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The Present Feeling Contemporary Art and the Question Of Time

Wait. What are you feeling right now?

Right now is a feeling of presentness more than it is the present as such, which has already passed. Think of the present not as a discrete instant following so many others on a straight timeline but as an affective overlay, a feeling of sheets of time in continuous co-composition. What we call the present is a remix of countless temporalities: the immediate past as the swing of the present, distant memories that return to colour the mix, the circadian rhythm that courses through you as an embodied expression of the earth's rotation, including working hours as the call for efficient action, dreaming as a thickening of the atmospheric real, history as an authority looming in the background, expectation as time traced ahead ...

Think of the contemporary as the commingling of all these temporalities: the con-temporary as the textured "*withness*" of times. Feel the textures inherent to this conjuncture of experience. Feel how immanent a *future* is in this moment, feel how far, how close, how else it is to your self, how topologically intimate it is to itself. *Now*, imagine the future as anything that could come out of the mix, as the potential of all that vibrates and comes together in withness. What could come is always still in the mix. This potential – *futurity* – can only be felt. In the present.

To be in the mix is to feel worlds spark from the glancing touch of one temporality on another. And since what might come potentially concerns one and all, enveloped in the perception is the feeling of a collectivity to come. A con-temporariness is always a collective experimentation *in* the event of time (not outside it, looking in). An invitation to a speculative pragmatism: the production of a pragmatism that perceives in *this* present a promise of a future to come, an *à-venir*. This *à-venir* exists not in the name of the common, as though the collective were already composed. It is an *à-venir* immanent to the composition of a presentness still to be defined, a becoming-other in time, together. What are the conditions for such an opening onto experience, in the event? Is not contemporary art – the art of the con-temporary – a machine for the fabrication of such conditions?

Wait. What are you feeling right now? Between *that* now and *this* now? What is the mode, the texture of existence of what lurks in between? There is no way that a work of art, that the art of existence could be on time. Too late for that, too soon for this, a work of art has something of the *inactual*: you can only feel whether it is successful in its effects. Then, what makes an art artful is not that it was useful. An art at no service, following no purposes, not even your own: an art that isn't on time, nor out of it, but *in time*. In the feeling.

We no longer ask “What does it mean?” but “What does it do?”

“What does it do?” is not a question of function. It is a question of machining the *à-venir* of potential. At its best, art activates an opening toward an inactuality – an untimeliness – that emphasizes the witness of the temporary, the time of the not-yet. This not-yet, active in the working of the work, exists affectively: in the can-only-be-felt of experience. When it works, it is through its capacity to simultaneously fold in on art’s con-temporaneity and fold out toward the futurity that is art’s potential, redoubled by the promise of something else: a more to come. The more art activates this becoming-with of the present’s con-temporaneity, the more intensely it is in the mix with futurity. To put it another way, there is a primacy of relation. The work of art – its working or its *faire-œuvre* – is a capacity to fold time, making felt the emergent relation between this and that now. The con-temporary is the felt primacy of relation, present in potential. Art that creates this con-temporaneity is a kind of time-machine.

The affect of a con-temporary artwork is a lived *sense of time*. How does the sense of time as an artwork’s affect foreground the primacy of relation? Not by representing it. Not by signifying it. Not by presenting it as its content. Rather, by making it felt, by making it what can only be felt, in a becoming-more, a becoming-other, a widening of experience in the name of the artful. Artful because here we are no longer in the object. We are instead in the crafting of time. The art of time activates experience in the making, it makes felt how the artful composes with the more-than of the presentness that art is capable of activating. Artfulness is what art can do when it composes with a time to come.

If con-temporary art is the machining of such conditions, the artwork’s affective sense of time is not a referent or a meaning, but rather a quality expressing itself in a propensity to connect in the time of the event. This propensity to connect cannot be reduced to the apparent content of a work. Artfulness is the work’s potential, in the act. When a work works with the con-temporary as the witness of time, the how of its happening doubles the what of its content, and disperses it across time.

How is the witness of felt time perceived? It would be easy to put this feltness in the human subject, but this would be to underestimate the potential of the event. When the event is coloured by everything that could happen, perception begins to move with these forces and we lose a clear sense of the edges of our selves. Individual perception disperses into a perceptual ecology. In other words, the con-temporary exceeds the measure of human time. It moves at the speed of shifting magnitudes of experience that include the human but are in no way reducible to it. This is important: the con-temporary is more-than human, and to make this felt is a vocation of art.

What *else* can happen?

Is the event of experience held together by an already-composed experiential matrix that begins and ends with the contours of our own bodies? What if the question of the con-temporary were asked in the name of the more-than that includes us even as it exceeds the “us” we imagine ourselves to be? And if so, what else can happen here?

The *what else* was felt in the *Printemps érable* of 2012. Here, where human bodies congregated to demonstrate, night after night, something else occurred. Over the months of gatherings, conversations, performances, art projects, teach-ins, publications, marches and casseroling, over all these months something more than the human form came to definition. This something-more included the woman, the man and the child raising their arm against raising fees for education, against allowing the neoliberal turn to destroy the possibility of the collective, but it also exceeded it. This something-more was an affective tonality, a felt experience of presentness tweaked toward the eventness of a future already in modulation: a feeling of the con-temporary as the force of time, running through the individuals present and the collectivities they presently composed, but irreducible to their current forms. This force was an insistence of potential tugging at the sleeve of forgetfulness: is this all there is, here, now? There was a presentiment, felt across ages, across genders, across class, across constituencies, that something else was at stake, still-to-come in excess over our present human condition, and that this something else could make a difference. The demonstrations were large and loud and engaged, whether we were holding out against increased tuition or whether we were celebrating the earth on Earth Day. The more-than of our collective bodies was the feeling, shared in the emergent field of experience, of the urgency of the untimeliness we were collectively creating, an untimeliness that also forcefully included us in the movement. This was artfulness: an open proposition about the politicality of time.

What made the youth of Québec erupt, prompting a rediscovery of society’s to-come? Do the youth feel the future more intensely? Do they see through the folds of time with the eyes of the clairvoyant? Do the youth have more invested in the future? Quantitatively, the youth have more future to deal with. Qualitatively, the future is more forcefully felt relative to youth. In this era of post-crisis austerity capitalism, the youth see the million lives they could have lived collapse onto a few dire prospects. A grey future for the old is pitch black for the young.

“Youth, no matter the age of those possessed of it, does not defend: it attacks.”¹

To become-young, to become-child, is to be open to the *à-venir* of the more-than human in experience, following the movement of the force of time. Artfulness invents futures capable of holding onto potential. It does not defend itself

against time: it attacks, with the force of time. To become-child is not to deny age, it is to celebrate the complexity of times in the duration of a life yet to be invented. To become-child, as Gilles Deleuze said, is to invent the youth of this age (every age).²

But there is always a temptation to grow up too quickly, to abandon one's youth, to become-adult. Isn't this where responsibility lies? It is not uncommon to see young people who are old in their ways. They grew up at the speed neoliberalism told them to. They make themselves too useful too soon.

Can we instead imagine responsibility as a sensitivity to the con-temporary: as an ability to respond? To respond ably with the world in the making is to align oneself eventfully with the futurity in the present. Is this not the more ethical stance, to become-with that which unfolds in the untimeliness of the yet-to-come? To be flexible, elastic, plastic, to be energized in the con-temporary event that cannot be calculated in advance?

Let us not be made useful. Let us remain incompetent in the face of the unrealized in potential, competent only insofar as we strive to invent techniques that facilitate lived experience. A tenuous competency, uncertain. Pragmatic yet speculative. Beyond instrumentalization.

The Québec student strike wasn't a utopian imagining of a far-off world. It was about how the prospects of the future make people feel now; about how the future is felt, immediately, in the present. Before the strike, people felt bound to the depotentializing of their present by its inherited past. This was a present impoverishing its own future through debt. Debt, chaining its debtors to an eternal repetition of the same: labour (day after day), the demands of the job market (forever clamping back down), enterprise and earning (to stay ahead on debt). As the movements were activated by demonstrations, by performances and future-imaginings, new possibilities arose in corners of the social field that could not otherwise have existed. The blocked, re-directed desire had to flow somewhere, and flow it did. Up against someone else's idea of the future bearing down on ours came a collective desire for a politics to come.

For some, the untimeliness and the temporariness felt like a loss once the strike ended and things returned to "normal." But this is perhaps the lesson: that time never returns, and that what is felt as the norm is always tweaking itself toward a potential differentiation. So we have to ask "what else?" What else happened? A schism was created in experience that makes felt what else can inhabit the everyday, an everyday that always includes the untimeliness of what is to come.

Artfulness, active in the con-temporary of art's activity, reclaims the schism for *collective* potential. This requires a kind of time travel that is different from the utopian displacement of one self on a linear timeline (my debt –

my labour – my prosperity). Artfulness refuses to hold the future at a distance as though it could be held up for evaluation, measured against the already-known. Artfulness instead invents in a rhythm with the urgency of a time in the making.

The politicality of art

The artful exceeds the bounds of the punctual art event, such as a biennale or any exhibition. It creates a time machine, it is an invitation to travel with the flow of desire, the desire for something else. It is an invitation to make-other, to move into the more-than, an opening toward a queering of experience.

Where does this leave political art? Must we assign to these artistic sensibilities the duty to smash normative conceptions of the future? To proclaim "no future!" and to bathe in all the exclamation's radical negativity? Or is art's vocation speculative rather than de(con)structive, in that it opens the way toward the potential of the present at each juncture that is encountered, lived and created?

How can art speculate in a way that doesn't box in, overdetermine or instrumentalize the future? We know all too well from contemporary finance capitalism that everything, including the future, is already speculated upon: minds, bodies, people, land, ideas and communication. What if, to avoid boxing in the future, instead of talking about political art, we speak of the *politicality* of art: that the artful within art is a force that is *potentially* political to the core, queering experience in the name of a politics to come?

Art that is political in potential proposes emergent conjunctions rather than self-reproduction. What if art could no longer reproduce, pass on its forms of intelligibility, its way of being read, its clichés, its historical lineage? If art could not reproduce, wouldn't it then have to generate new modes of valuation, in the absence of the possibility of reproducing old ones, in order to make sense in and of the world? Would this be a queering of experience in the name of the artful?

A queering of experience in the name of the artful propels art toward the useless, felt in all its potential. Here, in the realm of the as-yet-undiscovered, the artful is not yet strapped to another project for the future with its own agenda and timeline. This is not to say that art needs to be "new" in the way we experience it in the capitalist regime. Quite the opposite: art that is useless is capable of foregrounding the artful gesture within the already-experienced that always, quietly, subtly, tweaks toward difference. Artful gestures are not grand. They texture time in the making, as a minor gesture.

Useless because it doesn't yet know what it'll stir up

The art of futurity, the futurity in art, is bound to a kernel of uselessness, a kernel that art maintains in the face of all manners of instrumentalization. All art has a useless quality, even art that has been made the most use of. Because even such "useful" art is still useless from the perspective of the not-yet-stirred up: the what-else in the mix.

How then do we conceive of the relationship between what art stirs up – eventfully – and what it comes to be used for? What is the ambiguous dividing line between art that stirs up movement in the midst of its own existence and art that is created and deployed for its use-value? Or market-value? Uselessness and usefulness co-compose in most situations where art is encountered. The generative question is therefore not necessarily what can art do, but what can the force of time in art, or the artful, make felt in art's undoing of the present.

There is no general idea in artfulness, or of it. It does just what it does, and resists the need to commit to an ecology not its own. In this sense, the artful is always singular, rigorous and technically precise. It is specific to the work's capacity to be itself and to the work's capacity to become other. Artfulness is the minor gesture that values the artistic process from within. It creates value, immanently, making felt the pressing importance of the useless. Out of the useless come new, untimely modes of existence, new qualities of life – new values.

Immanent critique

This immediately invokes a set of problems about the role of the critic, the role of critique, and the role of writing about art. How can we write about art and allow art to maintain, in all uselessness, its future tending?

Writing is not outside the artfulness described here. It is also an art in the sense that it co-composes with the art of time activated by the work's withness. To write-with is to practice immanent critique, to be open to the tendencies of the artful and to its singularities.

Writing with the force of the artful is a kind of thinking in the act. Such a thinking cannot be reduced to normative forms of either critique or the historiography of art. The artful, while it appreciates traditions of art as they invent themselves and singularly co-composes with them, cannot be reduced to them. The gesture of immanent critique takes this seriously, insisting that the artful not be reduced by comparison, evaluation and judgment. What art can do is always a question of the "what else" of potential in a time of its own making, inseparable from its event, embodied not in an object but in the techniques that further and make-felt the force of time.

To practice immanent critique is to care for the con-temporary.

1 Hubert Aquin, "La jeunesse, quel que soit l'âge de ceux qui en sont investis, ne défend pas, elle attaque." in *Comprendre dangereusement*, 1961, <http://quebec.synergiescanada.org/culture/liberte1026896/liberte1026915/30104ac.pdf>

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, Paris: PUF, 1980, 340.