Transfiguration of a Discipline
What is the Point of Interdisciplinarity in Contemporary Art?

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> As though the two were formed of warming wax,
> each clung to each and, mingling in their hues,
> neither now, seemingly, was what it was.
> —*Dante, Inferno, Canto XXV*[1]

Art in the time of liquid modernity

Political-discourse-within-art and art-within-political-discourse are two separate, indeed painfully separate, matters. Within the sphere of contemporary art, political positioning matters hugely, but within most spheres of socio-political discourse *outside* the artworld (academic disciplines, journalism, elections, activism), social issues are not usually discussed by referring to the artworld, nor to aesthetics more generally. I feel this lack of connection most tangibly when, after an intense period of investigating a topic like the democratic merits of participatory art, I find myself outside the library and the museum, discussing some current political issue with, for example, a political philosopher with a predilection for chamber music or an environmentalist who enjoys Hollywood romcoms. To sincerely *demand*, in that context, that the conversation partner should abandon their artistic pastimes and instead apply themselves to avant-garde contemporary art would not only seem strangely meddlesome, but also politically superficial. Whatever buzz we might have felt around a political issue within the artworld, it seems hard or even embarrassing to insist on a deep interest in art when we are in the political "outworld," apart from, perhaps, making a passing reference to an exhibition or offering a stilted illustration of a broader point with an artistic example. After all, we have global inequalities and a burning planet to talk about.

1 Dante Alighieri: *Divine Comedy. Inferno*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick, London 2006, p. 218.

Such compartmentalisation of artistic and political preferences is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it would have seemed strange in the world of our philosophical grandparents, whose writings on art continue to inform the art practice and theory of our own time. Consider, for example, Theodor Adorno's preference for avant-gardist, modernist, dissonant forms of art in his *Aesthetic Theory*, and the way in which that preference is tightly interwoven with Adorno's political philosophy. To philosophers like Adorno—and I do not mean here only those affiliated with the Frankfurt School, but most other political thinkers active within the early-to-mid twentieth century cosmopolitan culture—questions of aesthetics were important because of a broadly shared cultural assumption that *some* alignment between a person's political and aesthetic preferences could be meaningfully expected. But today we have moved firmly beyond such social-political-aesthetic integration. The division of these spheres points, instead, to what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman described as "liquid modernity", that is, late capitalism's regime of total flexibility: of working hours, of software and hardware, of ethical systems, of place, of personal preferences, of culture, all shifting to comply with the fast-changing demands of capital.[2] A modern precarious worker must shift from the working habits of a doctoral student to that of a barista overnight; a global entrepreneur must conform to the asceticism of Saudi Arabia one day, to hedonism of New York the next. Similarly, whatever critical position you take as an artist, art critic or audience member, it seems the position will lose its grip once you mutate into another role: a university bureaucrat, an airline traveller, a precarious wage worker, an Amazon shopper, a voter. Political-discourse-within-art, however committed, remains within its own, separate, discipline of thought and action. This fact weighs heavily, I think, on any artworld participant; it manifests itself as a soft, anxious glow of irrelevance that surrounds politically committed contemporary art when it enters the world-at-large.

I begin with this provocation not because I would wish to engage in some deep pessimism about contemporary art, but because I think that it is under the sign of such anxiety—the anxiety of liquid modernity, the anxiety of always being able to shift one's *modus operandi*—that we should understand some recent developments in art, and, in particular, contemporary art's *interdisciplinary nature*.[3] Despite (or perhaps because of) the potential irrelevance just described, contemporary art has developed a kind of shapeshifting ability that allows the artist to take on the goals

2 Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2000.

3 Following the core ideas of *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman wrote a number of studies on different aspects of society, including an essay on art (Zygmunt Bauman: "Liquid Arts", in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24, no. 1 [2007]). Though this text draws some speculative parallels between Bauman's sociological model and the impermanent materials used by neo-modernist painters, it is not relevant to my aims in this essay.

and practices of other disciplines engaged in producing action or knowledge. The contemporary artist *doubles* as a bioengineer, hacker, researcher, archivist, journalist, activist, among many other roles; she seems to, strangely, *embody* precisely the kind of flexibility that is demanded of us in liquid modernity. We may find a suitable allegory for this kind of shapeshifting in Canto XXV of Dante's *Inferno*, which I have cited in the epigraph, where the damned souls of thieves are compelled to perpetually steal each other's shapes. Dante witnesses how one sinner, in the shape of a lizard, ambushes another: the first tightly embraces the second, then their colours and shapes intermingle, until the lizard becomes a human, and the previously human shade must scuttle away in the lizard's likeness. The shapeshifting nature of interdisciplinary contemporary art, like that of Dante's sinners, is a curse of sorts: it exemplifies the unstable, frenetic structure of liquid modernity. But, at second glance, shapeshifting may also be a capacity: an ability of art to transform ordinary ways of doing and thinking, and to reconnect the disconnected spheres of life.

The present chapter attempts to think through the interdisciplinary structure of contemporary exhibition-based art under the regime of liquid modernity, that is, to think through art's parasitic relation to other disciplines of thought and action. First, I try to define the scope and nature of interdisciplinarity in art, inscribing interdisciplinarity within a longer art historical trajectory (sections 1 and 2). As I argue, interdisciplinarity is much more than a niche phenomenon: it is a defining feature of much critical art practice today, the latest stop in a key current derived from politically engaged postmodernism. At the end of section 2, I offer the concept of "adaptive artforms" to define the specific form of interdisciplinarity in contemporary art. Here, art no longer distinguishes itself as a separate domain of medium, genre, technique or aesthetic experience (traditional conception of autonomy), nor does it organically connect to life and politics (traditional conception of heteronomy); instead, contemporary art is always an adaptation to other disciplines, an act of borrowing from non-artistic disciplines of knowledge or activity. This is also what differentiates exhibition-based art from other contemporary cultural forms, such as literature, feature films or popular music. In the third section of the chapter, I speculate as to what new *criteria* of artistic value follow from this description of contemporary art. Contemporary interdisciplinary art succeeds when it *transfigures* another discipline of knowledge and action, and fails when it is completely *absorbed* into it.

Two examples of adaptive artforms in contemporary art

To get some grip on the concepts of "adaptive artforms" and "transfiguration of a discipline", let me begin by considering two relatively recent art exhibitions. The first is the 2012 Berlin Biennale exhibition, entitled "Forget Fear" and curated by

Artur Žmijewski. The centrepiece of this exhibition was an activist encampment, shown on the exhibition grounds.[4] Two political groups, the German section of the Occupy movement and the Spanish anti-austerity Indignados protesters, were invited to host political events in the main hall. The preceding year, 2011, had seen the beginning of the Occupy, anti-austerity and anti-capitalist protests around the world; these galvanised a new optimism on the Left that the neoliberal consensus in the West could finally be overturned. Tying in with this new grassroots optimism, the artistic projects selected for the 2012 biennial also bristled with political initiative. The artist Khaled Jarrar created unofficial postal and passport stamps for Palestine and stamped them into visitors' passports (*State of Palestine*, 2011-12). Marina Naprushkina's artwork consisted of creating a political opposition newspaper, to be clandestinely distributed in Belarus (*self# governing*, 2012). A third artist, Renzo Martens, created an institute called Institute for Human Activities in the small town of Lusanga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The aim of the institute was to create craft-based traditional sculptures in Congo, sell them in the West, and thereby funnel development funds into this town (the project was ironically called *A Gentrification Program*, 2012-17). Such works, then, emphasised political action and a blending of artistic, organisational and activist tactics. The leading text of the Biennale catalogue, penned by Žmijewski, proclaimed that the curators' work is "the process of arriving at real action within culture, at an artistic pragmatism,"[5] and concluded that "the goal [of making art] is pragmatic—the creation of social and political facts; taking and bearing responsibility for views publicly expressed and decisions taken; real action in the real world and a final farewell to the illusion of artistic immunity."[6]

The goal of the projects at the 2012 Berlin Biennial, then, was not to just *portray* social problems, but to solve them through concrete commitments and actions. These aims are by now readily recognisable as belonging to a particular genre of contemporary art: what we may call art of the social turn or "socially engaged art," that is, art for which both the aims and the means of the project are largely coextensive with non-art, socially ameliorative social work or activism.[7] Curiously, however, if we were to return to the Berlin Biennale only two instantiations later,

4 See https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/biennalen/22/forget-fear, and Artur Žmijewski, Joanna Warsza (eds.): *Forget Fear: 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, Köln 2012.

5 Artur Žmijewski: "Forget Fear - Foreword", in: Žmijewski, Warsza (Eds.): *Forget Fear*, 2012, p. 10.

6 Ibid., pp. 17-18.

7 See, e.g., Grant H. Kester: *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley 2004; Claire Bishop: *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London 2012; Vid Simoniti: "Assessing Socially Engaged Art," in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76, no. 1 (2018).

in 2016, we would encounter a seemingly entirely different set of artistic practices and quite a different political agenda.

Curated by the New York-based DIS collective, the 2016 Berlin Biennale did not engage in grassroots political activism; instead, it explored the consumerism and narcissism that is enabled by contemporary digital technologies. The vanities of Instagram influencers, the mind-numbing fun of YouTube's attention algorithms, the identikit performativity of social media: all of this was foregrounded in a manner that we would today probably associate with the term "post-internet art".[8] The artist Anna Uddenberg showed an installation of department store mannequins, which had smartphones attached to their hands; their limbs were arranged so that they were taking selfies in sexually explicit poses (*Transit Mode* series, 2014-16). These were not merely sculptural installations: the visitors were encouraged to photograph themselves with these mannequins and circulate the photographs on social media, thereby accomplishing the very act of vapid self-promotion that the mannequins represented. At the entrance to one of the galleries, one could see a large cardboard cut-out of the singer Rihanna; this work, called *Ewaipanoma (Rihanna)* (2016), was created by Juan Sebastián Peláez. Rihanna's image had been modified in Photoshop so that her face was transposed onto her chest; the effect was a visual quotation of the mythical headless people of faraway lands, found in medieval legends. Accordingly, the explanatory text vaguely pointed towards the European 'othering' of non-European subjects; but as a fun, attention-grabbing, whacky image, the artwork was more readily recognisable as an appropriation of the aesthetic of online memes. Indeed, the work almost *became* a meme when the real Rihanna photographed herself in front of it and shared the image online.[9] Elsewhere, one could see a work called *Privilege* by Amalia Ulman, though the work that had made this young artist famous shortly before the Berlin Biennale would have been more suitable to its theme: here I have in mind Ulman's presentation of an Instagram account (an online photographic diary profile) as an artwork (*Excellences and Perfections*, 2014).[10] For about five months in 2014, Ulman was posting images of herself engaging in luxury shopping, pole-dancing and high-end yoga, before the narrative took a darker turn and the pictures showed her with bandages after a breast-enlargement operation, simulating pornographic poses, or crying in her hotel room. While Ulman's subscribers initially took her Instagram to be a

8 https://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/; DIS Collective: *9. Berlin Biennale Für Zeitgenössische Kunst = 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, Berlin 2016. For more on post-internet art, see Gene McHugh: *Post Internet: Notes on the Internet and Art 12.29.09>09.05.10*, Brescia 2011; Omar Kholeif (ed.): *You Are Here: Art after the Internet*, Manchester 2015.

9 https://news.artnet.com/art-world/rihanna-stops-off-at-the-berlin-biennale-during-her-anti-tour-611573.

10 Amalia Ulman: *Excellences & Perfections*, London 2018.

genuine representation of the artist's hunger for fame and eventual mental breakdown, she later revealed that it was all merely performance. Gathering such works, the 2016 Biennale, entitled *The Present in Drag*, was, then, a far cry from the anti-establishment earnestness of its 2012 predecessor; instead, it embodied a sort of Andy Warhol mentality for the digital age, allowing the visitors to ironically indulge in the zaniness and posturing that we associate with new online consumerism.

The 2012 and 2016 Berlin Biennials, then, explored widely different artistic positions. Given the diversity of works and themes, we might wonder whether there is anything that they have in common. There is no obvious medium, technique or methodology that a Rihanna meme, an Instagram account, a Belorussian opposition newspaper and a development project in Congo share; nothing obvious that would make us include all of them under the category "contemporary art". Of course, art theory offers an easy way out of the puzzlement: we might say that anything at all can be art, as long as it is recognised as such by members of the artworld.[11] As Arthur Danto claimed, (contemporary) art is engaged in the *transfiguration* of the *commonplace;* and this, we might think, is precisely what is going on here.[12] Just as Marcel Duchamp presented a urinal as art (*Fountain*, 1912), and just as Andy Warhol made silkscreen cubes printed to look exactly like cardboard boxes (*Brillo Boxes*, 1964), we here have artists presenting Instagram accounts or political protests as art. However, there is an important difference at play. By transfiguring the commonplace, Duchamp and Warhol changed a commonplace object into an aesthetic and interpretative one, completely displacing the object's original (mundane) function. The activities shown in the two Berlin exhibitions, by contrast, *retain* much of their original function when they enter the artworld. All these artworks have a kind of second identity: *as* an opposition newspaper, *as* a developmental initiative, *as* an Instagram account, *as* an online meme. They perform their non-art function in a way that Duchamp's urinal or Warhol's packaging boxes certainly do not. In the recent practices, then, the artwork is not only indiscernible from the non-artwork, but it also loses the aura of a definite, autonomous practice of aesthetic contemplation or interpretation. Instead of bringing the commonplace into the artworld, the artist's activity exhibits a strange, liquid-like *adaptability*, oozing into non-art fields, shaping itself into other spheres, disciplines and practices.

Against the old cliché that anything at all can be art, then, we might notice that a certain definitive and recognisable structure has come to define recent art production. It is not that anything can be art: what characterises all these works

11 As per institutional theories of art, such as George Dickie: "Defining Art", in: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6, no. 3 (1969).

12 Arthur C. Danto: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, Mass. 1981.

is something specific, and that something is these works' relation *with another activity or discipline*. This parasitic or relational structure in contemporary exhibition-based art is unusual. It may be contrasted with the more stable identities of the other art kinds of our time (e.g. novels, computer games, feature films, hip hop albums, etc.), which, despite various experimental permutations they have experienced, have remained grounded in a more robust set of media, resources, techniques and conventions, what philosopher Dominic Lopes has called an art kind's *medium-profile*.[13] The medium-profile of oil painting, for example, includes the physical medium of pigments suspended in oil, as well as certain established techniques, like the application of brushstrokes; the medium-profile of comic books might include the convention of segmenting the narrative into panels; and so forth.[14] The medium-profile of the type of contemporary art I am describing here, however, appears not to be some such set of media, genres and conventions, but the process of borrowing from *other* non-art disciplines of knowledge and activity. We may use the term *adaptive artforms* to describe this process. Art becomes the thief trying on another's form; art's identity becomes a transfiguration of another discipline.

It may be objected that I am overstating the case; that the exhibitions I am describing simply track art's turn towards heteronomy, that is, towards political commitment and "real-world" engagement that has clearly been the hallmark of the "critical postmodernism" of contemporary art, even more so since the 1990s and the globalised era of biennial-based art.[15] However, the distinction I am hoping to draw is both more modest and more *specific*, and is perhaps more easily noticed if we compare biennial-based art with other contemporaneous art forms. Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* (2016) is aligned with the concerns of Black Lives Matter movement, but it is hard to imagine an R&B singer who would organise a political march and declared that to be *her album*. Gianfranco Rosi's film *Fire at Sea* (2016) is a powerful combination of storytelling and documentary, tracing life on the Italian island of Lampedusa at the height of the refugee crisis; by applying directorial decisions typical of fiction to film footage that is entirely 'real', the work can clearly be described as belonging to a mixing of art and "life", rather than film for film's sake. Still, no film director would create a workshop for refugees and enter that project into a film festival *as a film*. Salman Rushdie's novel *The Golden House* (2017) is a thinly fictionalised portrayal of the (real) election of Donald Trump; but the

13 This is a rough characterisation of medium-profiles. Lopes attempts a more precise (and also more complex) definition, see Dominic McIver Lopes: *Beyond Art*, Oxford 2014, pp. 133-42.

14 As Lopes rightly notes, the invocation of medium-profiles need not lead us to modernist, medium-centred theories of Clement Greenberg and similar critics. Ibid., pp. 135-38.

15 See, e.g. Terry Smith: *What Is Contemporary Art?*, Chicago 2009; Pamela M. Lee: *Forgetting the Art World*, Cambridge, Mass. 2012.

writer is not publishing an opposition newspaper *as* his latest novel. In all this intermingling of art's autonomy and heteronomy, the conventions governing other cultural forms remain today more solid than those of exhibition-based art, and do not exhibit the same adaptability to target disciplines.

These comparisons are schematic, and probably overstate the stability of artforms like contemporary music and film. Indeed, the bolder claim to make would be that we can see a degree of adaptability and "transfiguration of discipline" across the arts of liquid modernity, but, as it is, let us proceed with the focus on exhibition-based contemporary art, where adaptability can be observed most acutely.

The scope of adaptive artforms: "artist as…" and the "turns" of contemporary art

A reader well-informed of developments in recent art might have already recognised that my discussion of adaptive artforms, and their attendant interdisciplinarity, captures a phenomenon broader than the two Berlin Biennale examples. Since at least the 1990s, we may notice this trend spreading through exhibition-based art in a series of what art historians and critics have designated artistic "turns", such as the site-specific turn, social turn, archival turn, curatorial turn, pedagogic turn, as well as in the various "artist as …" locutions, such as artist *as* researcher, *as* ethnographer, *as* scientist, *as* environmentalist. What these developments have in common, as I shall now go on to illustrate, is that they involve artistic projects which borrow their methodology from other disciplines. The scope of adaptive artforms, therefore, is much broader than a few isolated examples.

The turn to "site-specificity" is perhaps the earliest term used by art critics and historians to describe the trend of adaptability. "Site-specificity" was initially used to denote sculptural work which responded to the particularities of the landscape or space where it was exhibited. As art historian Miwon Kwon has argued in her seminal study *One Place After Another*, by the 1990s "site-specificity" came to denote something broader: not just sculptural work, but a methodology of responding to the social and institutional characteristics of a given "site" or location.[16] For Kwon, "site-specificity" thereby also came to include works previously theorised under the label "institutional critique"—a good example is the artist Fred Wilson's project *Mining the Museum* (1993), which responded to the "site" of the Maryland Historical Society museum by rearranging the collection, foregrounding histories of American slavery in the process. For instance, Wilson juxtaposed a sedan chair used by the governor of Maryland, and a baby carriage containing a Ku-Klux-Klan hood,

16 Miwon Kwon: *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Mass. 2002.

and then attached to the display a harrowingly simple label: "Modes of Transport 1770-1910."[17] Wilson achieved the chilling effect by appropriating the most prosaic methodologies of non-art museum curating: creating a narrative by juxtaposing items, affixing labels and adopting a neutral and objective mode of address.[18]

Other recent "turns" in contemporary art exhibit a comparable adaptability. We have already mentioned the so-called "social turn" in art, also describable as "useful art" or "socially engaged art": all these labels describe the moment when methodologies of activism, community organising and international development are practised within an artistic context. As said, here the activity of the artist becomes nearly indistinguishable from the activities of a non-art social worker or activist. The "Forget Fear" Berlin Biennale, discussed above, is a perfect example, as are many other artistic programmes, for example those associated with the work of curators like Mary Jane Jacob and Nato Thompson, and artists like Suzanne Lacy, Tania Bruguera and Theaster Gates.[19]

But aside from the social turn there are, in fact, many more such "turns". The ethnographic turn, and associated terms "artist as anthropologist" and "artist as ethnographer," has come to denote a slightly different subset of artists: those who double as social investigators rather than social instigators. Artists-as-ethnographers typically enter a disadvantaged community, spend some time within, and report their findings, whereby, as Hal Foster noted, "it is the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the committed artist most often struggles."[20] Martha Rosler's art project on homelessness in New York, *If You Lived Here...* (1989) is a good example, encompassing, as it did, three exhibitions which presented in-depth information on housing and homelessness; other representative artists include Hans Haacke, Alfredo Jaar, Gülsün Karamustafa, Allan Sekula, Camille Henrot and Omer Fast.[21]

The term "archival turn" meanwhile points to an overlapping subset of artists who work with various archives, often producing work that borders that of a historical exhibition, though often with a personal touch (e.g. some works of Elizabeth Price, Jeremy Deller, Goshka Macuga, Danh Võ).[22] More broadly, we may here speak

17 Fred Wilson, Howard Halle: "Mining the Museum", in: *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993), p. 159.

18 For discussion of this piece see Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 2002, p. 47; Hal Foster: *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass. 1996, p. 191.

19 Kester: *Conversation Pieces*, 2004; Bishop: *Artificial Hells*, 2012; Simoniti: "Assessing Socially Engaged Art", 2018.

20 Hal Foster: "The Artist as Ethnographer" in: Foster: *The Return of the Real*, 1996, p. 173ff.

21 See also Joseph Kosuth: "The Artist as Anthropologist", in: Joseph Kosuth: *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, pp. 107-128.

22 Hal Foster: "An Archival Impulse", in: *October* 110 (2002), pp. 3-22; Charles Merewether: *The Archive*, Cambridge, Mass. 2005.

of the idea of "artistic research", which is perhaps the broadest category, and suggests the incorporation of any number of research methods into the work of artists, usually within a university setting.[23] The work of the artist-researcher collective Forensic Architecture merits special mention here; part of a trend recently identified as "evidence-based art",[24] this collective combines attractive design with precise empirical methods to forensically reconstruct various violent events (be it in the context of war or civilian life), in at least one case leading to the presentation of their work in a court of law as evidence.[25]

Meanwhile, other adaptable artforms share methodologies with technological engineering. In the 1990s and early 2000s, "net artists" used simple HTML code to create art in the form of websites (e.g. Olia Lialina, Keith Obadike and the eToy collective); above we have already met some representatives of "post-internet art", some of whom may be considered as the inheritors of this approach.[26] In the 1990s and 2000s, new technology-driven futures were also suggested by advances in biotechnology, and this gave rise to artistic movements sometimes grouped under the labels "bio art" or "sci-art" (e.g. the work of Eduardo Kac, Paul Vanouse, Beatriz da Costa, Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr, the Critical Art Ensemble and Maja Smrekar).[27] Eco-artworks, meanwhile, have become distinguished from land art in that they do not only consist of aesthetic interventions in a landscape (e.g. Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria), but incorporate the methods and disciplines of ecology and environmental care for the environment in order to accomplish the specific and often quantifiable goal of repairing environmentally destroyed land (e.g. the work of Agnes Denes, Mark Dion and Alan Sonfist).[28] In the wake of the financial crash of 2008, some artists' collectives have even incorporated financial technologies into their work; for example, the Robin Hood collective have created an artist-run investment mechanism, the artist collective Okhaos have incorporated blockchain

23 Christopher Frayling: "Research in Art and Design", in: *Royal College of Art Research Papers* 1, no. 1 (1993); James Elkins (ed.): *Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, 2nd ed., Washington 2014.

24 Andrew McGibbon: *Evidently Art*, podcast audio (2019), https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0007bk3

25 https://forensic-architecture.org/. Eyal Weizman: *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, Cambridge, Mass. 2017.

26 Rachel Greene: *Internet Art*, London 2004; Lauren Cornell, Ed Halter (eds.): *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Mass. 2015.

27 See, e.g., Beatriz Da Costa, Kavita Philip: *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*, Cambridge, Mass. 2008; Vid Simoniti: "The Living Image in Bio-Art and in Philosophy", in: *Oxford Art Journal*, 42, no. 2 (2019).

28 Jeffrey Kastner, Brian Wallis: *Land and Environmental Art*, London 2005; T. J. Demos: *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin 2016; *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, Berlin 2017.

technologies into their work, while the Rolling Jubilee group evolved their art projects into a financial instrument aiming to bring about debt relief.[29] In all these cases, the identity of a project as *art* is parasitic upon another discipline for creating knowledge or undertaking political action.

The introduction of the different "turns" and "artist as" locutions in recent art historical scholarship has been important in documenting such practices and enabling individual artists to stake their claim to a specific identity of "artist as…" or "artist and…" (in the footnotes I have only included a fraction of the literature that already exists on each of these subgenres). However, we may also observe that the introduction of these seemingly diverse categories obscures the scale of the change. Considering each category separately, one has the impression of studying a hyperspecialised subculture of the contemporary artworld (such as "environmental art" or "bio-art"), however, if we put these together, we see that they represent a change of significant proportions; indeed, perhaps even the *mainstream* of what we understand under the label "contemporary art".

Looking beyond the specialist interest of interdisciplinarity, we will notice that some of the most recognizable ("mainstream") names of contemporary art could be reasonably related to some "artist as" category or other; for example: Olafur Eliasson (eco-art), Suzanne Lacy (socially engaged art), Hito Steyer (artist-as-ethnographer of digital culture), Kara Walker (the archival turn), Ai Weiwei (art-as-activism). Contemporary art is a diverse field in terms of its poetics and themes, but it is surprisingly common to find this ability of artists to inhabit methodologies of other fields, be it social work, ethnography, journalism, financial engineering, artificial intelligence design, biotechnology or something else. Indeed, at least for the "critical" subsection of the artworld, which is not primarily commercial but geared towards the twin goals of formal experimentation and political critique,[30] we might even venture the proposal that the concept "adaptive artforms" is more informative than those more rigid media-based subcategories like "video art", "performance art" or "installation". Though Olafur Eliasson largely makes installation and Agnes Denes largely makes land art, it is their adaptive identity of artists-as-ecologists that makes it meaningful to read their practices

29 See P. Piironen and A. Virtanen: "Democratizing the Power of Finance: A Discussion About Robin Hood Asset Management Cooperative with Founder Akseli Virtanen", in: Geert Lovink, Nathaniel Tkacz, Patricia de Vries (eds.): *Moneylab Reader*, Amsterdam 2015; Laura Lotti: "Contemporary Art, Capitalization and the Blockchain: On the Autonomy and Automation of Art's Value", in: *Finance and Society* 2, no. 2 (2016); Yates McKee: *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, London 2017.

30 For a convincing division of the artworld into two such subsets, see Malcolm Bull: "The Two Economies of World Art", in: Jonathan Harris (ed.): *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, London 2011.

together, and it is through that lens that their work invites either positive or negative critique.

What explains this shift towards interdisciplinary, project-based artforms since the 1990s is an important art historical question, one that has not yet had a comprehensive answer.[31] Among the more immediate causes, the most important is perhaps the rise of the large-scale temporary survey exhibition on the biennial model, which has come to play a large role in how contemporary art is displayed and received in the post-Cold War era. Biennials have often conceptualised the art exhibition as not merely a display of the newest trends, but also an opportunity for social amelioration of the host city through socially engaged projects.[32] The "de-skilling" and academicisation of arts education, which begun in the 1960s and intensified in the 1990s, is perhaps another factor—in particular the rise of art PhD programmes and the need to justify these through a notion of "artistic research"—simultaneously, we may note the rise of "art residencies" in institutions not usually associated with art, such as hospitals, archives, science laboratories and so forth.[33] Apart from such immediate causes, we may also inscribe the history of adaptable artforms within the longer trend of experimentation in art since the 1960s: the process that art historian Rosalind Krauss first described using the term the "expanded field" of art, and later "the post-medium condition".[34] The field now somewhat infelicitously called "contemporary art", and which originated in institutions traditionally associated with sculpture and painting, should now be better understood (as Peter Osborne has convincingly argued)[35] as post-conceptual art, that is, as growing out of those forms and processes in the 1960s that obliged artists to incorporate (often haphazardly and experimentally) the media and procedures of conceptual, non-art disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and theory broadly speaking. Therefore, artists representative of Conceptual Art, institutional critique and other forms of critical postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s—such as Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthears, Hans Haacke, Mary Kelly, Suzanne Lacy, Adrian Piper or Robert Smithson—can be seen as preparing the terrain for labels such as art-

31 Kwon: *One Place After Another* and Bishop: *Artificial Hells* are perhaps two of the most informative studies in this regard, though they focus not on interdisciplinarity as such, but on site-specificity and participation in art, respectively.

32 Anthony Gardner, Charles Green: *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art*, Chichester 2016, 183-205, p. 275.

33 Howard Singerman: *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley 1999; Elkins: *Artists with PhDs*, 2014. There is less published on artists' residencies, but see OMC Working Group: "Policy Handbook on Artists' Residencies", in: *European Union: European Agenda for Culture* (2014), pp. 15-24; and https://www.transartists.org/residency-history

34 Rosalind E. Krauss: *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 1999.

35 Peter Osborne: *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London 2013.

as-philosophy, art-as-research or art-as-ecology, which can be more systematically affixed to art since the 1990s.

With this outline of the longer view of artistic transfiguration of other disciplines now in place, we can more confidently assert both the definition of adaptive artforms and a claim about their pervasiveness.

> **An adaptive artform** is a kind of art, the medium-profile of which is the transfiguration of another, non-artistic discipline of knowledge or activity.

The medium of contemporary art is another discipline of thought or action. The interdisciplinarity in question here is then quite different from the sort that arises in either the humanities or the natural sciences, where multiple established methodologies of knowledge-creation are combined to create new insights. Instead, we have a one-way, parasitic relation, where the artist obtains a secondary discipline, but where it is not yet clearly mandated *what* the artist herself contributes to it by means of methodology. As to the pervasiveness of adaptive artforms, it seems that once the different "turns" and "artist-as" phenomena are combined and salvaged from terminological fragmentation, adaptive artforms constitute a central mode of production in contemporary exhibition-based art.

Criteria for contemporary art: transfiguration of a discipline and absorption into a discipline

Adaptive artforms present us with a paradigmatic shift in artistic activity that requires us to rethink the notions of artistic autonomy and heteronomy—art's independence from the broader world, and its embeddedness within it. In the 1960s and 70s, artistic experimentation with commonplace materials led to concepts like Arthur Danto's "transfiguration of the commonplace" and Rosalind Krauss' "expanded field", both of which justify the expansion of the field of art into the seemingly non-artistic.[36] But in contrast to these avant-garde predecessors, adaptive artforms force us to rethink not only what art *is*, but what its value is, and especially, what *criteria* we use to evaluate it.[37]

Though the two are closely connected, the issue of art's identity (what is art?) is theoretically separable from the issue of art's evaluative criteria (what is good art?); which question logically precedes the other is by no means a given. When

36 Arthur C. Danto: "The Artworld", in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964); Rosalind Krauss: "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", in: *October* 8 (1979).

37 For a persuasive analysis of conflicting autonomous and heteronomous values in contemporary art, see Jason Gaiger: "Value Conflict and the Autonomy of Art," in: Owen Hulatt (ed.): *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy*, London 2013.

Danto and Krauss, for example, included commonplace objects in the domain of art appreciation, the definition of art was expanded, but the intended *value* of such objects, and the criteria for evaluating them, arguably remained closely connected to high modernist art criticism, which these thinkers, albeit in different ways, emerged from. Danto, for instance, included Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes,* indistinguishable from mere cardboard boxes, under the purview of 'art'; but the transfiguration of the commonplace here has to do with bringing the commonplace *into* the artworld's "atmosphere" of artistic interpretation, of including them in the search for "embodied meaning" in the objects' aesthetic form.[38] Krauss's poststructuralist critical programme was quite different, but it similarly established a kind of continuity between the new commonplace objects and older art. However different the humble, cheap plastic objects of Minimalism were from more ostentatious modernist sculpture, Krauss could demonstrate a continuity between the two precisely by treating both as art *in the same way,* that is, by demonstrating a connection between them through a structuralist analysis of their form.[39] Even as previously non-art objects were permitted inside the museum, art's autonomy was preserved by leaving intact art's *rules of engagement*: contemplation, interpretation, aesthetic appreciation.

With adaptive art, on the other hand, art's autonomy is shattered precisely when it comes to those rules of engagement and the associated question of artistic *criteria*. Here we have a case of artists seeming to break into the reference frame of non-art *disciplines*: activism, bioengineering, archiving, and so forth. How, then, are these projects to be evaluated? By the standards of these other, non-art disciplines? And if so, what makes them succeed or fail; and what distinguishes the best of them as meaningful and valuable artistic activity?

There are, of course, various avant-garde precedents that have attempted to achieve a break with distinctly artistic criteria of assessing art, to reach that elusive merging of art and 'life' that would render the value of individual artistic activities entirely comprehensible from the perspective of some non-art sphere or discipline of activity. Recall, for instance, Walter Benjamin's defence of the 'operating writer' in "The Author as Producer", in which he cites as an exemplar the Soviet playwright Sergei Tretiakov, an artist allegedly perfectly embedded within the proletariat:

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38 Danto: "The Artworld", 1964, p. 579; Danto: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 1981, p. 135, pp. 47-48; Arthur C. Danto: "Embodied Meanings, Isotypes, and Aesthetical Ideas", in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (2007), pp. 121-129, at p. 125.

39 Krauss tries to construct such a connecting "logical structure" between old and new art in Krauss: "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", 1979, p. 44. But Krauss' strategy may also be noted, more implicitly, in the way she connects, for example, the work of early modernists like Auguste Rodin with the postmodernism of her own time. See, e.g., Rosalind E. Krauss: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass. 1986, pp. 151ff.

> Tretiakov went to the "Communist Lighthouse" commune and […] set about the following tasks: calling mass meetings; collecting funds to pay for tractors; persuading independent peasants to enter the *kolkhoz*; inspecting the reading rooms; creating wall newspapers and editing the kolkhoz newspaper; reporting for Moscow newspapers; introducing radio and mobile movie houses; and so on. It is not surprising that the book *Commanders of the Field*, which Tretiakov wrote following these stays, is said to have had considerable influence on the further development of collective agriculture.[40]

Tretiakov's successful influence on non-art political life might have been overestimated by Benjamin; Tretiakov was purged, like most Soviet avant-garde artists, and committed suicide in prison in 1937. Still, we may find here an early avant-garde *ideal* of artistic criteria that transcend artistically autonomous ones: a radical heteronomy, whereby what makes Tretiakov good *as an artist* seems to be not just a political *message* communicated through an artistic medium, but his direct influence and activity within something as utterly practical as the development of collective agriculture.[41] Contemporary echoes of Benjamin's radically heteronomous take on art can be heard in Artur Žmijewski's insistence on "real actions in real world", cited above, as well as in Tania Bruguera's concept of "useful art", Arte Útil, in what I have, elsewhere, tried to sum up as the "pragmatic view of artistic value."[42]

If such a radically heteronomous position feels somewhat inconclusive, that is because both Benjamin in the early twentieth century and his artistic heirs today have been more concerned with defending the general idea of a wholly politically committed art, rather than with critical differentiation of projects *within* their paradigm. Today, socially engaged art (and other forms of adaptive art) have become widespread. Therefore, an artist who merely *proclaims* their total willingness to be useful, to create social change, or to adapt the mechanisms of another discipline, cannot merely in virtue of that proclamation count as successful or worthy of attention. The correct criterion for evaluating particular socially engaged artistic projects cannot be simply novelty that may derive from comparison with other artworks; it must derive from the broadest possible sphere of political or intellectual activity. Projects by the likes of Bruguera or Žmijewski ought only to be praised if they can be shown to have made tangible changes to society, when compared

40 Walter Benjamin: "The Author as Producer", in: Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Howard Smith, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, pp. 768-782 at p. 770.

41 Peter Bürger's writing is another variant on such a radically heteronomous, conception of artistic value. Peter Bürger: *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis 1984.

42 Simoniti: "Assessing Socially Engaged Art", 2018, p. 76. See also Tania Bruguera: "Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)", http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/592-0-Reflexions+on+Arte+til+Useful+Art.htm; Žmijewski: "Forget Fear – Foreword", 2012.

with similar *non-art* social projects.[43] Interestingly, it is today still quite rare for socially engaged artworks to pass such a test. For example, Tania Bruguera, one of the most celebrated contemporary socially engaged artist, conceived of The Immigrant Movement International (2011–) as a socially engaged art project, which would be "a long-term art project in the form of an artist initiated socio-political movement."[44] Among other activities, Bruguera had planned to shadow politicians, organise various campaigns and start a political party for migrants. In one instantiation, the project offered workshops directed at Spanish-speaking migrants, hosted by the Queens Museum in New York. But it is hard to see, at least from publicly available materials, whether the project had a tangible impact beyond a few workshops (including a children's orchestra and a laughter-therapy session), and therefore, whether the project's goals would not have been much better achieved had Bruguera simply donated her arts funding to one of the myriad successful organisations already working with migrants in New York, such as "The Door" or "The Safe Passage Project".[45]

If we look beyond socially engaged art towards other adaptive artforms, we can observe the same problem, and it therefore seems we should draw corresponding conclusions. By saying this, I do not at all mean to suggest that artists-as-archivists, as-ecologist, as-researchers and so forth should be graded on their social utility: on the contrary, the target disciplines that they seek to infiltrate do not aim for social amelioration or activism. The parallel is to be drawn at a higher level of generality. Just as socially engaged artists try to infiltrate the non-art field of social work, and therefore subject themselves to criteria applied in that sphere of activity, so the adaptive artists of other genres subject themselves to the criteria of another non-art discipline. And this is a dangerous operation. While adaptive artforms might garner much praise in the artworld for their conceptual, technological or environmental prowess, the danger is that they will be considered amateurish mediocrities by the standards of their target discipline.

This is what we might call the *problem of absorption*: when adaptive artworks assimilate themselves completely to a target discipline of knowledge or action, but exhibit only moderate achievement within that discipline.[46] The case of a socially

43 See footnote 42.

44 http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/486-0-Immigrant+Movement+International.htm; http://www.queensmuseum.org/immigrant-movement-international

45 Larne Abse Gogarty criticises Arte Útil on the separate grounds that 'usefulness' is a notion too close to state mechanisms of social amelioration: "…[social art practice] seeks to 'mirror' and thus exceed the workings of state and capital from a supposedly progressive perspective". (Larne Abse Gogarty: "'Usefulness' in Contemporary Art and Politics", in: *Third text* (2017), pp. 1-16 at p. 11.)

46 I discuss 'absorption' with regards to bio-art in Vid Simoniti: "Artistic Research at the Edge of Science", in: *OAR: The Oxford Artistic and Practice Based Research Platform*, no. 1 (2017).

engaged artist who is not as impactful as the non-art social worker is then merely a special case of a more general potential failure of contemporary art today. The problem of absorption is to be seen in *artistic research* that is actually just research without academic standards, in bio-art that is just obsolete bioengineering, in conceptual artists that are just half-formed philosophers, in artivism that is just a miniscule part of a bigger movement, in ecological art that is just a less efficient form of ecological innovation, in "post-internet art" that is just a less funny and less appealing version of what influencers put on Instagram, and so forth. To prevent such absorption, the adaptive artist must do more than merely employ the old operations of modernist art criticism, and certainly a lot more than just sprinkle a few art-historical references on top of the practice. Indeed, to prevent absorption, the adaptive artist must achieve something quite difficult: she must attempt to make something that can be recognised as adding value to the target discipline itself, *transfiguring* that discipline so that the "artistic contribution", the artistic "extra", is in fact something that is valuable not just in the artworld, but in the "outworld" as well.

An example of successfully resisting absorption can be seen, in my view, in the work of the collective Forensic Architecture, who combine forensic research with design and cinematography. *The Murder of Halit Yozgat* (2017) is one such work, building on the collective's precise re-investigation of a racially motivated murder of Yozgat, a German man of Turkish origins.[47] The piece was originally shown in one of the exhibition halls at *documenta* 14, in Kassel, the city where the murder took place. Forensic Architectures' video piece painstakingly reconstructs the murder scene, using 3D modelling and other modes of re-enactment, and the final installation is an arresting visual presentation of the evidence that Forensic Architecture and their collaborators have gathered from interviews, leaked police documents and other data. The positive assessment of *The Murder of Halit Yozgat* is, of course, my own and there may be disagreement here as to the extent of the work's achievement. What matters for our purposes, however, is the sort of criteria that may be used to establish the work's success. Firstly, the value of the work seems to be instantly legible from the point of view of the non-art spheres of criminal justice and anti-racist activism. With patience, thoroughness and methodological rigour, Forensic Architecture distinguish themselves within those target fields (indeed, some of their other works have even been presented in courts of law). Secondly, while the work is presented in an art context, there are no attempts to insert characteristically artistic devices (such as art-historical references or artworld discourse) *just for the sake* of making the work conform to expectations of artistic autonomy. Nothing in the work detracts from its primary, heteronomous aim, which is legible from the non-art spheres of investigative reporting and social justice. Thirdly, we may

47 https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-murder-of-halit-yozgat

detect within the work certain concerns familiar from the artworld (though not exclusive to it), such as dramaturgy, pacing, visual design and the final presentation as a public art installation. These insertions differentiate the work from "forensics as usual" and prevent the work's total absorption into non-art; yet such insertions are all subject to valuation from the point of view of that non-art discipline itself.

If the task of the artists of the 1960s was to achieve what Arthur Danto called the "transfiguration of the commonplace"—the imbuing of an ordinary object with meaning and aesthetic value—then we might say that the task of the contemporary adaptive artforms is the "transfiguration of a discipline." In the work of Forensic Architecture, non-art modes of thinking and doing (forensics, investigative journalism and social justice advocacy) are brought into the artworld, where they are transfigured through certain methodological distancings and twists (dramaturgic placing, public installation, design), the value of which, however, remains comprehensible from the point of view of the target discipline. In other examples, we can speak of an insertion of irreverence into museology (Grayson Perry), of lived experience into philosophy (Adrian Piper), of discomfort into reality television (Christoph Schlingensief) or of open-endedness into archival work (Elizabeth Price). Elizabeth Price's *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* (2012), for example, is a video that collages together archival video footage of a department store fire in 1979. Like other works by Price, this work is highly informed by archival research and indeed *looks* somewhat like a remix of different archival reels. If the aim of an archive is to store and rationally order materials to historical events, Price's work can be seen as pursuing at least a compatible aim, though it certainly accomplishes that aim in an unusual way, layering the reconstruction of the department store fire with other images and symbols, both exciting and melancholy. Price's work, in other words, is not just a pale imitation of existing archival practices; it attempts their transfiguration. At their best, then, adaptive artworks modify some standard ways of thinking and acting that exist within target disciplines, and do so in ways that can be perceived as valuable from the purview of those disciplines themselves.

Rather than an autonomous field of activity, art becomes an experimental balancing act at the edge of other disciplines: aiming at transfiguration of a discipline and risking absorption into it. One consequence of the criteria proposed here, then, is a strong heteronomy, reminiscent of Benjamin's demands in *The Author as Producer*: a shift away from artistic criteria, and towards the incorporation of art into the criteria of other disciplines. Just as Benjamin wanted the operational writer's work to be recognizable from the viewpoint of the *kolkhoz* farmers rather than of art critics, we should take the true judges of adaptive artforms to be those embedded within the target disciplines. The contemporary artist must, further, acquire *true expertise* in another field, and perhaps even a degree of distinction recognizable from within it. And as regards the modes of display and discussion of art, both curating and criticism now demand juxtaposition of art with the relevant *non*-art

practices. (In fact, both Berlin Biennale exhibitions that I discussed at the beginning of the chapter accomplished this, showing art and non-art alongside each other: be it protest art alongside the Occupy encampment, or digital art alongside YouTube videos.) In the age of adaptive arts, the activity of artists, critics, curators and theorists alike should be thrown open, expanding from the positions within the artworld to demand a much greater variety of experience and expertise.

Coda

The picture painted here may look like a sad one. Art may seem to have been discarded like a useless cocoon out of which fly the butterflies of other, healthier disciplines. This is a peculiar "end of art": not the deadening aestheticism abhorred by Hegel and Heidegger,[48] nor the pluralistic museum of postmodern forms imagined by Arthur Danto,[49] but rather a transformation of anything recognizably artistic into *techne*, into hard-nosed activism and research.

A sense of art's ending—a nostalgia for the old or a disappointment with the new—occurs whenever art radically changes its function. And it is true that the adaptive, interdisciplinary artforms of today do not yet give us unequivocal reason for celebration. Much of interdisciplinary art that we see in galleries, biennials and art schools today falls under "absorption" rather than "transfiguration": the supposedly activist artworks that pale in comparison to resolute action, the dull displays of sci-art that replicate the tedium of research but none of its brilliance, the artistic statements that begin with "in his critical practice…" and then gesture at some half-digested philosophy. More often than not, we think: but were we not better off *just* engaging in politics, or science, or philosophy? Like the thieves punished in Dante's *Inferno*, the artists' borrowing of others' forms can be chaotic and misdirected. Still, Dante's *Divine Comedy* may also offer quite a different, more encouraging comparison here: Dante's is a text that conjoined the "disciplines" of his time—theology, poetry, political rhetoric, natural philosophy—though at a point of pre-modernity, where we of course cannot yet speak of disciplinary specialisation and when it was still possible for a single person to be a master of more than one form of knowledge. In (liquid) modernity, integration of disciplines is not possible in the same manner.

If one is to look for optimism and potential in new interdisciplinary art, it is not to be found in a fantasy of the full integration of varied disciplines, nor in imaginings of "specifically artistic" modes of knowing. The contemporary artist (or, for

48 Martin Heidegger: "The Origin of the Work of Art", in: *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 1-56, at pp. 50-52.

49 Arthur C. Danto: *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton 1997.

that manner, the contemporary philosopher, sociologist, historian…) cannot be a Dante who transforms and integrates various fields of knowledge into a coherent work. "Transfiguration" of a discipline must be something more piecemeal: a glitching at the edges, a reflective distance, an unexpected but rewarding modification of the ordinary methodology. If liquid modernity is a time in which we conform to many fragmented forms of thinking and doing (in the service of capital, bureaucracy, peer review…), then art's potential is in the momentary escape from that disciplinary control. Whether art's escape can succeed more often than in isolated instances, time will tell.