith who was one of the first theoreticians to take on the task of conceptualizing 'contemporary art'. In his text, De Laet also investigates how contemporaneity constantly interacts with the legacy of modernity – a phenomenon he recognizes in the practice of

contemporary choreographers' turn to modern dance as source material for choreographic re-enactments.

The notion 'contemporaneity' as a 'coming together of temporalities' for Osborne helps us to define the way in which our current time tries to makes sense of itself *historically* (in relation to the project of modernity but also in relation to the deconstruction of that project in postmodernity). It also invites us to consider how contemporary artworks represent our current time through an assemblage of different temporalities. In this issue, we are interested in how performance and the performing arts *does* this by performing contemporaneity as a dialectical practice of producing the now as a temporal co-mingling of times.

Claire Bishop's book *Radical Museology* makes artistic practice as a dialectical endeavour explicit when she introduces a contrast between two approaches of contemporaneity. Bishop starts from a critique of the current state of contemporary art and the institutions hosting it, where 'contemporaneity' is "the new, the cool, the photogenic, the well-designed, the economically successful" (12). The backdrop for this critique is what she elsewhere calls the "event culture" surrounding contemporary art (Bishop, *The Perils*) which mirrors the current functioning of the market economy – what Rebecca Schneider in this issue will call the "neo-liberal affect culture." At the same time, Bishop is unsatisfied by the recent research on 'contemporaneity' that sees 'contemporaneity' as "the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking", which is "underpinned by an inability to grasp our moment in its global entirety" (Bishop "Radical" 6). Reminiscent of Osborne she proposes a "non-presentist, multi-temporal contemporaneity" (23) which does not define the art work's contemporaneity by the degree to which it is *in synch* with the contemporary world around it (even if it might be an expression of the inability to capture that world). The dialectical contemporaneity is not about "an affirmation of the zeitgeist" (23). If our time today is marked by multiple temporalities, it is not just up to the artist or the art critic to simply affirm this. Instead, Bishop writes, "we need to ask *why* certain temporalities appear in particular works of art at *specific* historical moments" (23).

From her terminology, the reader will certainly have recognized that Bishop's dialectical contemporaneity is inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin (who was also an important source for Osborne). She links the idea of a dialectical contemporary with Benjamin's notion of the constellation in *The Arcades Project*: a true art of the contemporary creates collages of historical citations, putting

them together like the scavenger would collect and arrange left-overs, with the intention of creating ‘dialectical images’ that would not only challenge existing historical narratives but also interrogate and move the present. Bishop recognizes this practice in the curatorial philosophies of a few museums for contemporary art – the Van Abbemuseum, the Reina Sofía in Madrid and the Metelkova Museum in Ljubljana – where the museum is no longer a monument to archive and exhibit the cultural treasures upon which the current (often nationalistic) identity is founded, nor a popular temple for the global all-encompassing spectacle of the (art) market, but a critical space where curators engage in “a dynamic rereading of history.” Building on Bishop we could state that the dialectical contemporaneity is not just a discursive category, but also implies a method or practice.¹³ Put differently, the dialectical contemporaneity, rather than taking stock of the now, produces the now from a constellation of past and present. It is the contemporary as a *doing*, as an almost theatrical act of bringing past and present together to perform with and against each other.¹⁴

While developed in response to the current state of the museum, the dialectical contemporaneity is useful to critically reflect on the way contemporaneity is produced and practiced in the performing arts. Indeed, one of the important threads running through the contemporary performing arts of the last decade is the exploration of a dialectical multi-temporality through the strategic juxtaposing of historical and present material. This dialectical entanglement of times is a recurring theme running through this special issue: in the “durational now” of Rebecca Schneider; in Timmy De Laet’s “contemporaneous dance”; in Fabián Barba’s exploration of postcolonial perspectives on the temporality underlying contemporary dance; in Daniel Blanga-Gubbay’s unpacking of Giorgio Agamben’s contemporaneity as interval and anachronism; in Milo Rau’s “new realist” theatre or in Thomas Bellinck’s historization of the present from the standpoint of the future.

The Entangled Now of Performance

If art history has made a turn towards the contemporary theatre and performance studies always had a great interest in the performing arts produced in their own time.¹⁵ Given the methodological challenges of studying theatre history – as temporal and temporary art form performance always seems inevitably lost to history – it is perhaps not surprising that theatre and performance studies have a fraught relationship with history (e.g. Franko and Richards) which has also given rise to an approach to performance that elevated ephemerality as its defining

characteristic. Performance theoreticians in recent years have questioned this presentist paradigm of performance that is summed up by Peggy Phelan's dictum that "performance's life is only in the present" (146). While they might be tied to the *hic et nunc*, social and artistic performances, they argue, also have the potential to be carriers of history as they store the past in a repertoire of ritual repetitions (Taylor, Connerton). Performances can become "memory machines" that make past performances present in the memory of actors and spectators (Carlson) and performing bodies can become "archives" of past gestures, dances or choreographies (Lepecki). Rather than "becoming itself through disappearance" (Phelan 146), performance allows for the re-emergence, resurrection and reappearance of things past (Schneider). If performance is 'live,' it can also be 'after-live,' carrier of the 'no longer live,' or 'live on' beyond its short existence in the here and now. By interrogating the highly influential presentist paradigm of performance, these critics also open up the possibility of a notion of performance whose temporality is complex, multi-layered and multi-directional.

Rebecca Schneider's 2003 book *Performing Remains. Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* has been seminal in the shift towards a reconsideration of performance as no longer "composed in a linear temporality that moves from a past through a present to a future in which it dissolves" (Schneider 33). Inspired by the practice of historical re-enactment, Judith Butler's notion of performativity as "sedimentation" (Butler 15) and Elizabeth Freeman's concept of "temporal drag," she argues that the moment of performance can become "punctuated by, syncopated with, indeed charged by other moments, other times" (92). In historical re-enactments for example, the past re-animates the 'live' of the theatrical representation in the present, while the present re-animates realities thought of as long past or death. These examples of "inter(in)animation" (Schneider 7) show that the performative now is not just the fleeting moment between past and future, but is "sticky" – the past sticks to the present, it "drags" it along with it. Herein also lies a potential political impact: the non-chronological temporality of performance offers a framework for the emergence of disruptive counter-memories. If past political or revolutionary actions "stick" to the present – not locked up in history but enduring somehow, without temporal remove (but not, as Schneider will argue in this issue, without an "interval"), insisting in the present – these past events can start to act and act up again in the present.

"How long is the now?" was the question Schneider asked at the end of *Performing Remains*. In the text in this collection she explores this idea of a "durational now" further and asks:

If the past can be open to our questions, then isn't the past in some ways *with us*, and by being with us, also contemporary? Another way to ask this is, if the contemporary needs must be simultaneously historical, the contemporary needs to be paradoxically shot through with that which it is not. The now must be composed of, or in intimate relationship to, the not now.

The “cross- or multi-temporal engagement” (35) she explored in *Performing Remains* (which was an important inspiration for the development of this collection on *contemporaneities*), returns here in the question of what it means for us that the past remains *at the same time* as the present while retaining a temporal interval. This is particularly striking in the description of her encounter with a Palaeolithic rock painting – the negative hand at the prehistoric site of Pech Merle – that “hails her” and “bursts out of the straight march of linear time.” As material remains of a person touching the rock millennia ago, the rock painting is left to perform again (or still) in her presence. To take into account this “extended touch” or the “durational gesture” of the hail, it is also a ‘chronopolitical endeavour’ for Schneider. First of all because the “durational now” contrasts with the “now” in the “neo-liberal affect economy” where nowness is defined by the phrenic pace of the algorithmic high-frequency trading of the financial markets, the jerky-ness of the Twittersphere or the 24/7-economy where every single moment is an opportunity to produce, profit and perform.¹⁶ The “hail” or the “touch” also confronts us with “difference” and “response-ability”: while the hand is recognizable as a hand, it is not a token of the sameness between our hands and the hands of our Palaeolithic ancestors. Schneider’s text is a critique of both the neo-liberalism affect machine, and of approaches to history that collapse historical difference. To think the now differently, to engage with time differently, means to think the interval.

If contemporaneity for Osborne, Bishop and Schneider implies a critique of the temporality of modernity, it does not bar contemporary artistic practices from revisiting their modern, modernist and avant-garde predecessors. The ‘battle of the prefixes’ that emerged in the wake of the demise of postmodernity – is the contemporary still post- or rather postpost-, late-, anti-, neo-, hyper- or meta-modern? – has its merits as it proposes heuristic tools to understand the way in which the first decades of the 21th century can be situated historically in relation to preceding eras.¹⁷ Most of all, this debate is indicative of how the contemporary is still grappling with the legacy of modernity. This is a key element in the text of Timmy De Laet. In his text, De Laet explores “the tendency amongst contemporary

choreographers to revisit dance works from the past as an impetus to reflect on what this retrospective interest might mean for the contemporaneity of dance.” He is particularly interested in those choreographic works that use re-enactment “to the tradition of modern dance and, by the same token, to the historical epoch we have come to call ‘modernity.’” These examples of choreographic re-enactment, De Laet suggests, re-investigate dance’s own history and, in particular the legacy of the idiom and ideology of modern dance. Following De Laet’s text, contemporary choreographic re-enactment seems to explore different ways of ‘moving back’: it ‘moves back’ to a critical reconsideration of modern dance’s appraisal of uninterrupted flow and movement, and of the underlying beliefs in time as linear progress. But these choreographers, through re-enactment, also ‘move back’: they are back to moving, in contrast to the more static investigative modes of certain strands of conceptual contemporary dance. Most importantly, choreographic re-enactment ‘moves back’ in the sense that it assumes a critical distance. While moving again the image of the past, it also engages in taking a step back and considering this modern legacy of movement. In that sense, it combines movement with what Lepecki called the “still-act” of a bracketing movement.

Theatrical Time Beyond the Topical

How do theatre makers respond to the world they are contemporary with? How do they transfer onto the spectator this sense of capturing and reflecting what is current? Even a quick glance at the programs of major theatre venues reveals that choreographers, theatre makers and performance artists, regardless of genre, create work with the intention to seize time today and reflect on the current state of the world.¹⁸ Even when more traditional theatre companies revisit the theatre canon and stage texts of decades, if not centuries ago, they often do so to show how the works of Shakespeare, Racine or Beckett, despite the historical distance between the performance in the present and the moment the text was written, through analogy or adaptation, can still shed light on the world today. Theatre aspires to be topical. ‘Actualiteitswaarde’ (cf. the German ‘Aktualitätswert’), one of the possible translations to Dutch for the English word ‘topicality,’ adequately describes the idea that works receive value from a connection to the ‘actual’: the relevance of the work stems from the perspective it gives on current events. But topicality can be problematic. When topicality is the criterion for artistic production, theatre is tied to the ever-accelerating speed of societal change. It reproduces the pace and rhythm of the news media: rather than opening up a

space for reflection, the topical artwork is paradoxically caught in a spiral of becoming obsolete as quickly as it had become relevant.

Beyond topicality lies another way of making theatre contemporary that rather than closing the gap between theatre and current times, starts from the interval. This was also the point of departure for Giorgio Agamben in his seminal text *What Is the Contemporary?* presented by Daniel Blanga-Gubbay in this issue. He writes that Agamben “seems to withdraw from reproducing actuality in the way topical documentary forms might be grasping the present day. Instead of pursuing actuality in this sense, his use of the contemporary invites us to explore through fiction the possible disjunctions and anachronisms, which are able to make appear the complexity of the present beyond its image.” Under the heading “Portfolio” two theatre makers who are associated with documentary theatre but are also very critical of both the term and the practice discuss how their work creates gaps and intervals with the present.

In *A Future History of the Present* the Belgian artist Thomas Bellinck, together with his dramaturge Sébastien Hendrickx, shows how he couples the urge to make theatre that questions the world we live in with a search for performative strategies that take temporal sideway glances on that world. The way in which he twists traditional documentary formats (verbatim theatre, the museum, oral history) into crafty entanglements of past, present and future, of fiction and reality, merits further extensive attention in this introduction. His 2013 ‘theatrical installation’ entitled *Domo de Europa Historia en Exzilo* (which is Esperanto for “House of the History of Europe in Exile”), which he talked about in his artist’s presentation, exemplifies this approach. For *Domo*, the spectator is invited to enter a museum installed in an abandoned three-story school building in Brussels, a stone’s throw away from the European Quarter where different institutions of the European Union are located. At its entrance, the spectator is informed that the museum is build by the “Friends of a Re-United Europe” in the second half of the 21th century. In this museum time takes a leap to 2063. From the brochure handed out by the slightly greyish and sickly looking custodian in the ticket booth, the spectator learns that the “Friends of a Re-United Europe” have built this museum to shed light on the particular but often overlooked history of the European Union, from its inception until its demise, half a century ago, in 2018. Of this period known as the “Long Peace” or the “Second Interbellum” the museum will focus on the crucial final years, when the ‘Great Recession’ in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis would provoke the project’s eventual downfall. What remains *now* (read: in 2063) is “but a memory of an

intriguing experiment” that is memorialized by this museum. The spectator follows the museum’s trajectory leading through slightly dilapidated rooms with display cases, diorama’s and charts that sketch out a narrative that starts with the European dream to overcome the devastation of nationalism through economic, social and cultural collaboration. It ends when, “in uncertain times” brought forth by the Great Recession, “the evils of the past proved much more contagious than the dream of a united Europe.”

The financial crisis, the neo-liberal economic policy of austerity, the rise of Fort Europa, the rise of right-wing nationalism and euro-scepticism, which produced a “full-blown crisis of trust” are not present as current but as the evils of the past through the speculum of speculative fiction. Bellinck’s theatrical installation doesn’t simply use the device of speculative fiction to hypothesize about the potential real outcomes of the contemporary crisis of the European Union. Instead, the work offers a view on the contemporary by experimenting with temporality. His appropriation of the performative apparatus of the modern museum is key. As Tony Bennett has argued in *The Birth of the Museum*, 19th century museums functioned as “narrative machineries” (Bennett 178) that compress different events of the past into an evolutionary narrative of progress. When museum visitors follow the directional path plotted out by the curator through the spaces of the museum, they both embody and observe this evolution as a coherent and knowable whole: “the museum, rather than annihilating time, compresses it so as to make it both visible and performable” (Bennett 186). Not unlike the concurrently emerging discipline of history, the 19th century museum constructs historical narratives that explain how the present came to be what it is. By appropriating the museum, Bellinck plays the historicists’s game of imagining the past as a historical narrative with a clear beginning and ending. However, the museum’s past is the spectator’s recent past, present and (potential) near future. Put differently, Bellinck’s museum ‘periodizes’ the present by inviting the spectators to think of their own time as a finite historical period.

This strategy of creating a ‘science-fiction history’ reminds us of Frederic Jameson’s reflection on the temporality of science-fiction literature. Rather than offering realist images of the future, Jameson argues in *Archaeologies of the Future*, that the “mock futures” of science fiction “transform our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come” (288). Transporting the reader of science-fiction literature to the present’s posthumous future defamiliarizes the reader’s experience of the present. This “cognitive estrangement” (Jameson xiv)¹⁹ produced by the fictitious leap into the future makes it possible to contemplate

the present anew, alienating the fixed power structures and recognizing the unattested fears, desires and phantasies about a future that is fundamentally uncertain and unimaginable (Jameson 287-289). Likewise, Bellinck invites the spectator to become what he calls in this issue a “mind on legs” and to look at the present “decontextualized” by the standpoint of the future. Nevertheless, unlike Jameson, Bellinck does not recognize a potential utopian impulse in the science-fiction set-up. Perhaps because she is a spectator rather than a reader, physically walking along the old-fashioned dioramas and display cases, makes it so that the spectator is constantly slipping back and forth between what he terms the “historized present” and the “presentified future.” If the 19th century museum allows us to look back at an ordered past to understand the present and science-fiction allows us to look at the present as a historic episode open to the future, Bellinck’s museum is constantly oscillating between looking backwards and forwards. What we see there is not only our current past (i.e. the history of the EU up until, in this case, 2013) but also our own present and potential near future (the demise of the EU) that follows it as a historic past. The melancholic reminiscing to the initial anti-nationalistic dreams of the EU are undercut by the prospect of the coming war that is projected by ominous temporal markers like “the second interbellum” – and vice versa. The spectator’s journey through Bellinck’s museum is marked by an estrangement of time. We are in the present, aware that the museum is a fictional set-up, when at the same time we are transported to the future to look back into the past. But the temporal entanglement does not stop there. In the future historiography of the museum’s present, our current time is confronted with what could have become but never was. It might seem like a temporal blur where past, present and future intermingle without friction, but this is not the case. It feels more like a temporal ricochet, where you are invited to think the present together with its virtual others.

The Swiss theatre maker Milo Rau takes another approach in his work, which he presents in the *New Realism and the Contemporary World. The Re-enactments and Tribunals of the International Institute of Political Murder*. From the re-enactment of the trial against Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu (2009) to his ongoing ‘Europa Trilogy’ ((*The Civil Wars* (2014), *The Dark Ages* (2015)) as well as the recent *Compassion. The History of the Machine Gun* (2016), the work of the sociologist turned theatre maker again and again questions our relationship to Europe’s recent past. Even if contested (and often traumatic) histories are evoked, the work of his ‘International Institute of Political Murder’ (IIPM), which was founded in 2007 to allow for a cross-fertilization between artistic work and

academic research, always aims to speak to and from the present by re-doing, re-creating and re-litigating the realities of the past. To do this, he appropriates existing formats that, while coming from outside of the theatre, are inherently theatrical. In this issue, Rau discusses two recurrent dramaturgical devices the IIPM uses in its ‘new realist’ theatre and film: historical re-enactment and the appropriation of the format of the tribunal (reminiscent of activist uses of the trial, for example in the Russell Tribunals). What happens when the IIPM makes history and the instrument of historiography (the historical document, the witness account, the archive, the historical image, the trial) *perform* in the present? What questions does this ‘new realist’ theatre provoke? How is our contemporary world marked by processes of cultural remembrance and historical oblivion? The mission of art, Rau explains in his contribution, quoting from the manifesto of the IIPM *Was ist Unst?*, is to create a literal representation of the present, through the past, for the future. This roundabout way of addressing the present again creates a critical space that defamiliarizes the present from itself while at the same time, in the gesture of re-doing history and re-litigating historical and political injustices of the recent past, capturing what makes that present contemporary. Like others in this collection of texts, Rau’s contemporaneity, as he stresses himself, tries to step beyond postmodernist irony. He values ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’. However, the reconstruction of the past as it really happened is not the end goals of his re-enactments. Instead, he wants to demonstrate, through theatre, that the past in a way keeps on happening. Facts are not just locked up in the past, they remain, and theatre allows them to become present again in the moment of representation.

Both Bellinck and Rau use theatre or theatrical installations to forge a gap between the theatrical present and the contemporary present outside of the theatre. The temporal deviations, the jumps from one time to another and the multiple times coming together in the ‘now’ of the performance not only embody a state of the contemporary world as a “temporal unity in disjunction” (Osborne 17). If their theatrical present – the present of performance – is shot through with different times, it also produces a sense that the fate of the art work to be contemporary today lies in the movement of constantly gesturing towards but never fully grasping a world in constant movement. This reminds us of the title of a recent collection of essays on contemporary theatre edited by Florian Malzacher: *Not Just a Mirror. Looking for The Political Theatre of Today*. The subtitle “Looking for” is key here: instead of “The political theatre of today,” the politically engaged theatre works discussed in the book are characterized by a continuous search to develop ways of looking at the word politically, to test out

artistic strategies that give theatre its political relevance. The contemporary here has an aspirational quality: theatre becomes contemporary when it becomes a space for invention, exploration, experimentation and research of what the now could (but also should not) become.

The Other(s) Times

From the above, it should be clear that ‘contemporary art,’ be it dance, visual arts or theatre, is not simply the art produced contemporaneously or at the current moment. While classical ballet is still being produced today and countless hobbyist create paintings in styles that were once recognized as avant-garde, these works are not considered under the rubric of ‘contemporary dance’ or ‘contemporary art.’ To attribute to a work of art the adjective ‘contemporary’ inscribes the work in a broader discourse about what is or is not relevant today within the fields of ‘contemporary art,’ ‘contemporary theatre’ or ‘contemporary dance.’ What is not contemporary, is dismissed as out-of-date, old fashioned, characteristic of another idiom or style, posing questions that might once have been ground-breaking but are so no longer. In *Moving Together*, cultural sociologist Rudi Laermans argues that with regards to contemporary dance, contemporaneity implies the “imperative structuring of the medium dance” based on “*the contingent distinction between the dance-able and the non-danceable, legitimate and illegitimate movements*” (Laermans 57). In that regard, contemporary dance is not different from other historical ‘dance cultures’ like the baroque court ballets, classical ballet or different trends in modern dance. What these ‘dance cultures’ do is codifying dance’s potential movement material, while at the same time enacting and legitimizing the body ideals that exist in the culture as a whole. Different times and cultures produce different body images and different definitions of what dance is. In (re)affirming certain movements as ‘contemporary,’ dance cultures inevitably also devalue and repress other movement material. As a dance culture, contemporary dance is in no way different from earlier (or, as we will investigate in a moment, concurrent) dance cultures.

Put differently, we can argue that, rather than a simple descriptive category, the contemporary is thus also a performative category that rehearses “prior delimitations” (Butler 11) about legitimate and illegitimate artistic practices. The contemporary regulates the field. Not only are works framed in relation to the existing preconceptions about what is or is not ‘contemporary,’ these preconceptions are also embodied in practice. Artists rehearse them because they

are instilled through art education, through the desire to be recognized as belonging to the contemporary art field or through the art market that values what is ‘contemporary.’ In this performativity also lies dance’s political potential, because in each creative process, each dance performance and each collaboration, these prior delimitations can potentially be renegotiated. Laermans argues as much when he states that the relative contingency of the canon of contemporary dance²⁰ also means that dance can explore its “depreciated Other” and unlock the potential of “a realm of aesthetic possibilities” that had to “remain inactivated,” “non-actualized” or “virtual” (58). The contemporary danceable holds the promise of the non-danceable becoming contemporary (59-60). Even though not anything is possible in contemporary dance, with each new dance performance the possibility opens up to reconfigure dance’s contemporaneity.²¹

In *The Local Prejudice of Contemporary Dance* Fabián Barba explores how contemporary dance not only involves temporal delimitation – What is contemporary or old-fashioned? Contemporary or modern? – but also ‘geocultural’ delimitations. He argues that the contemporary also involves a topography of time, if not always literally, then often in the mental infrastructures and disciplinary mechanisms that support the critical instruments used to delineate what is contemporary and what is not. Barba’s account refers back to a profound post-colonialist critique on the modern concept of historicity that, according to him, still underpins the way in which the contemporaneity of contemporary dance can be conceived.

His argument reminds us of Peter Osborne’s astute remark that “to be chronologically simultaneous” isn’t the same as “contemporaneous.” This “differential temporality” is, according to Osborne, one of the crucial characteristics of the modern project of colonialism. (“Politics” 16) “The *non-contemporaneity of geographically diverse but chronologically simultaneous times*” urges the geographical other to catch up, to enter universal (read: Western) history, to become the West’s contemporary. (16) Barba carefully but convincingly explores how contemporary dance today might still be tied up in this colonial logic. This is an important and provocative statement because it questions one of the most influential definition of the contemporary by Terry Smith as an embodiment of “the global contemporary.”²² According to Smith, the shift from modern art to contemporary art – a shift that started in the 1980s – brought about a geographical decentralization of the art world when Europe and the United States lost gradually their status as sole cultural centres of the art production and critique. Today, “diversity marks every aspect of the production

and distribution of art,” (Smith “Contemporary” 8) with which Smith not only refers to the thematic, stylistic, methodological and material diversity of works of art, but also to the art world’s greater geographical spread. “Contemporary art,” he states, “is – perhaps for the first time in history – truly an art *of* the world” (8). Not surprisingly, apart from economic globalization and transnationalism, the postcolonial turn contributes to the fundamentally “multiple,” “internally differentiating,” “category-shifting” and “shape-changing” (9) nature of contemporary art.

While he recognizes that major institutions, curators and cultural centres still play an important role as gatekeepers, Smith does acknowledge that the ‘contemporaneity’ of contemporary arts is fundamentally defined by the culturally diverse and geographically dispersed artists. The geographic diversity and spatial multipolarity Smith discerns in the contemporary visual arts seems less obvious in the contemporary performing arts where centre and margin still remain much more defined. Further in this issue, Milo Rau notes that globalization in the theatre often comes down to exporting the work of European directors to other regions of the world – literally, through the network of festivals, but also symbolically, through the discursive apparatus of theatre critique and theatre studies. This movement, he says, is essentially still colonialist. Similarly, Barba states that the internationalism of contemporary dance is not because dance is global but because dance has “become global over time, originating in one place (Europe and the United States) and then spreading outside it.” Nobody will question the global reach of contemporary dance and the diverse cultural backgrounds of the dancers and choreographers that constitute the field, but, as Fabián Barba investigates in this issue, ‘contemporary dance’ has a distinctive performativity that continues to inscribe it within its original Western genealogy. He writes: “To ask about the Western genealogy of contemporary dance and its globalization is to ask about the political economy of this artistic practice, the institutions that support it and the epistemological constructions that build its ground.” His primary focus is on the “philosophical assumptions forged within Western cultural horizon,” “a distinctly western/modern temporality (unidirectional and progressive linearity; sharp distinction between past, present and future.” Contemporary dance, he argues, risks to remain mono-cultural if it doesn’t “open up and take into account different cultural horizons and heritages.” This also begs the question if the political potential of the disciplinary performativity of contemporary dance described above, is enough of a solution to allow the “depreciated Other” (here: dance cultures that are ‘contemporaneous’ to contemporary dance but do not belong to

the same geo-cultural sphere) to emerge and redefine the contemporaneity of dance. How can we think the *contemporary differently* to include *the time of the others*? To think the other within the temporal category of the contemporary, do we not only need to think time differently and allow it to be entangled with other geo-cultural times? To think the now as entangled often also means to think time politically.

Acknowledgements

The texts presented in this special issue are based on the lectures presented during the symposium *Contemporaneities* in March 2016, organised by Ghent University – S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts & Media) in collaboration with Vooruit and Campo. It is important to note that both the ensemble of texts and the individual contributions in various ways bear the traces of that symposium. Perhaps the most obvious marking indicative of that day is that, while thoroughly reviewed and in some cases significantly reworked, the contributions still retain some of the characteristics of a lecture presented for a live audience on that specific day. Rather than discard them, the distinctive formats of the live presentations (an academic lecture, a theorized account of an artistic trajectory, a performance lecture as introduction to the work of Giorgio Agamben, a prepared interview, an artist talk around specific artistic strategies) were adapted for the journal in such a way that they would suit readers. This also has an impact on the length of the texts. As one of the major concerns of the symposium was how to deal with time, contributors were given the option to decide in advance for themselves how much time they would need to lay out their argument about contemporaneity. Sticking to time, in a way, meant sticking to one's own time. Lengthwise, contributions therefore still differ. For the written version of their presentations, authors have taken the opportunity to elaborate aspects of their presentation that were not yet developed or only touched upon in the presence of the audience. Ideas that were in the air but had not yet solidified have now often found their way to the page (while others inevitably have not). The texts are therefore not only marked by that one event in March, but also record what has happened in the meantime, in between the live performance of a text at the symposium and the text as performance in this special issue. I'm well aware that this last remark might sound obvious and even a bit contrived. However, the deliberate decision to retain something of the live gathering of a symposium is the result of the genuine hope that the texts presented in this special issue of *Documenta* might again (or still?) talk to each other, to and through the reader. As an *assemblage* of texts of different formats and lengths, their significance

hopefully lies beyond the page in the contemporary moment of current and future acts of reading.

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¹ Terry Smith describes the “contemporizing” of Tate Modern extensively in his book *What is Contemporary Art?* (56-67)

² Despite scepticism that “the very idea of contemporary art history would seem to be an oxymoron,” (Kester in Foster et al. 7) art history departments develop course programs, appoint professors specialized in the subject and foster research on living artists and current curatorial practices (Richard Meyer in Foster et al. 18).

³ A turn towards the contemporary can be witnessed across the humanities: scholarship focuses no longer exclusively on the interpretation and transmission of the artistic high points of the past, but increasingly takes to studying literature, music, architecture or theatre of today as its subject. On this shift in literature, see Wegner. In history departments, “contemporary history” (generally understood as history post-1945) not only has acquired a steadfast position since the end of the 1970s, historians today also study the “present past” (Andreas Huyssen). The reverberations of the past in the present – the past in its most contemporary guise, if you will – is reflected in a general interest in cultural memory, heritage, transitional justice and the quintessential role of witness accounts and testimonials in history (e.g. Rousso; Hartog; Huyssen). Paul Rabinow has called for an “anthropology of the contemporary.” Giorgio Agamben and Peter Osborne have put the contemporary on the agenda of philosophy and aesthetics. See also the work of the research group on the Contemporary at Stanford (<https://thecontemporary.stanford.edu>) and the conferences “What is the Contemporary” (University of St. Andrews, 2014), “The Contemporary: Culture in the 21th Century” (Princeton University, 2016) or “The Contemporary Contemporary” (Aarhus University, 2017).

⁴ Similar arguments are being made by Claire Bisshop, Peter Osborne and Terry Smith: see later in this introduction and in this issue.

⁵ See for example the 2016 German Dance Congress in Hannover with the theme “Zeitgenoss*in sein (Being Contemporary)” (June 2016) and the “Dance Future II. Claiming Contemporaneity” (January 2017, Hamburg).

⁶ On the “performative turn” in the museum of contemporary art, see von Hantelmann. Tate Gallery has been especially active when it comes to collecting live art, which has led to several research projects (Calonje), and the presentation of the work of choreographers in the museum (Bishop “Perils”). See also the special issue of *Dance Research Journal* edited by Mark Franko and Andre Lepecki on “Dance in the Museum” (46.3, 2014).

⁷ This argument was first made extensively by Reinhart Koselleck and further developed by François Hartog who sketches the shift from the pre- and early modern regime of historicity of the *historia magistra vitae* to the futurist temporal regime of modernity. See also Frank Ankersmit's study on the 'sublime historical experience' and Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country*.

⁸ According to Rousso, the increasing professionalization of the discipline, the demand for strict positivism and an almost technical focus on methodology from the 1870s on led to the dismissal of history as the study of (and informed by) the present and the recent past. According to the historians at the end of the 19th century, focussing on the distant past avoided that politically contentious ideological debates would infuse historiography or open up traumatic wounds. Anti-historicist philosophers like Walter Benjamin would of course take issue with the supposed neutrality of historiography. The return to contemporary history today, according to Rousso, is therefore a return to the foundations of the discipline of history in the 19th century. (Rousso 69-86.)

⁹ On this "periodic contemporaneity" see the recent lecture by Berman.

¹⁰ "Time," Koselleck famously wrote, "is no longer the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality ... history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right." (236)

¹¹ According to Peter Osborne, the logic of totalization of temporal notions (like progress, crisis and revolution) is an inherent attribute of modernity (Osborne "Politics").

¹² As an epochal category, the term 'contemporary art' quickly runs into the same problems as other periodizing terms because when does the era of 'contemporary art' begin?

¹³ This is reminiscent of the work of Walter Benjamin, who, as I have argued elsewhere, advocates for a "performative historiography" (Le Roy, 229ff).

¹⁴ It is probably no coincidence that several art critics stress the importance in contemporary art of moving beyond the individual artwork to focus on formats that emphasize (and foreground) the interaction with spectators and between different works, media or disciplines - characteristic that are inherently linked with theatre and performance. Groys for example claims that “the installation is the leading art form of contemporary art” because it “demonstrates a certain selection, a certain chain of choices, and a certain logic of inclusions and exclusions. By doing so, an installation manifests here and now certain decisions about what is old and what is new, what is an original and what is a copy.” (76) Similarly, von Hantelmann proposes that the “exhibition” is the format par excellence of contemporary art. (von Hantelmann)

¹⁵ Arguably, the intertwining of the academic theatre studies as academic discipline with synchronous theatre practice, has had a profound influence on the development of the discipline. Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued that Max Herrmann developed the foundations of modern theatre study in dialogue with the artistic practice of Max Reinhardt (32-33). The emergence of performance studies was linked to the historic emergence of performance art and the work of the theatre avant-garde working in the US and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Richard Schechner considered performance studies as a theoretical avant-garde (360). Likewise, the impact of post-structuralism in theatre studies would likely have been impossible without the concurrent shift from representation to presentation in the theatre practice (an evolution dubbed “post-dramatic” Hans-Thies Lehmann). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why, in performing arts, the reflection on the contemporary has only just begun: as an art form, the performing arts have constantly been dealing with contemporaneity.

¹⁶ I use perform here in the sense of performance as efficiency, as discussed by McKenzie.

¹⁷ Rebecca Boym’s deliberately ambiguous term “off-modern,” which recalls associations with “off the beaten track,” “off the map,” or “off the wall,” might perhaps be the most interesting contribution to this “battle of the prefixes”. An off-modern approach traces “eccentric modernities that are out of sync and out of phase with each other temporally and spatially.” A similar call for a persistent engagement with the ruins of modernity (“social utopia, historical progress, and material plenty for all”) to take on the “historical task of surprising rather than explaining the present” (69) is a central idea in Susan Buck-Morss’ *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.

¹⁸ A few examples: *Empire* (Superamas), *Our Times* (Michiel Vande Velde), *The Internet* (Marten Spangberg), *The Dark Ages* (Milo Rau/IIPM), *The Middle Ages* (Andros Zins-Browne), *Etrangler le temps* (Boris Charmatz).

¹⁹ Jameson borrows the term “cognitive estrangement” from critic Darko Suvin who in turn was inspired by the aesthetics of estrangement of the Russian formalists and the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (Jameson xiv).

²⁰ That canonization exists in contemporary dance doesn’t mean that this field is uniform. Far from it: contemporary dance, as Laermans also underlines, is a metaphorical ‘big tent’ that includes varied styles and approaches to what dance can be. However, diverse as it may be, the point of this section is that disciplinary processes do take place.

²¹ Similar arguments about the codification and concurrent repression of movement can be made about “theatre cultures” or “visual arts cultures,” both historical and contemporary, where the visual, auditory or other sensorial material, as well as the images and ideas embodied by this sensorial material, are marked by a similar process.

²² I borrow this term from the title of the exhibition “The Global Contemporary. Art Worlds After 1989” (ZKM, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe from September 2011 to May 2012). Okwui Enwezor’s *Documenta 11* is often cited as a seminal moment in putting this reflection on the Global Contemporary on the agenda. For a critical discussion of this ‘strand’ of contemporary art, see Smith “What” 689ff.