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Poetics of History in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the historical consciousness that characterises some trends in contemporary art. Our working hypothesis is that contemporary art differs from postmodern art in that it appropriates the past in different ways, with the intention of exercising ideological criticism and having an immediate impact on the present; in other words, that contemporary art seeks to have an immediate social effect by activating repressed potentialities of our present and “redividing the sensible” (Rancière).

The first step in developing this argument will be an analysis of the concept of *contemporaneity* based on the work of significant theorists of aesthetics and contemporary art. In this analysis we will encounter concepts that are fundamental to an understanding of current art, such as *contemporaneity* itself (Osborne, Smith), *heterochronicity* (Bourdieu, Moxey), *anachronism* (Rancière, Agamben) and *suspension of history* (Ross), which we will also briefly analyse.

Lastly I will present two recent works taken from documenta 14 (2014) in order to discuss the applicability of these concepts and also to gather up new issues and practices to enrich future research. I will analyse two complex projects, the one by Irena Haiduk in Kassel, *Exacting Socialist Realism*, and the one articulated around *The Society of Friends of Halit*.

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1. Contemporary Art and History

This paper explores the historical consciousness that characterises some trends in contemporary art. This *zeitgeist* presents itself in a very particular mode in art that deals with historical events, because such art usually shows a rather refined relation with past and present times. Thus some of our essential references in the development of our argument come from works of current art. We will start by introducing some examples taken from a well-known artistic event, the documenta (17).



Figure 1. Otobong Nkanga, *Carved to Flow* (2017), performance and installation. Irena Haiduk (Belgrade, 1982) gave the visitor a chance to taste the atmosphere of the Yugoslav communist world, witness feminist performances related to the history of the Balkans and participate in an economic project on the footwear industry in the former republic of Yugoslavia. Antonio Vega Macotella (Mexico, 1979) reconstructed a mill, driven by slaves, that was used to mint coins in Bolivia during the colonial era. Visitors could drive the mill, with their own strength, to mint coins and bitcoins, while at the same time collaborating in a project to create awareness of colonial history and its persistence in current power relations. Otobong Nkanga introduced the visitor to the exploitation of primary resources in unprotected regions and cultures. She has built a soap laboratory that runs with raw materials from many different Mediterranean and African countries. By buying a soap bar in Kassel, the visitor can take part in a sustainable circular economy that brings benefits back to some of the affected communities through the foundation funded by the artist during the documenta.² Maria Eichhorn (Bamberg, Germany, 1962), in *Rose Valland Institute*, researched and documented the expropriation of property formerly owned by Europe's Jewish population before World War II and the impact of those confiscations. She has played an important role in the restitution of artworks. She is also interested in questioning the structures of artistic institutions. Máret Anne Sara (Hammerfest, Norway, 1983) researches on the reindeer culls in Norway, which, being regulated by state

² It is a complex process that in August 2018 still seems to be working. There are even projects that were still not defined during the documenta: <http://www.carvedtoflow.com/> (last visit: August 2018).

laws, require the Sámi to indiscriminately slaughter many heads of reindeer. She also reports on other brutal huntings and their related historic practices (such as buffalo hunting in the US), denouncing atrocious consequences for animal lives and related human communities. In this project, Sara has also helped her brother challenge state-ordered culls that are seen to undermine the Sámi community's struggle to preserve its culture and identity after centuries of "Norwegianisation". *The Society of Friends of Halit* was founded – by members of the victims' communities – after a series of murders of citizens of foreign origin in Kassel and Dortmund in the 2000s. Since then the society has investigated many of the unsolved crimes and has revealed how police inquiries and court decisions have been strongly influenced by racist tendencies in society.



Figure 2. Maria Eichhorn, “*Unlawfully Acquired Books from Jewish Ownership*”, part of the *Rose Valland Institute* project. Unlawfully acquired books from Jewish ownership by the Berliner Stadtbibliothek in 1943, registered in the book of acquisitions.

Practices such as these have become quite common in the current artistic landscape. They share an interest in recovering collective memories in order

not just to denounce old injustices but to reappropriate them in a poietic way, that is, in a productive and performative manner. Practices of this kind are intended to have an impact on the artists' own current communities, without waiting for a more critical consciousness to take root in younger generations. In the following pages I will take these artistic projects as representative of the contemporary historical consciousness and will characterise them using temporal categories drawn from current philosophers and art historians.

Although I am using these artworks and ideas to develop a general concept of "the contemporary", my position is not essentialist". Since our age is complex and plural, many other current artistic practices can represent our contemporaneity; but not all of them. A characterisation must also be operative and, therefore, in some way also exclusive.

2. Being Contemporary as Being Historical (Rancière)

We will start with the conception of time that lies behind the term 'contemporary'. If we want to find a stronger meaning for contemporary than just being synonymous with coetaneous (as in "they are the same age"), then we have to find a deeper relationship between two (contemporary) things than merely being the same age. We could then state that two things are contemporary when they belong to a particular order of things that evolve in a set direction. Rather, two things become contemporary because they relate to each other in building a sense of time. Therefore, time does not exist before the events but is made by the events, when two or more things or actions become significant for others and become the epicentre of

a historical context. Thus, we can say that being contemporary is like being a reflection of an age. Something is contemporary when, rather than reflecting or copying its time, it has an impact on it and is influential or historical.

Rancière has defined the fact of being historical in an analogous but still more radical way. Being historical means breaking with one's own age. Since the concept of an age belongs to a static, immobile notion of history, being part of a time that passes must mean breaking with a static model of time. Rancière relates resistance to change to a tendency to stop history. In his view, historians also try to control time through important historiographical categories, most notably the concept of the age and the concept of chronology. An age or period is a long interval of historical time that is, by definition, internally coherent or homogeneous. History defines common features for an age, features that last throughout the period but are not found in other ages. The concept of the age thus defines what is possible in a given period and what is not.

Much the same applies to the concept of chronology. A chronology is a chain of events that establishes a law of causality or a logic of necessity between one event and the next. Through such an account, historiography again avoids unexpected events and controls what is possible in the order of a progression. In so doing, recorded history builds a paradigm in which an eternal and universal truth may be possible:

to abolish succession as such, to put in its place an image that resembles as far as possible the eternity of the true, to oppose time as the advent of a totality to time as the heterogeneity of successive parts

(Rancière, 1996, p. 56).³

Avoiding unexpected events and making time homogeneous in order to find a stable truth is not only an epistemological issue for historiography but also a political problem, since such a model for history becomes conservative. On the other side, any historical change, any unexpected movement in the direction of history implies something that was not appropriate for one time or was not expected in the chronological chain. Any historical change requires an anachrony that breaks the immobile, homogeneous conception of history.

There is history insofar as men do not “resemble” their time, insofar as they act in rupture with “their” time, with the line of temporality that inserts them in their place, by obliging them to use their time in one way or another (Rancière, 1996, p. 66).⁴

For this reason, Rancière advocates something like anachronism in historiography. If being synchronic means being of a time without being able to change it, being anachronic means untangling the knot between time

³ My own translation from: “abolir la succession comme telle, mettre à sa place une image aussi ressemblante que possible de l'éternité du vrai, opposer le temps comme avènement d'une totalité au temps comme hétérogénéité de parties successives” (Rancière, 1996, p. 56).

⁴ My own translation from: “Il y a de l'histoire pour autant que les hommes ne “ressemblent” pas à leur temps, pour autant qu'ils agissent en rupture avec “leur” temps, avec la ligne de temporalité qui les met à leur place en leur imposant de faire de leur temps tel ou tel “emploi” (Rancière, 1996, p. 66).

and the eternal present of an age. Anachronism, that is, not pertaining to a time, is the only possibility for someone to introduce something new, that is, to become historical.

this rupture is itself only possible because of the possibility of connecting this line of temporality to others, because of the multiplicity of lines of temporality present in “a” time (Rancière, 1996, p. 66).⁵

An anachronism can join two different lines of time and insert something new into a time or make something new happen. It has the capacity to “create new connections between lines of temporality” (“définir des aiguillages temporels inédits”). In the following, we will see that Agamben also understands the contemporary spirit in an analogous form to Rancière’s idea of anachronism.

3. Being Critical by Being Anachronic (Agamben)

Agamben also understands the contemporary as something that, rather than assimilating to the general features of a time, does not coincide with its time. The Italian philosopher refers first to Nietzsche’s *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* to explain that only one who does not resemble her own time is able to go beyond it:

⁵ My own translation from: “cette rupture n’est elle-même possible que par la possibilité de connecter cette ligne de temporalité à d’autres, par la multiplicité des lignes de temporalité présentes dans “un” temps (Rancière, 1996, p. 66).

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [inattuale]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time (Agamben, 2008, from the English translation, 2009, p. 40).⁶

Similarly to Rancière, the contemporary differs from the current (*zeitgemäss*) in not coinciding exactly with its own time. One who is contemporary does not adapt himself to his time. In a way, he is anachronic. This gives him the ability to stare at what is not clear: “The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity” (Agamben, 2008, from the English translation, 2009, p. 45).⁷

Looking into the darkness – Agamben goes on – opens up the possibility of perceiving the light to come, that is, what has been sown and will grow up in the future. Sometimes, this newness is found in the past, in the origin. Something that was lost in oblivion can be brought back as

⁶ “é veramente contemporaneo colui che [...] non coincide perfettamente con esso [suo tempo] né si adegua alle sue pretese ed è perciò, in questo senso, inattuale; ma, proprio per questo, proprio attraverso questo scarto e questo anacronismo, egli è capace più degli altri di percepire e afferrare il suo tempo” (Agamben, 2008, p. 9).

⁷ “Può dirsi contemporaneo soltanto chi non si lascia accecare dalle luci del secolo e riesce a scorgere in esse la parte dell’ombra, la loro intima oscurità (Agamben, 2008, p. 14).

something new: “there is a secret affinity between the archaic and the modern [...] because the key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial and the prehistoric” (ib. 51).⁸

Hence past, present and future can join through a split in chronological time and meet in a sort of temporal pleat. Temporal continuity is broken by rummaging in the past, as a result, a door to the future is opened. One who lives his time as a contemporary does so not only by being attuned to all that happens but also by introducing fissures and splits in what happens, creating newness and changing the course of things. For that reason Agamben says that “the contemporary (...) is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times” (ib. p. 53).⁹

Concluding this first attempt to conceptualise the spirit of the contemporary, both in Rancière and Agamben we can find a common idea of breaking the homogeneity or continuity of the chronological advance of time, so that the new it is not merely the consequence of what preceded it. The contemporary spirit has a critical attitude, a distance that breaks with the simple present and, perhaps drawing anachronically on the ancient past, inserts a utopian idea that can transform the pace of time. Therefore, our contemporaneity can be understood as a type of temporality in which time is not so much homogeneous as heterochronic and in which different lines of

⁸ “fra l’arcaico e il moderno c’è un appuntamento segreto [...] perché la chiave del moderno è nascosta nell’immemoriale e nel preistorico” (Agamben, 2008, p. 22).

⁹ “il contemporaneo [...] è anche colui che, dividendo e interpolando il tempo, è in grado di trasformarlo e di metterlo in relazione con gli altri tempi, di leggerne in modo inedito la storia” (Agamben, 2008, p. 24).

time meet and mix or anachronically relate different times. This is done in order to break the inertial present we seem to live in and open up the possibility of a change from now on.

4. Heterochronic Artistic Practices? (Kubler and Bourriaud)

The concept of heterochrony, which Rancière applies to historiography, as it is commonly quoted, was already advocated for art history by George Kubler. The American art historian reformed art's historiographical model by introducing a materialistic, open and flexible model for building relations among art objects. Following Kubler's conception of art history, there are countless temporal lines of continuity between the objects created by humans. These continuities may last different lengths of time, stop for periods, cross one another and converge:

We can imagine the flow of time as assuming the shapes of fibrous bundles, with each fibre corresponding to a need upon a particular theatre of action, and the lengths of the fibres varying as to the duration of each need and the solution to its problems. The cultural bundles therefore consist of variegated fibrous lengths of happening, mostly long and many brief. They are juxtaposed largely by chance, and rarely by conscious forethought or rigorous planning. (Kubler, 1962, p. 122)

Though the influence of the model proposed by Kubler on contemporary art historiography is unquestionable and has opened the door of a field that can

understand and renarrate the complexity and plurality of art in a postcolonial world (Moxey, 2013), the application of this concept to unique art objects is not straightforward. Following Kubler, what is heterochronic, rather than chronological, is the resulting story that relates works of art among themselves and not, therefore, the actual experience of artworks. Besides, the purpose of Kubler's model of time is to find new or rather deeper continuities. We may wonder whether an experience of the artwork that includes in itself a disruptive experience of historical time is possible.

Terry Smith has classified contemporary art in three main categories, all of them including temporal insights. The first group includes those artworks that more or less critically take up or develop topics and features of Modernity, thus representing in general a kind of continuity with the modernist period of art. The second group comprises postcolonial artistic practices. These question orthodox colonial narratives by confronting local and international art practices. Finally, the third and more heterogeneous group comprises mainly younger artists who "focus their wide-ranging concerns on questions of time, place, mediation, and mood. (...) Nowadays, the list looks more like: (alter)temporality, (dis)location, transformativity within the hyperreal, and the altercation of affect/effectivity" (Smith, 2006, p. 700).

Smith focuses on temporal issues that current art seems to deal with. However, he specifies neither whether the time questions include approaches to history nor what kind of historical consciousness they shape. Is there any phenomenological approach to current artworks that shows a critical historical consciousness?

Nicolas Bourriaud has managed to sketch an "aesthetic of

heterochrony” in the introductory text to his *Altermodern* show at Tate Gallery. For Bourriaud, what is contemporary, for the works of art collected by him, is not showing evident features of the current time but “the structure of the work: the very fact that it brings together heterochronic elements” (Bourriaud, 2013). A contemporary work can mix past elements, such as archival documents, with immediate stimuli and anticipatory images. Bourriaud groups all heterochronic displays into two well-known artistic practices: assemblage and storytelling. Both allow results that go further than the “principle of accumulation (postmodern baroqueism)” and reveal features of our times.

It is worth considering that Bourriaud stresses the differences between postmodern and contemporary temporality. While postmodern temporality seems to be a kind of more playful and subjective mixture of elements that belong to different times, the contemporary use of heterochrony offers an insight into our contemporary reality. Furthermore, it is important that Bourriaud introduces a phenomenological approach to experience various temporalities in the work of art itself. Yet, it is hard to figure out how this “positive vision of chaos and complexity”, this “positive experience of disorientation” (Bourriaud, 2013) can go beyond a mere symbolisation of our present age and produce a strong critical attitude or performative statement aimed at creating a disruptive break in temporal continuity. Although Bourriaud critiques the postmodern “melancholic episode”, his contemporary inclusion of the future also looks like an aestheticising insight and does not seem to offer a future other than the one already predefined by the present.

So far we have defined the contemporary spirit as one that is actively

historical. Rather than being a development of a trend, it breaks with the continuity of linear time and inserts something new. This something new does not come out of nowhere: it can be a sort of reappropriation of forgotten or non-actualised pasts, so that the relationship between past and present is no longer one of continuity or opposition (tradition or progression) but one shaped by an anachronism that links different historical lines (Agamben). Having seen with Rancière and Kubler that anachronism and heterochrony are possible types of narrative relations in the making of history (or art history), that is to say, in the telling of history, we now ask ourselves whether art itself may trigger such experiences. Bourriaud has put us on the track: he has identified contemporary artistic strategies such as assemblage and montage as being capable of producing heterochronic and anachronic experiences of history. However, he misses their critical potential when he describes these practices as mere ways of representing the present. We must pursue our inquiry further to find an explanation that can trigger the experience of art as both anachronic and historically subversive.

5. The Subversive Experience of Anachronism in Art (Didi-Huberman)

Didi-Huberman follows the iconic turn that has been diagnosed in cultural studies in the last two decades to consolidate the role of phenomenological analysis in the field of art history. He has made it possible to argue that an anachronic association in the experience of a work of art, understood as an inherent part of that experience, may subvert the orthodox historical experience of the work. This would mean that the work does not need to be

read from the outset in relation to its direct influences (coetaneous present) and its closest antecedents.

Didi-Huberman has exemplified the aesthetic experience with several case studies, such as his encounter with a Fra Angelico fresco in San Marco (Florence). He reminds us that what motivated his attention to part of a mural painting and the following discovery was its resemblance to a painting by Pollock. Without this initial startling reaction, he would never have paid attention to it nor have started his research. The research outcomes allow him to question much of the accepted wisdom on Renaissance art that misinterprets Angelico's oeuvre.

Taking advantage of this lesson, Didi-Huberman states that the experience of art cannot but be anachronic in the first instance, since the reception of an artwork is always triggered from the beholder's present context and expectations. A new point of view can bring attention to elements of the past that were unperceived until now and can unveil new aspects, traditions and meanings that were partially or totally hidden by all the meanings previously attributed to an age.

The structurally inherent anachronism of the experience of art thus not only gives rise to a newer interpretation of the past, which naturally has to be verified through historical knowledge, but also allows the emergence of new objects for human experience. These objects, as Didi-Huberman has also argued, involve both a resignification of past events and a reconsideration of one's own current perspective. After that experience in San Marco, he started to question his own expectations as a beholder and also some of his essential methodological postulates.

This follows a shift in the ontological consideration of the artistic

object, which ceases to be just an object waiting to acquire fullness of meaning through application of the appropriate context by the art historian and becomes instead an interlocutor that is able to bridge the temporal distance with the present. Indeed, “Before an image, finally, we have humbly to recognise this: that it will probably outlive us, that before it we are the fragile element, the passing element, and that before us it is the element of the future, the element of duration. The image often has more memory and more future than the one who looks at it”.¹⁰

As we can see, Didi-Huberman has generalised this consideration to all kinds of images. Even though in this text he is interested in ancient images, in other texts he deals analogously with current images, because they deserve the same ontological status. However, it is not clear enough here how this dialogue operates with contemporary art. For this, we will have a look at Christine Ross’s consideration of the experience of history through contemporary media art. Although Ross does not focus on the concept of anachronism, we will see that her analysis concludes with the results we are looking for, that is, the problematisation of history through short-circuiting its structure.

¹⁰ Own translation from: Devant une image, enfin, nous avons humblement à reconnaître ceci: qu’elle nous survivra probablement, que nous sommes devant elle l’élément fragile, l’élément de passage, et qu’elle est devant nous l’élément du futur, l’élément de la durée. L’image a souvent plus de mémoire et plus d’avenir que l’étant qui la regarde” (Didi-Huberman, 2000, p. 10).

6. Suspension of History in Contemporary Media Art

Christine Ross has analysed how contemporary art breaks the chronological chain of events when dealing with history and collective memories. Yet, all this has to be understood first in the wider context of a philosophy of present times. Following contemporary studies in philosophy of history (Koselleck, Hartog), Ross agrees with the idea that today's "predominant regime of historicity" is presentism, which is characterised as

the turning of the present into an absolute value, whose absoluteness now means a real disconnection from the past (perceived as lost) and the future (perceived as increasingly uncertain) (Ross, 2008, p. 128).

Contemporary presentism appears to be a compensation for the previous dismissal of the present in modernity, "based on progress, chronology and permanence" (Ross, 2006, p. 85). While modernism had put the focus and all hope into the future, the current regime of historicity, with the whole accent on the present, puts into question "in fact the possibility of history, which is claimed to be on the threshold of loss". The contemporary human experience of the world shrinks the historic dimension and its influence in the present to its minimum. In some sense, when there is no past that pushes the present, the present is unlikely to move forward.

In this social context, Ross's thesis about contemporary media art, or at least art which deals with historical events, is that it also suspends the course of history in a sort of presentist experience. But in doing so, it opens up the possibility of a reconstruction of historical time.

The Canadian art historian analyses some of Melik Ohanian's video works to exemplify how some works of art mix different records of a common reality: for instance, the mixing of an audio recording of Allende's final speech with video footage of the aerial bombardment of the Palacio de la Moneda on 11 June 1973 and Ohanian's self-taken images of present-day Santiago de Chile. According to Ross, the desynchronised perceptual experience of the work breaks the continuity of history with the present and avoids the possibility of a narrative construction of events, thus suspending the historical continuity between past and present.

However, Ross sets out a long argument to the effect that this suspension of history "might, under specific conditions, open up the process of history" (Ross, 2008, p. 138). Briefly, in this suspension of history the elements of the narration become disjointed and leave visible gaps. Because the spectator is perceptually confronted with the events without a structured narrative, he must adopt a role analogous to that of a witness. He must negotiate the parts presented and try to actively articulate them in a new yet subjective narration. The spectator is thus assigned the role of witness. It is up to him "to take up a narrative with the fragments of the coexisting documents" (Ross, 2008, p. 144). Thus the spectator becomes the history maker because, following Paul Ricoeur, the witness's testimony is the foundation of history, one that sustains the whole process of making history (Ross, 2008, p. 145).

In summary, by short-circuiting the perceptual experience of the narrations pointed at by the work, which thus questions current historical conditions and the sense of previous narratives, the spectator finds herself committed to the role of witness, that is, the one who articulates different

parts of the past in order to make a historical narration that has effects on the present. Thus, Ohanian's installation opens up possible new unfoldings for history and "in short, is more about the conditions of possibility of futurity than its noticeable actualization" (Ross, 2008, p. 148).

We can conclude that in producing a new present by rewriting the past, contemporary art offers us a poetics of history in a deep sense, that is, a repotentialisation of the conditions for historical times.

7. Two Modes for a Poiesis of the Past

We have discussed some aspects of a possible contemporary aesthetic consciousness through the ideas of various philosophers and art historians who unfold their arguments in close contact with contemporary art. Beyond unavoidable subjective affinities, our selection of these arguments is oriented by what we have encountered recently in current artistic events. It is time to check whether those ideas help us understand better certain contemporary art practices. I have chosen two projects from documenta 14 (2017) not so much to illustrate the ideas unfolded as to show how art points to further, newer issues.

Irena Haiduk presented at the documenta a complex artistic intervention in which she resurrected objects from repressed memories and gave them a new, practical function. SER (Seductive Exacting Realism) is part of a long project with several ramifications called Yugoexport, an oral

corporation funded by the artist.¹¹ According to Haiduk, Yugoslavia is currently an empty space and Yugoexport occupies it, trying to recover the original sense of Yug or Jug, which is “south”, the cardinal point.



Figure 3: Irena Haiduk, *SER (Seductive Exacting Realism)* (2015–), part of the installation

A parade walkway and a coffee shop counter occupied a large room. In the coffee shop, a clerk sold books, exhibition books and women’s shoes. These sober, elegant, ergonomically designed shoes in dark blue (known as

¹¹ The artist has a website where more information is given and also some of the products can be purchased: <https://yugoexport.com/programs>

“Borosana shoes”) were produced for all public workers during the 1960s in the former Yugoslavia. Irena Haiduk claims to have rescued the production of these shoes from the past and given it a new life in the present. It is not a commercial activity: the price was adapted to the visitor’s purchasing power, calculated based on age and country of residence. Opposing the consumerist desire of the capitalist system, the product could be acquired only after signing a contract in which the buyer undertook to use the shoes during working hours for one year.



Figure 4: Irena Haiduk, *Spinal Discipline* (2016–), a walking performance involving up to thirteen members of the Army of Beautiful Women in full Yugoform. Produced for Yugoexport

At the end of the space, a door opened into a dark room. Sitting in hammocks, visitors listened to a dialogue between two female voices about art, its value, the market, and art’s political function. Topics such as art and

action, revolution, art and value, economy, capitalism, etc. appeared. The dialogue was a transcript of the conversation Irena Haiduk had held with her compatriot Srda Popovic, a political activist who during the Balkan War co-founded the student group OTPOR!, which helped overthrow Milosevic.

Completing the installation were other objects, such as a collection of *In Search of Lost Time* translated into Serbian, a work much sought after during the civil war. This incomplete version, however, had been completed by Haiduk with a volume of theoretical texts about the contemporary era.

The project included a weekly performance by between five and thirteen women of different ethnic backgrounds who wore the complete Yugoexport uniform, consisting of the shoes and a sober, long plain dress. The women walked from Friedrichsplatz to the Neue Neue Gallerie, with solemnity and discipline, balancing a book on their heads. With this performance, called “The Army of Beautiful Women”, Haiduk hinted at the Via Militaris, a military and commercial route dating from 22 bC that started in Constantinople and passed through Thrace, Dacia and Macedonia before arriving at Singidunum, present-day Belgrade. Through this performance, Haiduk started to recover, by and for women, the route of a time without nations.

The Society of Friends of Halit brings together various groups of individuals and associations engaged in fighting racism and exposing the social relations that have prevented murders from being solved. Today it is part of a popular movement that began in 2006 after the killing of a German citizen, born of Turkish immigrant parents, Halit Yozgat. Halit was killed in April 2006 in an Internet café he and his family had recently opened. This murder, considered the ninth in a chain of racist killings, was the last straw,

triggering demonstrations under the slogan “Kein 10. Opfer” to warn of possible new attacks and alert police authorities to the racist motives behind that and previous murders.



Figure 5: The Society of Friends of Halit. Images of the first demonstration

The investigations promoted by the Society of Friends of Halit have unveiled how a system of institutions, politicians, media and part of civil society perpetuate a long racist history that is deeply rooted in Germany. In this context, the official investigations of the killings were plagued by errors and the cases remained unresolved.

The group of associations and individuals gathered in meetings organised by documenta, gave workshops and exhibited the results of various inquiries. The exhibition at the Neue Neue Gallerie in Kassel focused on the research conducted by Forensic Architecture into the truth of

the evidence given by Hessian secret service agent Andreas Temme, who had been at the Internet café just before the murder. A review of all the witness testimonies and a virtual and physical re-enactment of the event (curated by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin) led to a questioning of Temme's statements.

This and other investigations were presented by Forensic Architecture in a meeting at the Parliament of Bodies (the documenta's central meeting place), posing many questions about the role and efficiency of the Hessen secret services in identifying the murderers.¹² The results do not provide an answer but raise questions by showing possible incoherences in the official version and by reconstructing various scenarios the original police reports deemed impossible (anachronic).

¹² Detailed information on the research can be found on the Forensic Architecture website https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/77sqm_926min/#toggle-id-2 (last view August 2018). The affair is described by Robert Mackey and Robert Trafford in a long article in *The Intercept*, "A German Intelligence Agent Was at the Scene of a Neo-Nazi Murder. He Can't Explain Why", October 18, 2017; <https://theintercept.com/2017/10/18/germany-neo-nazi-murder-trial-forensic-architecture/> (last view, August 2018).



Figure 6: The Society of Friends of Halit. Display set up by Forensic Architecture

The associations also gathered at the “34 Exercises of Freedom” in Athens in April and joined forces with local groups to encourage investigations of possible fascist attacks in Greece. Committed to seeking the involvement of other audiences, in Kassel the associations offered a workshop on sound technologies. In this workshop, the artist and activist Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt showed how racist codes and stereotypes are communicated through sound media and music and proposed various strategies for disrupting racist narratives.

Overall, the results of The Society of Friends of Halit’s inquiries do not so much offer a new version of the past as put the dominant ideology that has constructed certain narratives of the past into question by bringing different scenarios into the discussion. Thus, the aesthetic display has a deep

political function, in the sense of bringing ideological structures to light.

8. Conclusion

Irena Haiduk's project and The Society of Friends of Halit have differences and points in common. Both are directed towards the past, aiming not only to question a certain narration of events (chronological history) but more particularly to refigure the historical conditions in a specific context and, in so doing, to give new meanings to its underlying ideology. Irena Haiduk, in a heterochronically structured project, vindicates certain elements of Yugoslavia's socialist past, mixing them with references to ancient history and feminist demands. The Society of Friends of Halit does not so much produce a different version of events and their authors as denounce the power relations that determined the construction of the official narrative.

Both projects, especially that of Haiduk, also include a participatory dimension aimed at influencing an immediate present. Indeed, *Seductive Exacting Realism* invites the public to participate in an economic and cultural production project. On Halit's behalf, The Society of Friends of Halit organised workshops with visitors on technology and sound and, thanks to the research into Halit's murder, has managed to get the case reopened in the courts of Schleswig-Holstein.

We can also say that through their appropriation of the past and the creation of intervention mechanisms in the present, both projects acquire a historical-performative dimension that transforms the horizon of the future. By generating anachronisms and intervening in the present, both projects preclude the function of historiography as "learning the lesson of the past",

as if the relationship of the past with the future were that of a causal chain. By shaking up the relationship between past and future, they promote agency towards the future. Haiduk's proposal, which works more like a conglomerate of projects united by a homogeneous aesthetic, leaves the public freer to subjectively appropriate the different aspects and apply them to other contexts. In contrast, The Society of Friends of Halit, with its cold, objective, scientifically modelled display, strongly urges the visitor to think afresh about racism and fascism in the Old Continent.

In conclusion, according to curator Nina Möntmann, "this specific mode of dealing with history, which marks a rupture with the concept of chronology and genealogy in favour of an updating of historical fragments, is specific for the current critical understanding of contemporaneity and the actualization of its potentials in the age of globalisation" (Möntmann, 2017, p. 129). Through the combination of objective records, fictional elements and subjective references, different temporalities and planes of reality come into play in the construction, not of a representation, but of a situation for the visitor, who is able to become a participant. The participant can then be empowered by the energy recovered from the past to participate in the construction of a new present and new outcomes. It is not only about drawing attention to ideological structures but also about participating, as Rancière puts it, in a potential new "distribution of the sensible". Nevertheless, the pressure of a paradox can be felt: in the projects presented here, as in our own political consciousness, we wonder whether it is possible to be immediately historical, that is, to influence our own time with a force that can really change the sense of our age.

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