

NON-PHILOSOPHY
AND CONTEMPORARY ART

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A NON-PHILOSOPHICAL PROPOSITION

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*'My thoughts are like an avalanche in the mind, in the sense that they are breaking apart; there's no information that can't be collapsed or broken down, so that it's not a matter of establishing a perfect system. There is no perfection in this situation. There is no perfection in my range, because my thoughts as well as the material that I'm dealing with are always coming loose, breaking apart and bleeding at the edges.'*¹

(Robert Smithson)

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0.
FOREWORD

THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE!

'All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.'²
(Joseph Kosuth)

'Don't accept. Question. Everything.'³
(Philip Guston)

0.

Here are some examples of recent art exhibitions I've attended in Berlin over the last couple of years:

0.01.

The opening of Cyprien Gaillard's *The Recovery of Discovery* at KW in March 2011. The ground floor of the large exhibition space was filled with young people sitting on top of an approximately 5 metre-high pyramid of stacked Turkish beer-crates, drinking the *Efes* beer directly from the crates. The noise of voices chatting and laughing was immense. During the exhibition period, visitors could enter the space and drink as much beer they liked. Slowly, the whole installation was dismantled, leaving the residue of the party: empty beer bottles, ripped-open blue boxes, the stench of an old brewery hanging solidly in the air. In the press release the piece was presented as a comment on how Western culture preserves its monuments through destroying and displacing them, on how entropy is allegorically present in the process of the work's decomposition.

0.02.

At Kino Central, August 2014, artist Stine Jakobsen presented her project *Direct Approach*, consisting of a number of short films by young people that were remakes of the most violent scenes from movies they had seen. The participants worked from their own memories and conversations about violence. They made the films themselves, taking the role of actors, directors and camera-people, and thus gained insight into the technique of producing visual effects in cinema. The adolescents played different parts: the victim, the perpetrator or the by-stander, and thereby furthered the understanding of how violence affects identity.

0.03.

In the project space 'die raum' the Brazilian artist João Modé presented his installation *Land*, September 2014, which consisted of flowers and plants carefully planted so as to simulate a jungle in the midst of concrete slabs. The viewer could enter and hide behind the foliage. No windows, doors or walls protected the installation from the outside; the façade of the building having been removed. The exhibition was open for 24 hours.

0.04.

Before closing for renovation, the Neue National Galerie hosted in October 2014 a *Festival of Future News* with more than 100 students, teachers and associates from Olafur Eliasson's art school, Institut für Raum Experimente. On the top of the building Fabian Knecht's smoke work *Freisetzung* gave the impression that the museum was on fire. Inside, Kirsten Palz read her *Sculpture as Writing* to her audience, while Anton Burdakov built cardboard models of an artist's studio in evolution with a team of artists and architects. Jan Bünning had attached his strange concrete stalagmite sculpture *Feuerstelle / Seit 2007* to wheels, ready to roll. The whole building was buzzing with energy from the numerous interventions, performances and sculptures on the go and the thousands of visitors attending the festival.

0.05.

Carsten Höller's enormous installation *Soma* at Hamburger Bahnhof in 2012 consisted of twelve living reindeer, twenty-four canaries, eight mice and two flies, several huge oversized mushroom sculptures, a space for visitors to sleep, the fragrance of hay and shit spread out over the floor, and small cubic sculptures. The viewers could walk around, enter onto the viewing platform and see the amazing environment. A special piece of information was supplied: the reindeer were eating euphoric mushrooms that were changing *their* perception of time and space.

0.06.

At Berlinische Galerie in Autumn 2013 Franz Ackerman presented a huge wall-painting-installation *Hügel und Zweifel*, which covered the whole space (approx 10 x 40 metres). Paintings, photographs and covered surfaces were integrated into one gigantic mind-map

interconnected with lines, arrows and diagrams. There were paintings of floating worlds and paintings with huge holes in them. Painting was *expanding*: on the canvas and across the gallery, producing a space of new perspectives and openings.

0.1.

All these exemplars are but a limited number of possible approaches to what is called contemporary art. No medium, means of exhibiting or artistic strategy can be said to be the only way to make contemporary art. Everything has become legitimate within the contemporary art space of today, because the history of contemporary art is so rich: so many *ways* of making art belong to the space of contemporary art and the space is still proliferating – each contemporary artist cross-combining and re-mixing different possibilities into new artworks and projects. From the young student and the MFA graduate to the established mid-career artist, positions are tried out, experimented with, developed and ultimately defended as *ways of producing, but also situating oneself within the already established framework of contemporary art*. Hundreds of thousands of exhibitions have already taken place in the name of contemporary art, and right now a multiplicity of future exhibitions are being planned and executed. All over the globe, contemporary art spaces are saturating the cultural landscape in all kinds of disguises, ranging from the major institutions such as MoMA, Tate Modern, MACBA and K21, to regular art events such as Documenta, the Venice Biennale and Manifesta, to the project spaces in every major city. In Berlin alone these include: OZEAN, Tête, ZK/U, die raum, Espace Surplus, District, LEAP, L40, NOTE, Sonntag, Autocenter, Grimm Museum, General Public, Insitu ...

0.1.1.

Contemporary art is a *fait accompli*, the historical consequence of the postmodernist attack on high modernist art. The paradigm shift didn't happen all at once. It has been a slow continuous movement towards the contemporary art space as we know it today and it didn't happen without struggle.⁴ Is there any kind of teleology within this postmodernist paradigm? Does it, like modernity, have forces of emancipation? I think it does, but the goal of emancipation was different then from now, and with good reason. Critical postmodernist art operates through its horizontal spreading out, its ability to expand the vast territory of art, building on existing transformations and expansions: the development of an ontology of the *whatever*.⁵ It is a flat, wet world, but with a new kind of verticality⁶ to be explored. The historical art of modernism before the avant-garde revolution is still present in museums and collections, but imbued with a different sense of tradition and a clear division between genres and media. Postmodernist art derives its power from a fundamental nihilist⁷ outlook on the world, which ultimately leads to the dissolution of the Western art world as the modernist art refuge (NATO-art). It is nihilist because it questions and problematises all conventional and accepted ideas, values and support-systems generating so-called notions of 'art', 'aesthetics', 'taste', 'viewer' and 'meaning'. Thus

the advent of contemporary art has also been seen as the *end of art*, because in the endgame of postmodernism there are only *propositions* on art: *'The "value" of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying "what they added to the conception of art" or what wasn't there before they started. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art's nature.'*⁸ (Kosuth).

0.2.

The end of art has been announced on several occasions. First, with G.W.F. Hegel's (1770–1831) philosophy in the early 19th century, when the concept of freedom had attained its realised form in the abstract formulations of the modern state. Once the structure of freedom had been politically secured through its democratic institutions, the highest truth possible became real. *'For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself [...] We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit.'*⁹ (Hegel). Art from this moment on would, in the eyes of Hegel, have a secondary role in expressing the conceptual armature of the world, always one step down from the sanctuary of political truth expressed philosophically in the concept of the Absolute Spirit: that democracy is the ultimate securitisation and institutionalisation of the human spirit, understood as freedom, justice and recognition of the individual (which today can be designated a *systemic modernity*¹⁰). Through democracy, civic society is established, and one could say that the latter is one of the conditions of contemporary art: the right of individuals to gather freely in institutions protected by the state and without its interference. And, in retrospect, art was declared at its endpoint a second time with the placement in a gallery of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*¹¹ in 1917, a urinal signed 'R. Mutt', which, when spoken sounds like 'poverty' in German, or 'mud' in English.¹² With the Dada approach, nihilism enters into the space of art as a fundamental questioning of the belief in art. This radical questioning, initiated through the placement of a readymade in a gallery, is in reality the birth of contemporary art, because it becomes a *state of mind* (just as Dadaism was a state of mind).¹³ The contemporary art space is both 'muddy', as in uncertain or unclear, and 'poor' because it has no absolute value-foundation upon which to rest its activities. The last thing found within the space of contemporary art is precisely the transcendental signifier that the nihilist declared dead: God.

0.2.1.

In 'The Richard Mutt Case', Marcel Duchamp's text on his urinal, he writes: *'Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.'*¹⁴ Through his decision and the actual act of placing, Marcel Duchamp opened up a thought-space that is the reason why contemporary art exists today as it does. All the exemplars mentioned above have behind their manifestation the choices made by artists to do whatever they want within the exhibition space. Duchamp's

fundamental power resides in his double revelation of A) the artistic choice grounding whatever phenomena are designated as contemporary art and B) the conditioning force of the context in establishing the meaning of art. This is the tautological nature of contemporary art: it's art if someone says it's art. There is no contemporary art without artists and contexts. But the placing of objects is not random. It is carefully picked by the artist, and this care comes back to the artistic project.

0.2.2.

Today, 100 years later after Duchamp placed his urinal, much has happened to the art world and to the cultural and economic climate feeding into this world. The 'experience economy' in particular has within the last decennium transformed the understanding and use of culture in relation to the market. Artistic culture has become a new norm, creativity is everywhere, and institutions must define and legitimise themselves according to cost-benefit schemes, quality management and the number of viewers attending exhibitions.¹⁵ Culture has become a new value-industry, spurring gentrification, city branding, but also part of a new consumer-identity where the art experience feeds into a self-consuming process. Art has in many circumstances become a public good, packaged in a nice, harmless marketing discourse. And this is problematic because it covers up the original violence, destruction and questioning that led to the creation of contemporary art as a thought-space. Thus, in order to understand Duchamp's heritage, we must also understand the historical context of Dadaism – such as its aspect of nihilism, disillusion and response to the threat of immanent destruction. As Hugo Ball stated regarding the condition of Dada: *'The bankruptcy of ideas having destroyed the concept of humanity to its very innermost strata, the instincts and hereditary backgrounds are now emerging pathologically [...] The Dadaist fights against the death-throes and death-drunkenness of his time. Averse to every clever reticence, he cultivates the curiosity of one who experiences delight even in the most questionable forms of insubordination. He knows that this world of systems has gone to pieces.'*¹⁶ Here we find the description of a positioning against the world, as in a *counter-culture*, a fundamental scepticism towards all official value-systems that also fuelled Duchamp's position. By signing the urinal 'R. Mutt' he was pointing towards an immanent poverty within the Western world because of its unleashing of the destructive forces of World War I. Dadaism was a response to the feeling of *moral bankruptcy* haunting the Western world. What was left for art was to *mock* the institution of art, to *question* the institution of art. And this questioning happened through the production of a radically new art and a new consciousness: being Dadaist was a position with consequences. With new materials, ideas, collectivities and a certain sense of *abstraction*, art opened itself towards the virtual (virtuality being the sum of all total possibilities including unrealised ideas from the past haunting our present). Today, we are in a situation where *anything goes* in art (Feyerabend): where contemporary art and its theoretical counterparts are moving on in a myriad of new directions without anybody having any clear overview. Intentional Art, Emergency Art, Ultra-contemporary Art, Radical Philosophy, Speculative Realism, Object-oriented Ontology, the Forensic Turn, Art-based Research, the Pedagogical

Turn, Reference Art, Retro-Conceptual Art, Meta-Modernism, New Materialism, Neuro-nautical Society ... The number of concepts currently entering into the art-world discourse is still growing and this is good, because it testifies to the need to think, perceive and act in the world differently. So much energy is being unleashed that the house of contemporary art is on fire. Contemporary art cannot be totalised on an empirical level, but we can *speculate* on its conditions in order to answer the question: what is the potential of contemporary art for the future?

0.3.

I see the situation of contemporary art, the postmodern condition and its origin in nihilism as a *historical potential* of art to become everything it has ever dreamt of being. Yet I do believe we need to rethink this original space of contemporary art: what lies behind it? What are the ontological conditions of contemporary art in relation to the agent of art: the contemporary artist?¹⁷ There is a fundamental relation here that needs to be investigated and brought out into the light as a possibility for artists to reflect upon. There is a *thinking* happening in this contemporary art space of questioning, experimenting, challenging and inventing, which I believe it can be fruitful to see as a kind of *non-philosophy in action*. In this book, I will think of the contemporary artist as a non-philosopher who practices non-philosophy through his art. The act of non-philosophy is to push the complex experience of life into existing categories and transform them into something new. It is to develop an autonomous position *vis-à-vis* the present configuration of forces – to think for oneself within an already established space of artistic movements; a thinking-doing that is anarchistic, autarkic and experimental, witty, serious, open-minded, questioning, following mental lines of flight ...

0.3.1.

Duchamp used his sovereign right to place *whatever* within the space of the contemporary. The objects were full of meaning, the titles were puns with several layers, and an aspect of eroticism was always present; for subsequent artists working from this insight, the ready-made becomes the possibility of designating whatever as suitable for art, because the choice is coloured by a radical *contingency* and *virtuality*: anything from the present and the past can in principle be presented, because the act of choice returns to the artist and his *project*. So, in order to grasp the full significance of contingency and virtuality, we have to *return to the existence of the whatever artist*, of how this existence comes into being with the right to decide. Thus, as a non-philosopher, the contemporary artist is a conceptual person,¹⁸ in the sense that every contemporary artist participates in their own way, since the act of non-philosophy is one of distortion, displacement and ultimately reinvention of what a contemporary artist *could* be.

0.3.2.

Part of this institutionalisation of contemporary art – that the context produces the meaning of art – was also a *de-authorisation* of the artist, the so-called ‘death of the author’ (Barthes).¹⁹

In relocating the significance of the artwork to its active decoding and interpretation in the consciousness of the viewer, the focus was shifted from the *myth* and *biography* of the author to the ability of structures to produce meaning within the receiver. It was to liberate the author from the position allocated by the commercial systems surrounding the artwork and instead make him a *producer* of art similar to the industrial production of a readymade. The death of the author was the birth of a new kind of viewer: one who was not accommodated by works of aesthetic beauty, but sought works that challenge. As a position, this shares some relations with nihilism because it believes that all have the potential to become creative in the *use* and *interpretation of art*. Following this turn, the meaning of artworks, of how they are experienced, interpreted and placed into horizons of significance was brought to a new level in the 20th century. This question of the viewer, however, is not the focus of these thoughts. I want to investigate what it means to situate oneself in the world, to propose artworks as ideas, to generate ideas in the space of the virtual, to develop interests and gather knowledge of the world. I want to explore the artist's intentions, how he anticipates the interpretations of viewers and points them in a certain direction because he *wants* something with his artworks and because he *positions* himself in a certain social space. It is a basic assumption of this book that artists actually *think*²⁰ not only about how their artworks are executed, installed and mediated, but also about how they themselves are *situated* in a complex social field of colliding forces. Artists write texts about their practice, statements about their ideas, give interviews about their exhibitions, show up for their openings and talk to other artists and people outside the art world. They 'ride' the meaning of their own artwork and are part of social life, like all human beings, because ultimately they want to communicate with the world ... There is thinking in contemporary art, which is why the viewer is also given something to think about.

1.
INTRODUCTION

EVERY CONTEMPORARY ARTIST IS IN THE POSITION OF A NON-PHILOSOPHER ...

*'I don't believe in art. I believe in the artist.'*²¹

(Marcel Duchamp)

*'Life becomes ideas and the ideas return to life, each is caught up in the vortex in which he first committed only measured stakes, each is led on by what he said and the response he received, led on by his own thought of which he is no longer the sole thinker.'*²²

(Merleau-Ponty)

1.

The question raised by the contemporary artist as a non-philosopher is first and foremost: *what is the relation between the generic singularity and the artistic project as a form-content proposition?* Within this question we find three basic aspects of that which constitutes the thought-space of a contemporary artist. Firstly, we have the *generic singularity* as a mode of existence: a human being who becomes something within a generic space of social categories. Secondly, we have the *artistic project* as a system of competing interests that designates how knowledge is not only embedded but also operative in the artistic agent. And lastly, we have the *form-content proposition* as the specific artwork-event, which designates what is actually produced and made real in institutional contexts. A generic singularity is a human being who develops his own knowledge and insights through the mode of existence, the artistic project and the actual artworks produced throughout his life: artwork-events appear, from one to thousands, that in their totality are a life's work. All these artwork-events, which sum up the artistic output of a

life lived as a *gesture* towards art and life in general, present their own kind of thinking in action: a non-philosophy. In three words, we can sum up the nature of this non-philosophy: *self-positioning*, *investigation* and *intervention*. Some kind of self positions itself within the art world, some kind of investigation through a system of competing interests is carried forth, and finally the artwork-events intervene into some more or less established contexts for presenting art. Self-positioning, investigation and intervention are here understood as taking a position and emitting objects, gestures, signs, situations or environments that are received in a more or less defined context for viewing art. It is a non-philosophy because the contemporary artist thinks, but in a personalised way, through his experiences, the position he has taken, whatever artworks he has made and finally, what is stated about them.

1.1.

There is a thinking that happens in contemporary art that I believe can be productive to see as non-philosophy. Thus, the propositions presented here are generalisations of what I see as the common features of contemporary art and artists, and the act of non-philosophy. When I mention other artists, exhibitions or institutions, or my own activities, they serve as examples underpinning my general argument, because what I present here are *speculative* thoughts about the space of the artistic agent and the paradigmatic structures that condition contemporary art as an outlook on the world. I don't want to write the history of contemporary art; rather, I want to understand the *totality* of what can be *thought* of as contemporary art. *Contemporary art is a speculative opportunity.*

1.2.

What is non-philosophy and why can the contemporary artist be viewed as a non-philosopher? French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was, to my knowledge, the first to designate non-philosophy as a new possibility for thinking, and it is from him that I have taken my lead regarding the potential of non-philosophy.²³ Non-philosophy is not anti-philosophy (Groys).²⁴ For Merleau-Ponty non-philosophy is the operation of situating philosophy in whatever configuration of life: *'No human being can receive a heritage of ideas without transforming them through the sole act of knowing them; without injecting into them his own, always different, way of being.'*²⁵ It means to translate the insights produced by philosophy into one's personal existence, thereby distorting and twisting that knowledge so that it becomes a concrete *experience*.²⁶ It is to push the transcendental space of conceptual reasoning into the empirical space of singular existence, and in return push new concepts into the transcendental.²⁷ The 'non' added to philosophy points to a distance between the conceptual space of philosophy and the concrete space of life in all its complexity and contradiction. It is 'non' because it admits to its own deficiency, its own lack of completion and perfection. Non-philosophy acknowledges its own act of deformation, distortion and misinterpretation, but gains access to the life that is there to be lived and experimented with. Non-philosophy points towards an act, towards the future, a becoming that is incomplete and unknown, and the contemporary

artist will use whatever theory or movement is at hand in order to propel himself forwards. 'Theory is no problem for the artist. Theory only interests him in as much as he can make it run in his blood.'²⁸ (Gombrowicz). This act of transposing but also transforming theory so that it is useful is exactly what makes the contemporary artist a non-philosopher, because he has taken a position in the world in order to achieve something in it. The positioning is a reflexive operation committing to some kind of theory of the world (more or less reflexive) whereby the artistic output is possible. Contemporary artists have *thought* about *why* they *want* to make art and *what* kind of art they want to make in relation to an already established art world. This reflective reasoning, specific to each artist, represents its own personal experience, and is one of the first aspects of the contemporary artist as a non-philosopher. Not that all contemporary artists began by taking a philosophy course, reading classical or post-structural theorists in order to become artists; rather, the initial gesture towards actively deciding to become an artist was accompanied by a fundamental sense of openness and orientation towards the already existing movements of contemporary art that had to be transformed into something specific: the whatever life of a contemporary artist.

1.2.1.

Merleau-Ponty developed his idea of non-philosophy during the last three years of his life, before his sudden death in 1961 at the age of 53. He delivered three courses at Collège de France in Paris. The first was called *Philosophie aujourd'hui* and given between 1958 and 1959, with the first section entitled: *Notre état de non-philosophie*. The second course (1960–61) was *L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui*, and the first section of this course was entitled *La pensée fondamentale en art*. The third course (also 1960–61) was *Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel*. Simultaneously with these lectures Merleau-Ponty was also working on the manuscript for what was later published in 1964 as *Le visible et l'invisible*. Here, we find a new and radical attempt to think about non-philosophy through his concept of *la chair* (the flesh) that plays an important role in my understanding of the experience as a radical transgression. The last manuscript he finished is now a classic essay on the relationship between painting, the painter and the act of perceiving: *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* (1964). What is important to grasp here is the intimate connection between non-philosophy and art that Merleau-Ponty was attempting to describe, or, put differently: his attempt was to intersect the activities of contemporary philosophy and art. In chapter 2.A.1. *Merleau-Ponty and the Space of Non-philosophy* I will go more deeply into the full scope of his idea of non-philosophy, and in chapter 2.A.4. *Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Art* I will elucidate some perspectives on how *Phénoménologie de la perception* from 1945 influenced the American development of Minimalism and how his thinking can be useful for an understanding of contemporary art today.

1.3.

In order to outline a fundamental ontological²⁹ insight regarding the relationship between non-philosophy and contemporary art, I need briefly to clarify the historical background

of Merleau-Ponty's idea of non-philosophy. According to the philosopher, classical systemic philosophy reached its metaphysical endpoint with the Hegelian master-narrative of the spirit becoming absolute self-consciousness through the unfolding of the system itself. History – as the progression towards emancipation – having reached the stage of the modern democratic state, ensuring the freedom of the individual, had also come to an end in an abstract sense. This is not to say that historical events would no longer take place, but that the substance of the spirit as freedom had now become real as a rational structure within historical reality. 'What is rational, is real, what is real is rational,'³⁰ is the infamous quote from the introduction to Hegel's *Philosophie des Rechts* (1820). One of the ways for philosophy after Hegel to escape his dialectical prison was to turn him upside down by thinking about that cleavage in the system that negates this totality: *the individuality of experience*. In *Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel*, Merleau-Ponty quotes two pages from *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) where what is called 'experience' is defined: 'This dialectical *movement, which consciousness exercises (ausübt) on its self – on its knowledge as well as its object – is, in so far as the new, true object emerges to consciousness as the result of it, precisely that which is called experience.*'³¹ Experience for Hegel is the development of 'new, true' knowledge after it has been sent to the testing-ground of the real. In the encounter with something outside the system, the system of knowledge breaks apart, has to enlarge itself, and in this movement expand its understanding of the world. Experience becomes a *rupture (Bruch-erfahrung)*: it breaks me apart and forces me to reconsider my being in the world.³² I am forced to interrogate the relation between the system and that which goes *against* it. That which goes against also holds the potential of something new. '*The experience, that is to say, the effective assumption of a being, is capable of giving space to a dialectic, because it alone is the opening towards something that can reveal itself, that has its depths, a latency, and that can become a space for an ecstasy from where a true novelty may emerge.*'³³ (Merleau-Ponty). By designating the possibility of such a point within the space of consciousness (and that it can be ripped apart: '*Zerrissenheit*'³⁴), Hegel is also 'opening a back door for those who later came to insist upon the absoluteness of experience. There are experiences that cannot be surpassed and integrated into the transcendental system. They designate a specific encounter between a subject and something other to it: *concrete* experiences happening to the individual. This insight will become integral to my understanding of the power of contemporary art today. Ultimately, contemporary art takes place in that corridor between the already established world of signs and conventions and that fringe of the other, the unforeseen, the virtual, that excess of being that points towards something beyond me. Contemporary art is visibility with infinite depth, because the contemporary artist has moved into the space of contingency: he has been ripped apart from the conventional space of art and into a new state of mind (epistemic rupture); he contains within himself that specific experience of being able to *think* himself and the world differently. And because epistemic ruptures happen all the time, opening up towards situations of contingency, we never know what exactly will happen in the space of contemporary art. In this state of mind I locate the fundamental thought-power of the contemporary artist as a non-philosopher.

1.3.1.

Let us return to this back door that Hegel left in his system. According to Merleau-Ponty, three philosophers push philosophy towards this new space of thinking about the concrete: A) Karl Marx (1818–1883), with his demand for philosophy no longer simply to interpret the world, but actually to change it – that is, engaging in the praxis of human life. For Marx, philosophy is social criticism of the structures that govern the production of reality, analysing the relation between ideology and capitalism, fuelled by social indignation and a revolutionary spirit. Academic philosophy (Hegel) must be destroyed and man's creative potential must be realised. Absolute truth is not official appearance, but must be produced through *praxis*. B) Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), with his focus on the singular human existence as it is lived through different stages and from an interior perspective. The inner time of subjectivity evades the absoluteness of the Hegelian spirit. Kierkegaard's discourse gravitates around existence and the questions of action, angst, decision, love, but also passion, the ironic attitude and the leap of faith. For Kierkegaard it is more important to choose your own life than to conform to the abstract principles of the state. C) Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), with his demand for the rethinking of values and the quest for new values with which to live life. Postulating the Dionysiac way of life as being that of the aesthetic realm, Nietzsche initiates the affirmative experimental attitude towards life. As a critic of culture (*Freier Geist*) he opens the pathway for Freudian psychoanalysis in his unmasking of the rational subject, in his sense of the instinctual forces behind official appearance: the will to power. Each of these three thinkers represents his own kind of rebellious anarchistic attitude towards the system of Hegel because each placed himself as a singular authority against the absolute spirit. Each in his own way was searching for liberation; for modes of existence where human nature could individualise itself beyond the confines and dehumanising aspects of the bureaucratic industrial state of modernity.³⁵

1.3.2.

Marx, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche all belong to the 19th century, but one can find them as sources of inspiration for several substantial discourses in Continental thought of the 20th century. As Merleau-Ponty states: '*They live on in us rather than our having a clear perspective on them and we involve them in our own problems rather than solving theirs with ours.*'³⁶ The Frankfurt School (Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse), Existentialism (Heidegger, Sartre), and Post-structuralism (Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida) are each indebted to the way these philosophers transformed idealistic philosophy into the actual sphere of human life and all its social contradictions, existential turmoil and life-experimenting facets. When looking closely at human life, these three thinkers saw that each human being had the potential to become something other than that which was already pre-determined by the system; or rather, that the institutionalisation of freedom represented a historically unprecedented opportunity for modern man to become completely different from what he had been. Through the *encounter* with the experience he could be changed. But what we can experience that will break us apart, we fundamentally

do not know. And this insight connects these philosophers regarding their view of the metaphysical structure of the world. Looking out of the back door towards experience one sees *the radical contingency of being*. And contingency must here be understood as non-necessity: a fundamental openness of being that gives space and time for the desire to exist in a different world. There is not one essential eternal foundation in our world. As Merleau-Ponty states: ‘*Everywhere the foundation is recognised as contingent.*’³⁷ By this he means that the way the world appears, how we relate to being and what the future will be, is not determined once and for all. These non-philosophers that Merleau-Ponty evokes believed that in our openness to the experience, we can allow ourselves to change. The political, aesthetic and cultural realm has exactly this redemptive power: to open man to a new way of being in the world. We as humans have the ability and the freedom to change the world by consciously reflecting on our relation to it. This means to *question* the world actively and critically in order to free a space of possibility, a questioning that later finds its apotheosis in the fundamental definition of conceptual art: *to question the definitions and limitations of art.*³⁸ Where natural science searches for the valid invariable laws governing all possible worlds, non-philosophy engages in the virtuality of life itself. From virtuality the present receives energy to burst into the future. Virtuality and contingency recapture this common belief: that the future is unknown, that I exist within a spectrum of possibility and that as a human agent I have the power to enact non-necessity in the world. Contingency opens the space of not-being, of the right not to be, and thereby a critical space of reasoning and new ways of experiencing the world.³⁹ This is the radical situation of modernity that Merleau-Ponty already sensed was on its way in the new developments within the advanced art and philosophical positions of his own time. Today, more than 50 years after he delivered his lectures on *Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel*, we are now in this situation of art: that the post-Hegelian discourse of modernism in the disguise of Clement Greenberg has been superseded by the institutional insights produced by neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s. A new historical state of common ground between contemporary art and non-philosophy has emerged as a delta of possibilities for any young person who wants to make art today. A new space of freedom has become real: a vast amount of ways of making and interpreting art have materialised. Thousands of artistic positions exist alongside each other in one huge global horizontal maze of art worlds – from Cairo to Mumbai to Tokyo to Mexico City to São Paolo to Reykjavik to New York to London to Glasgow to Barcelona to Berlin to Copenhagen to Warsaw to Stockholm to Tallinn to Moscow to Istanbul – everywhere, contemporary artists are tapping into the contemporary art world as a space of unprecedented freedom and expression.

1.4.

I propose to think of the contemporary artist – who has been around for almost 100 years as a conceptual person – as a non-philosopher. As a starting point, the contemporary artist has the radical contingency of art. Art as an essential phenomenon tied to certain ideas, genres or media no longer exist. Artworks only exists as *propositions* about art: ‘*This could be art.*’ And

he who makes the proposition is the contemporary artist, because it is in the act of making art that he becomes contemporary. The contemporary artist is he who proposes artwork from an absolute background of the virtual. He proposes the artwork as an offering to art, because this is the only way in which art attains a presence.⁴⁰ But this absolute freedom of the contemporary artist does not relieve the artist from his embeddedness in the generalised space of human existence: a body, a social world and a being in time (the metaphysical knot).⁴¹ A contemporary artist is *situated* in life, because he exists as the specific *instantiation* of the metaphysical knot: as someone who has transformed his relations to a specific body (the monstrous body) appearing within a social context (the art world) at a point in historical time (historicity). Contemporary artists become generic singularities because through their life trajectories they are framed by institutional and ideological regimes of discourses, but nonetheless have a sovereign right to their individual interests, to be proactive and to develop new ideas for future artworks. Simply put, the contemporary artist exists with a right and a power to make art. And here, 'to make art' is understood in a narrow semiotic fashion: the ability and will to produce whatever signs, objects and events and make them circulate within contexts of viewing art. Artists can authorise their artworks simply by proposing and presenting them to an audience. From this perspective, even the most minimal, conceptual or collective art project is expressive because it originates from somewhere and has a destination. To be able to express is to have the power to exist as the ability to produce difference in a social environment.

1.4.1.

Let me reframe the relation between the contemporary artist and the generic singularity. The contemporary artist is a sub-category within the general concept of a generic singularity – the latter designating all those individuals who become something specific in a social field. Like all generic singularities, the contemporary artist exists just as other human beings exist, but relates differently to the three basic fields: the body, the social and time, and thereby carves out a new singularity from the background of those generic categories that constitute his existence. Contemporary artists *push* their bodies, their social world and their time in a different direction through the fundamental choices they make regarding the art worlds to which they wish to belong, the art-historical movements from which they seek inspiration and consolation, the peer-groups to which they adhere, and then the internal decisions they make about the content of their work, pursuing specific interests and executing artworks according to stylistic logics. The beginning of a generic singularity as a contemporary artist is the *gesture* towards art that totalises this movement, whereby the artist comes to the point of actual art-making. Behind each artist there is an initial decision to make art, a gesture that has the radical contingency of being. There is no longer any absolute position from which to state the essence of art; there is only the specific position taken by those battling the forces of virtuality in the instauration of the artistic project.

1.4.2.

Anything and everything is possible, at least on a principle level (Danto).⁴² But, because anything and everything is possible, there is no medium that can come closer to the essence of art, that channels art or participates better in the idea of art than any other. A contemporary artist of today is faced with a different problem: that of the artistic project. What is an artistic project? *A system of competing interests*. To have an interest means to develop a certain kind of attention towards the world. Because my interest takes me in a specific direction, meaning appears and is framed. An interest is intentional: it guides my actions, it makes me decide what to do. An interest empowers me, because through the pursuit of an interest I come to know something about a specific topic, a field of themes and those who are key actors within that field. The artistic project is not just one interest, however, but a system of *competing* interests. Each artist may have several interests that overlap, come to the forefront, disappear and then re-emerge. They can be like a pack of wolves with a leader, but spreading out or concentrating depending on what is to be achieved. My interests constitute my research area, those topics within the world to which I am drawn, as in being *fascinated*, intrigued, curious and engulfed. In return, my interests give me new ideas for future art projects; they constitute my *access* to a situation and they authorise my choices regarding what I propose as art.

1.5.

The proposition I am trying to present here is that a contemporary artist can be seen as a non-philosopher because *from his embedded situation he is confronting contingency*. From this position he develops and presents a thought-space that is personalised as a specific way of engaging with the fact that everything is possible. It is a thinking in the sense that certain aspects of an artist's thinking can be externalised and communicated (the interview, statement or project-description), but most importantly, it is an *operative thinking*, because the artist does something in this world: he produces form-content propositions – the whatever artworks that burst into the future and one day crash into our present. This demands a level of thinking infused with some kind of knowledge and certain skills to make interesting artworks. But, it is not a knowledge that follows the same criteria as the production of scientific knowledge, such as the possibility of iteration, verification and systematic study. It can be knowledge infused with desire, memory, ambition, but also a sense of uncertainty and joy in experimenting. It can be knowledge informed with the intention of making a statement. It can be knowledge infused with a *white energy* of freedom and exuberance. Ultimately, it is a thinking-knowledge infused with transformed *experience*. Firstly, the experience of having encountered numerous artworks and projects (perceptual); secondly, the experience of producing one's own artwork or initiating collaborative art projects (pragmatic); and finally the experience of being transformed and inspired by other artists and life in general (radical). I have *lived* with art, and this living in all its totality has become a complex experience that fuses with my position as an exhibiting artist. My field of experience as an artist is that of having ideas for exhibitions and projects, putting artworks on display, of presenting them to a public and receiving a response.

I have experienced knowledge of how this can be done, and which rhetorical possibilities exist as to how to install, to present and to mediate artworks, exhibitions and gestures.

1.6.

Not all artists of today are contemporary artists. There are many artists still working in traditional media, who do not reflect on their art practice, who do not engage with any of the insights or breakthroughs that have happened in that massive space of art that was opened with Duchamp's readymade. The extreme version of the non-contemporary artist, who states he is an artist but makes art in the basement without any knowledge of contemporary art and with no audience from the contemporary art world in mind, is not a contemporary artist. Thus, I disagree with the all-inclusive position on the contemporary artist: that all artists and artworks of today are contemporary, the argument being that all art being made is always contemporary, since it comes into being *in* time and is thus present to the time of its own making. I disagree, because I believe that to be a contemporary artist is a state of mind, the result of a specific reflective operation, and thus a change of consciousness.⁴³ *A contemporary artist is aware of other contemporary artists and produces art for a contemporary art-world context.* So, a contemporary artist has *consciousness* of the contemporary as a cultural field, and also wishes to participate in that specific art world that constitutes the contemporary. Knowledge and desire produce an intention: the contemporary artist wants to make art that is presented at institutions or exhibition spaces showing contemporary art. To be a contemporary artist is to belong to a contemporary art world.⁴⁴ *A contemporary artist exists within the post-medium condition* (Krauss).⁴⁵ This condition has its origins in the radical contingency of art that Duchamp revealed with his readymade urinal, and that later Merleau-Ponty designated as the condition for philosophy to become non-philosophy. The post-medium condition is the situation in which the institution of art as a system allows for whatever object or event to appear and become designated as an art object. As Arthur Danto states in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*: *'Something is an artwork if it satisfies certain institutionally defined conditions, though outwardly it may appear no different from an object that is not an artwork.'*⁴⁶ Contemporary artists might be working with certain materials or be framed by their media, such as being categorised and labelled as a painter, sculptor, photographer or media artist, but these artists are aware that other possibilities exist, and that there is no absolute hierarchy between the different material outputs. Contemporary artists are no longer defined by the material support of the media with which they are working.

1.7.

These reflections presented here are an attempt to show that contemporary artists are thinking beings both through their act of being contemporary and through the way they establish their artistic projects. I believe that there is a relation between the condition of non-philosophy and that of contemporary art. Contemporary artists present a vision of the world that

is equivalent to a way of thinking; a non-philosophy in action. Non-philosophy is a mode of existing that becomes a mode of vision: a gaze that entails a theory of seeing and perceiving, but most importantly is ‘*externalizing a way of viewing the world.*’⁴⁷ (Danto). Inspired by Merleau-Ponty, non-philosophy is the name I want to give to this specific way of thinking about the world, which has exploded since the early historical avant garde. In the following pages I will try to demarcate the nature of this thinking and why contemporary art has become one of the more potent sites of enacting non-philosophy. Thus this book consists of two sections. The first section, *The Depth of Experience*, attempts to describe Merleau-Ponty’s idea and conception of non-philosophy through a reading of his manuscripts from the period of 1957–61. Here, key ideas are the role and power of experience, the turn towards the lived experience, and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh. Thereafter, I develop my own thoughts on the body, existence, position and method of a non-philosopher. Finally, I present some thoughts on Merleau-Ponty’s actuality for contemporary art as a position and practice. The second section, *Aspects of Contemporary Art*, deals with the space of contemporary art in relation to institutions and the agent producing art: the contemporary artist as a generic singularity. Important aspects are the artwork as a proposition, the system of competing interests, the art of contemporaneity, the framing of art through institutions, nihilism, experimentation and the notion of systemic hysteria. These are attempts to encircle different elements of the force-field constituting contemporary art and thus not attempts to convey the absolute truth about contemporary art. I end the book by presenting my thoughts on the future of contemporary art.

1.8.

I view these reflections as a presentation of a *poetics* for my own practice and existence as a contemporary artist and non-philosopher. They are aspirations for my life; thoughts and ideas that push me further, force me to re-consider my practice and the way I exist in the world. My writing transforms me: it feeds back into my mind as insights that I have to acknowledge are part of me and thus confront me with an understanding I did not know existed. They are the *trace* of an *experience* of thinking something *beyond* me. I am a contemporary artist and in the position of a non-philosopher. *It is a state of mind.*

2.
SECTION A.
THE DEPTH OF EXPERIENCE

1.
MERLEAU-PONTY

THE SPACE OF NON-PHILOSOPHY

*'Why this detour? Because we do not yet know what we are thinking.'*⁴⁸

(Merleau-Ponty)

*'This world, this Being, undivided facticity and ideality, is not one in the sense that being one applies to the individuals it contains, and still less is it two or several in that sense. Yet it is nothing mysterious: it is, whatever we may say, this world, this Being that our life, our science, and our philosophy inhabit.'*⁴⁹

(Merleau-Ponty)

1.

In the late 1950s, non-philosophy designated for Merleau-Ponty the position of philosophy within Western societies after the hegemony of the natural sciences in explaining the world. Since the collapse of speculative philosophical systems with the end of Hegel's idealism, philosophy no longer held the superior position. Rather, it was marginalised as a discourse inferior to the success of natural and social sciences that, together with capitalism and social engineering, have transformed the surface of the globe in the 20th century in a way hitherto unknown to humanity. For Merleau-Ponty, the world had become: *'A universe of constructa. A universe completely human and completely inhuman,'*⁵⁰ an ultra-artificialism where nature had been discovered as a new source of explosive energy: the nuclear bomb, with the potential to destroy all life on the planet. In the face of this potential to absolute destruction, contingency reveals itself: our world could be, but it could also not-be. The natural sciences developed through human history have constructed a new nature: a nature that exists for us, yet is also

the foundation of our own nature.⁵¹ It is not that the laws of nature are contingent, but that we as humans can manipulate them to our own ends. Against this exploitative and potentially destructive way of being in the world, Merleau-Ponty develops his non-philosophical position as the search for a more fundamental origin where we as humans are all part of *one* world: *'The Earth is the matrix for our time and our space: every constructed notion of time presupposes our proto-history as incarnated beings, co-present in one common world.'*⁵² Non-philosophy is thus a way of searching for a new absolute order that is not beyond, but which is on 'the side' of the Earth. Merleau-Ponty explores this new immanence through his concept of the flesh, to which I will return in the last part of this chapter.

1.1.

Merleau-Ponty's sense of a fundamental crisis in the relation between humans and the world can be viewed in the light of what anthropologists and scientists have recently been defining as the new geological age: *the anthropocene* – that is, the age of human impact on the earth and all its eco-systems,⁵³ through the construction of cities, infrastructure and development of land, and the influence on larger eco-systems with phenomena such as climate change.⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty's non-philosophy can be viewed as his idea for the new position that philosophy must take in the face of this crisis: a 'negation of the negation'. This means to insert the thinking mind into concrete experience, and ultimately to open up a space of criticality and action within and against the human-made positive world. The latter is itself a negation of the natural world, but has now become its own sedimented reality, consisting of institutions, capitalism and nation-state territories. To negate this negation is where non-philosophy begins: it must enter the daily life of human experience, of life lived: *'Philosophy must enter the fray. The practice of theory must itself be non-philosophy, i.e., philosophy that has become experience and action.'*⁵⁵ (Silverman).

1.1.1.

How does Merleau-Ponty envisage this entering into the space of experience? *'We have to rediscover the dimension before objectification; a world that is not theoretical – the theoria being a form of praxis with a human attitude – re-discover an untamed, wild world [un monde sauvage] before the distinction between the subjective (the psychic) and the objective (the in-itself) have been made.'*⁵⁶ To objectify experience is to reduce it to something controllable and instrumental, and thereby remain within the confines of Cartesian ontology. In the latter, knowledge and objects are organised into a grid, which fixes the experiences we have of objects according to their respective qualities, being either objective or subjective. Thereby, only that which is reasonable, clear and distinct can be allowed to enter the space of science. Yet it is exactly this kind of manipulation and instrumental reasoning that lies behind the fundamental crisis haunting Western societies. Classical philosophy is itself part of the problem, and thus only through reworking the basic ontological propositions can a new path be made that can escape the dualistic ramifications of being and rediscover 'a dimension before objectification'. Nature

has to be thought of as something beyond its appearance for a human consciousness, hence Merleau-Ponty's evocation of nature in its wild and raw state of being. In many ways his thoughts can be seen as anticipating certain aspects of postmodern ontology that can be found among a number of his students who later became central to the development of Continental thought: Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze.

1.1.2.

It is obvious that Merleau-Ponty in this project was continuing a thought already put forward by the late Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (1936), in which the latter tried to show how the natural sciences were founded in a life-world (Lebenswelt). '*Husserl saw the life-world as the universal framework of human endeavour – including our scientific endeavours. It is the ultimate horizon of all human achievement. As conscious beings we always inhabit the life-world; it is pre-given in advance and experienced as a unity. The life-world is the general structure which allows objectivity and thinghood to emerge in different ways in which they do emerge in different cultures.*'⁵⁷ For Husserl, and later Merleau-Ponty, the task of phenomenology was to discover the constitution of this life-world, the transcendental origin of the sciences and our intersubjectivity, and thereby re-direct the philosophising mind back to the common space: the foundation of human existence. To emphasise the life-world is important, because whatever changes or transformations we attempt to realise within our natural world, life still has to be lived in all its concrete multiplicity. We cannot escape the framework of the everyday and the problems that arise in the confrontation with the fundamentals of our lives. A good example of how science produces knowledge that returns to the world of daily life is the number of changes that have already taken place in our understanding and relationship to nature: the way we handle and re-use garbage, differentiating between organic, plastic, paper and metal; the way green energy is being supported: wind-energy, solar-energy, new water-based energy; the insulation of houses to minimise energy-costs; the production of organic food; the green profile of companies; the public discussion of global warming and the attempt to implement new CO2 emissions goals. Everywhere, on a daily basis, we are coming to an understanding that we as a civilisation must reduce our impact on nature.

1.2.

As mentioned in the introduction, Merleau-Ponty gave three courses on non-philosophy, and in the following I will attempt to summarise these. They cover more than 300 pages and were in no way destined for publication. Thus, they are far away from the clear and pregnant style that the reader familiar with his major works and many essays will know. They are often disjunctive, sketchy, technical and difficult to follow. Like staccato music and with lacuna, they read more like notes for speaking, not a manuscript to be printed, as the editor Claude Lefort points out in his introduction to these texts.⁵⁸ In the following presentations I have attempted to outline the themes that are important for my own understanding of non-philosophy.

1.2.1.

In the notes for the course *La philosophie aujourd'hui* from 1958, Merleau-Ponty devotes the second section, *La philosophie en face de cette non-philosophie*,⁵⁹ first to Husserl (A.section), and then primarily to Heidegger (B.section). The phenomenology of Husserl can be seen as the attempt to re-establish a 'naïve' contact with the world, to establish a gaze that simply looks, and thereby overcome the deadlock of psychologism, historicism and positivism that prevailed after the Hegelian endpoint. In his *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900) Husserl was interested in the *Wesen* of an experience: what does it mean to experience something as a concrete subject? He was searching to establish a transcendental idealism that would disclose that all being is being-for-someone: that in order for something to be perceived, a perceiving subject has to direct attention towards it. Merleau-Ponty also evokes throughout the course a number of other Husserlian themes from his later period, such as the question of sedimentation, the return to the life-world and the effect of history and how nature can be thought.

1.2.2.

In the B.section Merleau-Ponty shifts his attention to Heidegger, for whom thinking becomes a problem. Philosophy as scientific language-use is replaced by *Denken* as the problem of being and the medium through which being can pose the problem of being: *Dasein*. But by constituting the human being as that privileged being through which being *reveals* itself, Heidegger is himself committing to the same ontology that lies at the foundation of the Occident. Heidegger's 'turn' away from the early *Sein und Zeit* (1927) is a movement away from the importance he gave to *Dasein* and towards a new sense of the *world* and the *language* that encompasses *Dasein*: 'There is a universal Being that envelops the two correlations of Dasein and the world.'⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty is guided in his reading of Heidegger by his search for a being that underlies both the human body and the natural world, a principle of being that he calls '*raw being*', '*brute being*' or '*vertical being*'.⁶¹ There is a being that gives itself ('*Il y a*') propelling human beings into the world and making us act, because we are forced by the situation to take responsibility for it and create solutions to it. We have within us an energy that wants to externalise itself, impregnate itself into the world in order to make it meaningful. This being is not a solid foundation upon which we can build a human and justified world. Merleau-Ponty continues his reading of Heidegger's metaphysics and explores deeper this universal being, this '*Grund*': 'There is no foundation of Being [*Grund der Sein*], it is Being itself that is the foundation of all the rest [...]. Being as "abyss", "abyssal foundation".'⁶² Here, we find the ontological assessment of being as nothingness, as a fathomless contingency that gives no substantial priority to any kind of being. Only the ontic establishment of relations protects us from the violence of this nothing; yet, since being is nothing, it is also fundamentally *open* through the way we *speak* about it. For Heidegger, it is language that becomes the *house of being*, because it is through language that I project myself into the future, speak about what I might become, and thus project myself towards the unknown. But language is also an opening in another sense, because through language I can verbalise thoughts and desires that I did not know existed.

Language contains within it the power to displace me, transport me to foreign territories and new perspectives. Being approaches me through language, reveals itself as a hidden dimension of my own being. This is the meaning of *Denken*: that language becomes creative thought speaking *through* the human being.⁶³ In this view, a fundamental *reversal* takes place between the human agent, his being in the world and his medium of communication: language. It is language that comes first. Without language there would be no being: '*It is not Man who speaks, or who has language, it is language that speaks in him.*'⁶⁴ Thinking becomes not the establishment of a clear line of thought, but, as Merleau-Ponty indicates in the epigraph, a *detour*, because a non-philosopher does not *yet* know what he thinks. *Thinking itself becomes an experience.*

1.2.3.

How does thinking reveal itself in this new position as non-philosophy? According to Merleau-Ponty, thinking turns to the realms of art, literature and poetry. This he deals with in the course of *L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui*, 1960–61.⁶⁵ The first part of the course is entitled: *La pensée fondamentale en art*. The aim is to develop the contemporary ontology implicit in the new developments of literature and painting. A philosophy that is not always explicit, but remains 'in the air': an investigation into the 'underground man' ('l'homme souterrain') beginning with Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, and later developing into Freudian psychoanalysis. Merleau-Ponty wants to trace this ontology and to contrast it with Cartesian ontology, the latter being defined as: '*Truth defined by immanent certitude (thought).*'⁶⁶ Against a Cartesian ontology where thoughts hold their truth by being linked to a benevolent God who ensures their validity, Merleau-Ponty sees in the investigations of art a new ontology emerging: a communication with Being through vision that is open and incomplete. My previous remarks regarding Heidegger and language make sense in this context, because just as language opens the human world to the unknown, so vision contains an element of invisibility, a depth that cannot be fully mastered or controlled. Merleau-Ponty continues to sketch the different potentials he finds in literature (Marcel Proust, Claude Simon, Michel Butor), and painting especially, and one clearly sees how these working notes are part of the general research for his essay *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* on painting and vision. In the last part of this section, before he turns to Descartes, Merleau-Ponty attempts to summarise the fundamental insight that is generated through art: that the artwork emerges as a metamorphosis between author/artist and the work itself, because every artwork depends on a vision. Yet vision is also distance. It is a distance between what is seen and he who sees, not the possession of objects and environments. Within the structure of visibility, there is something unknown, a limit of knowledge, and this distance is revealed in the process of producing the artwork. For Merleau-Ponty, the achievement of art as an ontological endeavour lies in its approach to the virtual.

1.2.4.

In the last course that Merleau-Ponty delivered, *Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel*, he

traces the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy, an issue on which I touched in my introduction. Merleau-Ponty's general aim with this course is to locate Hegel and his concept of the absolute in order to develop his own non-philosophical idea of an absolute, *the flesh*. Before he enters into a close examination of Hegel, he takes the reader on a slight detour into the non-philosophical aspects of Nietzsche. In his introduction, he briefly mentions Marx (and will later devote the second part of the course to him) and Kierkegaard, but then quotes very lengthily from Nietzsche's *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1886) and his descriptions of the philosopher: *'A philosopher simply cannot keep from transposing his states every time into the most distant form of the spiritual – this art of transfiguration is precisely philosophy. We others are not free to separate the body from the soul, as the people are wont to do; we are even less free to divide soul from spirit. We are not thinking frogs, nor are we objective and registering mechanisms with refrigerated innards [...] For us, life consists in continually transforming all that we are into clarity and flame, just as it transforms everything that we touch.'*⁶⁷ Here, we have an emphatic description of the constant displacement of transcendental thinking that is the hallmark of a non-philosopher: a constant *translation* and *transfiguration* between experiences and concepts; an entering into life with all its pains and complexities that in turn inform the philosophical output. Nietzsche *embodies* non-philosophical thinking because he *invests* himself in the actual process of thinking and living. His thoughts are his life, just as his life becomes his thinking. He moves beyond the already established world, because he not only thinks about that which is within the world, but also produces his own thought-experience. He is a free spirit (*'Freier Geist'*) thinking for himself in an expressive act, asserting himself as an individual: non-philosophy in action.

1.2.5.

In order to understand the relation between what is within (the visible) and what is beyond (the invisible) and how they are related (the intertwining, the chiasm), Merleau-Ponty moves on to analyse Hegel's concept of experience.⁶⁸ The aim is to address how thinking can gain access to the absolute (that which appears to a consciousness, before consciousness itself is aware of the absolute), a problem posed in the introduction to Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). Understanding as a tool cannot be the absolute itself, because understanding as an instrument modifies that which appears. So the aim is to establish a concept of understanding that is identical to the absolute: *'We must understand the relation between "understanding" and the absolute as given in our life (hence an absolute which also will be "understanding"). We must truly recast the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, the absolute and knowledge according to their contact with our life.'*⁶⁹ (Merleau-Ponty). Why must subjectivity and objectivity, the absolute and knowledge, be recast according to their contact with our lives? We must understand this in the light of Merleau-Ponty's own development of his concept of the flesh. Life for Merleau-Ponty is that great enigma, that mystery of being alive and existing in a body that is both an object for others and an object that is mine and from where the world is perceived, the body being object and subject at the same time, and thus a double-sided being perceiving and being perceived, sensing and sensed. My life is exactly this fact of being situated in a body right

here, right now, in a condition that is ambiguous but also unachieved. For Merleau-Ponty, this is a new absolute immanence to the world, and philosophy must insert its reflexive interrogation into this structure of intertwining and double-sided existence. At that moment, it becomes non-philosophy as a renewal of already existing thinking, because each human being incarnates a singularity that can be thought. Thus whatever understanding we might have, we constantly have to return to the specifics of human experience unfolding in a human body. There is never an end to non-philosophy, because it is destined always to start over again. Hugh J. Silverman says of this new wild state of philosophy as potential non-philosophy: *'At each moment that a philosopher refuses to accept the standard metaphysical assertions in favor of a renewed understanding of life, then non-philosophy is at work.'*⁷⁰ It is exactly the encounter with life in all its myriad manifestations that forces us to rethink our position in life – whether it is politically, culturally or sexually. I think – and this will become more obvious later on – that this is what constitutes contemporary art as a position and practice: the attempt to produce a renewed understanding of not only life but also art through new propositions on art. Contemporary artists refuse to accept any fixed notions on what art, life, society *should* be; rather, they constantly search for what art, life, society *could* be.

1.2.6.

In his close reading of Hegel, Merleau-Ponty continues to examine the question of the development of experience. Experience, according to Hegel, appears when consciousness encounters something that makes its own standard of examination fall apart and is thus forced to change itself: *'Consciousness will have to change its knowledge in order to conform with the object. In the transformation of knowledge [...] the object itself becomes something which has in fact been transformed as well. For the knowledge which existed was essentially a knowledge of the object. [...] When therefore consciousness discovers that its knowledge does not correspond with its object, the object itself will also give way. In other words, the standard of the examination is changed if that whose standard it was supposed to be fails to endure the course of examination (Prüfung).'*⁷¹ (Hegel). Experience emerges in this process of both developing a new, expanded understanding, but also changing the standards of measurements by which the object is cognised and then transformed through the new knowledge of it. Experience is this double movement of breaking apart my already existing knowledge and also forcing me to develop a new concept and understanding of the object of my experience. The difference between Merleau-Ponty and Hegel is that the latter integrates the experience into his system; its violent and negative power is sublated and becomes part of the dialectical unity that is the Spirit in its totality. Experience serves a purpose: it is part of the movement of the Spirit (Geist) on its own path towards self-consciousness. Merleau-Ponty – and with him a broad range of modern thinkers – allows the experience to remain within the sphere of the undecided, the ambiguous, to become that whatever opening towards the new, the unforeseen. Experience is on a path to nowhere. Visibility with infinite invisibility is Merleau-Ponty's concept of such an ontology that allows experiences to emerge within the immanence of life and with the radical power to transform me.

1.2.7.

Merleau-Ponty ends his analysis of Hegel with a general commentary on philosophy and non-philosophy, summing up his insights regarding Hegel and the problem of experience. He accuses Hegel of dogmatism, because the latter allows the radical experience to become a step on the way to absolute knowledge. In the end, the experience is necessary as the unfolding of the Spirit itself: *'it is understood, transformed into its truth, but then surpassed.'*⁷² Against this surpassing of experience through consciousness, Merleau-Ponty wants to open a passage to the 'back of consciousness', of that which goes on behind it and where the self does not proceed towards a higher level of consciousness. There is something that escapes the totality of the system: *'It is the limb and face of experience, the manifestation of the intimacy of the one and the other which "consciousness" never succeeds in attaining.'*⁷³ Here, we find an almost Levinasian critique of what Merleau-Ponty pushes to the forefront of the philosophical investigation: the encounter with another human being in the flesh right in front of me; another who becomes an infinity in my world, who enters into my world and thus dislocates and transposes me into a new dimension of being-with (Nancy).

1.2.8.

In the last section, Merleau-Ponty devotes his attention to Marx and his critique of Hegel as a search for a link between philosophy and experience. He sums up the scope of Marx's endeavour: *'What he criticizes in Hegel includes: the theoretical attitude, the exhaustibility of philosophy, the return to phenomenology, praxis contra theoria, the search for a thought-action which does not have the positivity of all thought, the profane character of all action, and the exteriority of all action.'*⁷⁴ In this summary we find a number of themes that point towards the potential of non-philosophy as a mode of existence in relation to philosophy: that against a purely theoretical attitude there is an active engagement with the world; that human concrete praxis contains the seeds of change and transformation; that the act of *taking* action contains the element of risk and the unforeseen that cannot be anticipated by thought; that action in a human world is profane and objective. In light of Merleau-Ponty's previous investigation of the experience, the content of the Marxist experience is the dehumanising aspect of capitalism. By being confronted with capitalistic alienation of human relations, reduced to an economic labour unit that is denied the access to the meaning of his work and can be exploited through underpayment and replaced or fired, the worker experiences something that breaks him apart. Through the worker's development of a new knowledge of himself as a proletarian, the idea of himself as a revolutionary subject comes into being. Marx substitutes Hegel's 'becoming truth' with a 'becoming consciousness' of how objects in a concrete world are structured and generated by capitalism. Against the ideology of capitalism, Marx advocates revolutionary praxis: *'Action is the strategy and the technique of the reversal of capitalism.'*⁷⁵ So the non-philosophical potential of the Marxist destruction of Hegelian idealism is a double movement of confrontation with the alienating power of capitalism as an experience, and a movement towards concrete human action as a transforming experience.

1.2.9.

Merleau-Ponty enters into his notes for a future lecture of 8 May 1961: '*A text by Kierkegaard and one by Nietzsche.*'⁷⁶ What the content would have been we will never know, because of his death on 3 May. Presumably we would have been introduced to the non-philosophical content of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: how Kierkegaard pushed a satire of the Hegelian system into philosophy and a new mode of existence into philosophical discourse; how Nietzsche pushed nihilism as the active production of new values for life in a world where God was declared dead. We are left to speculate on what Merleau-Ponty would have talked about on that day – but it explains why there will be no further discussion here of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in relation to Merleau-Ponty's idea of non-philosophy. I will return to Nietzsche in the chapter *Nihilism and Experimentation*, but from a different viewpoint.

1.2.10.

Before I move on to a more detailed account of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the flesh, I will try to sum up the concept of experience in relation to non-philosophy. There are several aspects of experience that are connected to Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception. As stated earlier, experience is the encounter with something other that transgresses my existing form of knowledge – or my ability to receive being. It is an *anomaly* that goes against my understanding and forces me to produce a new theory of the world. I can encounter many things: strangers, artworks, institutions, political demonstrations, traumatic memories, violence, discrimination, torture, illness, amputation, hunger, slavery, humiliation, rejection, loneliness, the birth and death of family members, war, earthquakes, states of exemption. The list of experiences that can suddenly manifest themselves is long. Common to them all is that they arise within a perceptual field: they crash into my phenomenal field of experience, my daily life, and radically split time into two: a before and after. The whatever experience cleaves itself into my brain as an overwhelming event that I cannot master or completely understand. If I survive, I survive in a traumatised condition, as someone who must return to the event several times in order to understand it, and each time, allow myself to change with it or against it. So in this sense, there are experiences that transcend clear and immediate rationalisation, and cannot be integrated fully into an already existing form of knowledge. *After* the experience I have become different, because I have *expanded* my knowledge of life. Then, there is another kind of experience, as when we say that someone is *experienced*. Here, 'experienced' means to have survived the violence of being in a form that can *resist* and *engage* itself in whatever configuration of the phenomenal world. I am experienced if I know how to handle a situation, if I am familiar with the valid solutions and able to give useful advice to others. I am experienced if I have survived many experiences. Thus, for the experienced, the experience does not hold the same power of surprise, attack, crashing in as it does for the first-timer. This is a *pragmatic* concept of experience because it develops out of my ability to make things *work*. Thus, there is a certain *form* to my experience, because I am able to project, plan and execute from a reservoir of experiences. The first kind of experience I call the *pheno-event*, the second the *form-event*.⁷⁷

1.2.11.

It is important to keep these reflections in mind when we enter into the space of the contemporary artist, because the kind of experiences I will be talking about here are related to both kinds of event: the experience of being radically transformed by something outside of me (artworks, movements, other artists, a professor, an institution, an event), and the power of being experienced as someone who has developed a being-ability that is both a power to *exist*, a power to *resist* and a power to *insist* (execute a form-event). With these concepts I point towards a fundamental aspect of experience: that every experience re-enters into my general matrix of understanding and into the life I am living. Experiences enhance my capacity to exist; they give me power in the form of self-reliance, self-engagement and self-enhancement (but they can also be so violent that they destroy me, leave me shattered, traumatised, unable to go on living). A being-ability is another term for being competent: being able to manage and navigate a situation so that I can realise a plan, a project or a simple task. A being-ability unfolds a relation to being where experience is at *work*.

1.3.

Simultaneously with his courses on non-philosophy and the situation of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty developed his concept of the flesh, *la chair*. These two intellectual endeavours should be considered together, because they mirror each other. Merleau-Ponty's attempt to conceptualise that which '*there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate*'⁷⁸ and the position of the non-philosopher are related. In my view he is trying to describe a certain way of being, seeing and feeling the world that was specific to him. Through his tracing of the flesh he was enacting non-philosophy himself: he was pushing his own body-perceptions into the abstract space of philosophy, almost tearing it apart in order to make room for a new understanding of being a bodily subject. Where his early dissertation *Phénoménologie de la perception* deals with the classical tradition of philosophy and the recent insights of Gestalt psychology, the *L'invisible et l'invisible* has clearly abandoned academic language and moved towards a new, more poetic style of writing. Merleau-Ponty is situating himself in the midst of his own life.

1.3.1.

What is the flesh then? How can we understand it? First of all, as a *passage* between the body and the world, between the seen and the seer, the sensed and the sensing; the flesh is a primordial intertwining between my body and my surroundings.⁷⁹ The fundamental quality of the flesh is *reversibility*: a circulation of vision, sensibility and touch between objects and subjects that defies any analytic division of the world. The flesh is an absolute, a double-sided structure of visibility and invisibility, but it produces singularities, because behind each human vision there is access to a dimension of negativity: '*Through a labor upon itself the visible body provides for the hollow whence a vision will come [...] What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass, has no name in any philosophy. [...] We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be the union of contradictories – but we must think it, as we said, as an element,*

*as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being.*⁸⁰ Here, we must understand Merleau-Ponty's use of 'element' in the way in which the Greeks understood it: the permeating forces that organise the world into a pattern that becomes a style. For example, when I visit a different culture I sense a generalised way of being that connects those who are living with the way they build houses, organise traffic, eat food and talk to each other. There is a general way of being (a stylisation) in the world specific to the medina of Marrakesh and the Carl Humann Platz in Berlin. Both instances of city life have a style that is different, because the flesh of these worlds is not the same. They are not permeated by the same structure, values or the same economic, social and cultural conditions, and yet they are still visible; they can be seen and grasped both by an insider and outsider. My vision is not the same in these two instances, because in the first I am a stranger but can sense a logic to which I do not belong, and in the second I feel at home – I know the people, the façades, my memory superimposing the past on the present, clearly giving me a sense of being in the midst of a world *I know from within*.

1.3.2.

The flesh of the world constitutes a wonder for the thinking mind, because everywhere it is a stylisation of being through the unfolding of invisible structures in a concrete form. It is not style, as in a new trend emanating from the forces of the spectacle,⁸¹ but style as a form-giving way of making life visible, which means: liveable. From the visible order of the everyday to the hidden invisibilities of the virtual, the flesh contains a latency, a certain potential for being. Thus the principles of circularity and intertwining mean that: *'It is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact.'*⁸² To think from the flesh is to view human life as existence in a world that is always *unfinished*, each life representing the attempt to situate oneself and transcend into the future. From the other a vision emerges that has yet to be unfolded; that in its nature can never be totalised. The flesh is the name for this fact that the world is there in all its phenomenal existence as matter, but embedded with structures, historical meanings (verticality) and sedimented life-forms of already established ways of making life happen. All human beings are in their own way involved in a life-world right now, representing the sustained effort of keeping a body alive. They are present in a flesh: their own body-flesh and the perceptual flesh of their life-world that exists because there is an armature to the world we live in: governing bodies of institutions and generalised ideas of what makes life meaningful and valuable; of how to distribute freedom, wealth, property and civic rights constituting the *spirit* of a society at a given moment (systemic modernity).

1.3.3.

With his concept of the flesh Merleau-Ponty wanted to overcome a number of classical binary divisions: subject vs. object; perception vs. perceived; seeing vs. seen: 'overcome', in the sense of producing a new hyper-dialectic that could account for this intertwining between man and his surroundings (nature). As mentioned earlier, Merleau-Ponty saw the situation

of philosophy as that of a crisis in relation to the exploitation and destruction of the natural habitat through science and capitalism, a way of accessing the world based on Cartesian dualism that turns nature into dead and controllable matter; nature as purely object. Merleau-Ponty's 'new' ontology can thus be seen as an attempt to sketch out a new path of thinking about the relationship between man and nature, where nature is not 'outside' or 'out there' at a distance, but right within me, as the foundation of my own existence. Several key concepts emerge in Merleau-Ponty's later attempt to designate Nature as a force immanent to existence: *raw being* or *brute being* or *vertical being*. These concepts point towards the outside of thought: that which at once escapes me, but also imposes itself upon me with a force I cannot completely control. Raw being is a state before objectification that I can only access if I leave my pre-conceptions behind and enter into the fray of the event. It is to surrender to the event crashing into the present; to experience states of virtuality flashing into the movement of actuality, transforming it, opening up new paths to be explored.

1.4.

Merleau-Ponty envisioned non-philosophy as a new possibility for philosophy within modern thinking. He himself succeeded in producing thoughts that can be viewed as non-philosophical in their nature, many of which were unpublished manuscripts, lecture notes, ideas and sketches for further investigations. But due to his sudden death, his programme for a non-philosophy was never completed. Yet, more than fifty years later, in 2015, we are in a situation where we can *re-actualise* his thoughts, and qualify them for our life today. A lot of thinking has happened since (the paradigm shift into postmodernity, for example), not to mention the changes in the cultural and political landscape (the development of accelerated globalisation and the digitalisation of communication and information with the internet). The atomic threat of the global self-destruction of all life on earth did not happen. Instead, the Cold War was eclipsed by a neo-liberal victory in favour of democracy and capitalism. Yet the constant crisis between humans (the crisis of capitalism, the clash of civilisations, the generalised war on terror and the attacks by terrorists, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, the monumental dislocation of refugees and migrants) and the continuing crisis between humans and nature (climate change, pollution, the draining of natural resources, the melting of the poles) has simply shifted from the time of Merleau-Ponty, not the *fact* of being in crisis. The media saturates our minds with war crimes, disasters and tragedies on every scale possible. It is as if modernity at large is always in crisis, as if *crisis is a permanent condition of being modern*. Merleau-Ponty's concept of non-philosophy can be seen as the acknowledgement that no absolute system can validate or encompass the totality of life.⁸³ We must all begin from our own situation, our own embeddedness, from where we are positioned. We all have experiences that do not fit the system; each individual has been transformed in a way specific to him or her.

1.4.1.

In my attempt to push Merleau-Ponty's thoughts about non-philosophy into our own time, I

will present my reflections on the methodology of thinking for oneself. To think for oneself transforms the way in which you exist in the world, because it becomes a certain *openness* towards the movements of associations, sudden insights and flashing ideas. It is a bodily way of being, because I open myself to sensations, memories, new ideas and new modes of behaviour. It is basically to *exist* as an *experimenter* in the world. *It is a way of life*. The following sections are therefore descriptions of a certain *poetics of existence*. The thoughts presented here under the headlines of the body, existence, method and the position of a non-philosopher are therefore also *programmatically* for my future thinking. It is the way I exist, how I try to install myself in the world, how I have attempted to *perceive* and *feel* and *think* differently.

1.1. EXCURSUS: FRANÇOIS LAURELLE AND NON-PHILOSOPHY

1.

During my investigation into Merleau-Ponty's idea of non-philosophy as a position and a method I became aware of the non-philosophy of François Laurelle (born 1938). In the following I will digress from the question of contemporary art and the artist as a non-philosopher and attempt to present and critique the non-philosophy of François Laurelle and show how it differs from the non-philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

1.1.

François Laurelle represents a radical break with philosophy. He attempts to think philosophy from the position of the One: '*The One is radical immanence, identity-without-transcendence, not associated with a transcendence or a division.*'⁸⁴ This One is not a desired One as in Platonic and Neo-platonic discourse, where the access to the One grants the initiated the absolute secret and understanding of the world. The One of Laurelle can only be thought of as 'radical immanence' and therefore cannot be anchored into a system of representation. It is a Real that exists before any decision to think the world (Marxist, Phenomenological, Empiricist, Deconstructivist for example) and thereby a One without any positive determination. It is a One that has no form, but which is presupposed by any philosophy who attempts to think the world. '*The One is a real absolute and not only a transcendental principle, and it is capable of grounding Difference itself without letting itself be exhausted, in its essence, by the use that Difference at any rate makes of it.*'⁸⁵ Thus Laurelle's idea of the One is speculative; it grounds any conceptualisation of difference, without itself being destroyed or exhausted by the act of positioning difference. The instance when thought decides to position itself (the different philosophical positions) is called the *decision* or *the determination-in-the-last-instance* (DLI) whereby the philosophical system attempts to anchor the system within the origin, the One. Another name for the same operation is *givenness-in-the-last-instance*, because in order to think, the thought needs an ultimate ground from where it can think itself. Thus, DLI becomes both immanent causality and radical immanence within the One: "*Last-instance*" means that the One is the real

*unique cause, whatever the distance of the effect or the mediations that separate it from the One might be [...] The cause is always-already experienced through the One or “in-One” – this is the radical performativity of immanence.*⁸⁶

1.2.

For Laurelle, the project of non-philosophy is to foreclose any such determination or decision and instead view philosophy as a material for a new scientific system (‘a positive science’) where all philosophical propositions can be *cloned*. To clone a thought is to take it apart and reveal its inadequacy: to show where it fails in bridging the gap between the presupposed One and the thought of this Real, the Real here being another term for the One of Laurelle. Vision-in-one is the term given to this operation where we do not try to think the thought of a One, but: ‘*to think according to the One rather than trying to think the One.*’⁸⁷ Thinking *according* to the One instead of thinking the One means to shift position and to think of the different philosophical positions as attempts to create a fundamental relation to the world. We have to place ourselves in a position of a One where different philosophers try to think what we are, yet what they think is their thought of what we are, not what we are in ourselves.

1.3.

Why does Laurelle want to think the One as a radically autonomous One-in-One? What are the philosophical benefits? First of all, he arrives at the possibility of transforming theoretical knowledge into a pure science of thought. It enables him to view the history of philosophy as a *material* for a new kind of philosophy: non-philosophy. In order to escape the already existing formations of concepts – and thereby failed attempts at grasping the One – he invents a whole new technical jargon, which at first reading is difficult to grasp. It is not only new, but like all science it attempts to *universalise* whatever concept from the history of philosophy. This process of universalization is what gives non-philosophy its very abstract, academic and partly obscure nature as a discipline. When the concept of ‘lived experience’ is defined in Laurelle’s *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, there is no mention of what this actually means on a daily, concrete level for a human being. No, the aim of his non-philosophy is exactly the opposite: ‘*Within the framework of a non-phenomenology, it can be re-worked as “lived-without-life,” a first term that indicates its neutralization as a philosophical concept.*’⁸⁸ Here, we find the explicit aim of non-philosophy in its working with concepts: to neutralise concepts, but in this act of neutralising, the flesh of experience is cooked until it is dry and indigestible. The meat of Laurelle is without juice.

1.4.

Ray Brassier (born in 1965) has in *Nihil Unbound* (2007) voiced several critical objections to Laurelle, but was also one of the first to translate and introduce him to an English-speaking audience.⁸⁹ Associated with the movement of Speculative Realism,⁹⁰ Brassier takes a position that is fundamentally different from mine, because of his complete lack of any ecstatic being

in the world. Nevertheless, I do share his points of criticism directed towards Laurelle and will briefly present them. Brassier's main attempt is to circumscribe a real beyond any human relation to it whatsoever (beyond any human correlation, thinking a real according to the real itself, not through the human relation thinking and constituting the real as an object). Thus Laurelle is included in Brassier's investigation because he '*provides us with some of the resources required for a version of transcendental realism that would not be vitiated by the idealism of inscription or intuition.*'⁹¹ Brassier sees the potential of Laurelle in his designation of a de-phenomenologised conception of the real as 'being-nothing' that for Brassier is the ultimate nihilistic viewpoint. Simply put, there is nothing that supports our being in the world; our belief in meaning and sense is futile and self-deceptive: *existence is worthless.*⁹² Yet Brassier disagrees with Laurelle on some very important points. One of Brassier's first critical objections to Laurelle is his search for the essence of philosophy as a thinking process, of the attempt to think its un-representable condition. This deconstructive approach Laurelle inherits from Heidegger and Derrida, and he locates the essence in the fundamental decision (DLI). By reducing all kinds of philosophy to this essence, Laurelle also loses sensitivity to the specificity of the different kinds of philosophies and ways of thinking. Brassier writes of Laurelle's generality and theory of non-philosophy: '*It is too loose-cut to fit its objects; too coarsegrained to provide useful conceptual traction upon the material for which it is supposedly designed.*'⁹³

1.5.

What is the difference between Laurelle's concept of non-philosophy and the concept of non-philosophy that Merleau-Ponty designated as a new potential and which I want to reactualise here in the 21st century? Firstly, Laurelle wants to approach philosophy from the One. Merleau-Ponty thinks from the experience of life, of being *situated*. Secondly, Laurelle wants to construct a theory in order to produce non-philosophical statements. Merleau-Ponty wants to engage himself in the world of literature, arts, film – the world of concrete life. Thirdly, Laurelle wants to remain upon a transcendental plane of immanence, a pure scientific plane. And here is where my critique of Laurelle comes forth: I am not interested in any scientific understanding of philosophy, or strict limitation of what can be said and what can not, or in theories that can be cloned, taken apart and revealed in their inadequacy. I am interested in life, and whatever theory we construct we must enter into life, using our own body and existence as the testing ground for the encounter with life. I see life as raw being, as the mastering of raw being to reach the ecstasy of being. My starting point is life lived as a human, and the questions that arise from such living in a historical world. This means that the non-philosophy of which I am in favour becomes an act of activating thought in the encounter with life. Non-philosophy is, for me, to begin with the *experience* of life.

1.5.1.

What is the force of Merleau-Ponty's version of non-philosophy as I see it? First of all, it means to *situate* myself in the world where I am right now and from there develop a *position*

in order to *enter* into life. I am forced to live my life, and therefore I need to *know* life. Knowing life through the development of pragmatic knowledge is a meaning that returns to me and enhances my capabilities in life, because immanent to my body-space is a certain being-ability: *a way of disclosing being*. Doing non-philosophy as a reflexive action in social space is an attempt both to intensify my already acquired being-ability and to be open to new ways of living life. I constantly have to *test* life to see what it has to offer; at least I have to try it, for the sake of experience. And this becomes one of my fundamental problems with Laurelle's attempts to determine '*a more theoretically rigorous form of thought, one that is simultaneously more universal and "real" than philosophy, and that converts the latter into a particular case, or perhaps, a simple "model" of thought.*'⁹⁴ His discourse, in which he posits philosophy as models of thought, makes him unable to intervene within the specificity of experience. And he does not want to. I want to. Because of his denial of the life-world as the beginning and end of the philosophical mystery, he is *unable to translate* from the transcendental plane of philosophy back to the lived life. His thought circulates within a space of technical language-use. It lacks not only specific quotations from other philosophers, but also flesh: the human body stripped bare and not all dressed up in codes. In the act of reading Laurelle's non-philosophy I myself am unable to become my own non-philosopher. I don't know how to activate it. I cannot implement it. I cannot use it. I don't feel it *transforming* me. It doesn't *inspire* me.

2.
SECTION A.
THE DEPTH OF EXPERIENCE

2.
BEING FLUID

THE EXISTENCE AND BODY OF A NON-PHILOSOPHER

*'True philosophy is non-philosophy – which is to enter into the profundity of experience [Erfahrung].'*⁹⁵
(Merleau-Ponty)

2.

So, what are the *existential* consequences of being a non-philosopher? I will in the following move from the presentation of Merleau-Ponty's concept of non-philosophy towards an attempt to describe my own practical way of doing non-philosophy – how it *works* for me on a daily basis as a method to approach life, how doing non-philosophy becomes a life-form: the life of a non-philosopher.⁹⁶ I will be supplementing Merleau-Ponty's version of non-philosophy with a new space. For me, to try to *actualise* Merleau-Ponty is also to create a *poetics of existence* as a way of thinking in the world. I am a thinking being and my thoughts change my way of being. This space of reversibility between thinking and existence comes from my double-sided condition: I am a thinking being, but I am traversed by a transcendental plane of immanence constantly in the centre of a metaphysical knot: always situated in my body, the social and time. From this field of forces, relations to a constant emanation of events and experiences unfold. No one has thus far determined what the body, the social and time can do (Spinoza).⁹⁷

2.1.

To think for oneself is not just the act of producing arguments, statements and propositions. It is a way of actively becoming *conscious* of the way I exist in the world, but also allowing the

world to become me. And this works on a very basic level. My body as a non-philosopher has to be *fluid*, so ideas, perceptions and words can seep into the flesh, creep through my skin, mutate in the swamp of my brain, cook in the caves of my intestines. From this state of fluidity, of a fundamental openness, sentences appear as a mumble, as words springing forth from a well within my mouth, coming from the dark recesses of my mind. It is a *disposition* to think, a certain *inclination* and *temptation* to think. I cannot help myself from thinking, because it makes me delirious: contemplation is creating (Plotinus).⁹⁸ Sometimes my thoughts are like fireworks exploding as evanescent illuminations in the dark night, and if I do not grasp their apparition by writing them down on whatever paper is at hand they will disappear into oblivion again. At other times I feel they are haunting me, like ghosts yearning for another life on the printed page, but which will only disappear if I write them down.

2.1.1.

Do these thoughts belong to me? In a certain way, because I await them and nurture them: reading, going to lectures, talking, experiencing and testing them in conversation. Non-philosophy has to be protected, defended and attended to. It is the daily practice of capturing each thought that enters into the mind. A non-philosopher honours his material: his thoughts. One has to be alert and attentive, ready to write them down. Only in this way do I understand what is thinking itself *through* me. On the other hand, my thoughts are a conglomerate of already existing thoughts. I have exposed myself to a massive amount of thinking. I have travelled in the space of transcendental reasoning, but my flesh is distorting it because I am asserting my singularity. I am pushing thinking in a direction where *I* want it to go, not necessarily where academia or any other social configuration wants it to go. I become indifferent to what others might think of these aberrations, because it is my style of thinking: I cannot escape it, but I might *improve* it, just as I can improve my body power. I know I can modulate myself, I can *tune* myself, because my body is a primordial site of non-philosophical thinking: it is the space from where my world has become a given through my relations to it and in this long history of my own becoming I know I haven't always been the same – both as a body and a thinking mind. There is something about this monstrous body that is mine: it has been a site of pain and pleasure, joy and despair, freshness and tiredness; a space of erected being: wet nakedness and sweaty skin; anger outbursts and hugs of warmth; bleeding wounds and feelings of rejections and failure; hunger-cravings and wiggling dance-movements; ejaculations and erotic desires. I am this flesh: a *sensate* being. Just by looking in an old box full of photographs from my childhood, adolescence and adulthood, I see a body growing in size, taking in the world, going out into it, accumulating experiences and a specific power to exist. Looking back I see my own fluidity: this ability to expand, adapt and endure changing conditions and new challenges. My non-philosophy arises from this experience of travelling through time with my body, because I am constantly seeking to produce an adequate thought related to *my* situation.

2.2.

Merleau-Ponty views the body as an expressive entity: as a site of heterogeneity.⁹⁹ The body expresses itself in all possible ways: shouting, screaming, talking, whispering, gesturing, singing, dancing, fighting, loving, crying, laughing. A multitude of bodily capabilities are inherent to the body as *modulations* depending on the *situation*. ‘*Expression is everywhere creative, and what is expressed is always inseparable from it.*’¹⁰⁰ (Merleau-Ponty). Through expression I push myself as a body into the spaces of the world, with a certain emotional charge electrifying the context. If I shout in anger the passersby on the street will become afraid, turn their heads in my direction, and try to grasp the significance of my expression. Expression has the power to change my life, because I can change other people and the way they behave towards me. I can evoke joy, sympathy, compassion – but also disgust, rejection and distance. My affects are material.

2.2.1.

My thoughts can be seen as a kind of expression: they express the attempt to clarify what I experience, but they also express my attempt to think a thought without knowing its conclusion. I am thinking, but I do not know *what* I am thinking. Non-philosophical thinking becomes a *detour* (Merleau-Ponty) because it is a process in which I engage myself in order to think something new.

2.3.

My existence as a non-philosopher is one infused with experience, because I am *testing* it with my body. To test something is to try it out for myself, to see what it is like, and thereby achieve authority through the experience. I can talk about my experience in a voice that belongs to me, because I know it from within. Yet every test is related to a question of risk: it is a way of opening oneself towards the negation of negation, because the risk designates that point where I open myself towards the limits of *my* system: the acquired way of existing in the world. Whenever I risk something, I am exploring another side of the law, of what has been sanctioned and allowed, and I return with a new knowledge of why my world is real to me.

2.3.1.

As a non-philosopher, I must become *frugal* towards my existence, through the intensified use of my time: always bringing a book to read, writing down my thoughts, prioritising that which is important in *my* life. I have chosen not to be a frantic consumer whose desires are dictated by corporations. I want to *honour* my capacity for experiencing and thinking – avoiding packaged standardised experience: the ‘McDonaldization’ of the world in relation to food, space, time and consumption.¹⁰¹ It is impossible to live ‘outside’ the effects of capitalism, but I can survive in this maze of commercial attacks by simply *not* giving them attention. I must constantly *de-authorise* whatever projections are made towards me that emanate from the spectacle of the *perfect life*. I am not the perfect consumer, and I do not want to be. This is not a universal ethos, valid for everybody (‘perfect consumers’ living the ‘perfect life’ don’t

exist). I speculate as an act of freedom (but it takes time, as in the act of reading and writing), and I do not make any economic gain from it. My thinking doesn't make money. Nobody pays me to think. I cannot live off it. It is useless from the perspective of a capitalist: a waste of time. But, *I* use it to live *my* life. I would not be without it.

2.3.2.

As a non-philosopher I am addicted to the act of keeping my body in motion. To walk. A walk is both physical and metaphorical: I move through a space, producing my own distance, uncovering new territory, perceiving the world; but the walk is also a metaphor for my movement through life. I walk from one position to another, taking up space *and* time, and in this double engagement with these two Kantian *a priori* conditions of having an experience, I become something other to myself. Why should we become more frequent walkers?¹⁰² Because it makes us think better and it dismantles one-sidedness. '*Sit as little as possible; credit no thought not born in the open air and while moving freely about – in which the muscles too do not hold a festival. All prejudices come from the intestines.*'¹⁰³ (Nietzsche). From this credo we can add a new aspect to the Situationist attempt to discover the urban realm through the act of drifting or the *Dérive*. Not only do I lose myself in the maze of the city, the wilderness of the woods or the rocks and cliffs of the mountain ridge, but my thoughts are also freed from their bindings to the intestines: the system of already established thought. Sitting behind a desk is for bureaucrats; walking is for the non-philosopher. Non-philosophy is open-air philosophy.

2.3.3.

Walking in the streets I can become a street-prophet: mobile and ready to give good advice to whomever might be in need of it. From my pool of experience I have accumulated a number of lessons and insights, of what works and what doesn't. This is the *pragmatic* aspect of non-philosophy. Experiences are there to be passed on, to be useful; yet good advice is always dependent on understanding the situation, on being cautious and on timing. It must be passed on at the right moment and the help must either be asked for or spontaneously given – the one receiving the advice must *need* it. And once they have received it, the solution proposed, the guidelines suggested, they still have to translate it into their own existence, to see if it is the *right* thing for them: if it will work.

2.3.4.

Soren Kierkegaard praised the daily 'human bath' ('Menneskebadet')¹⁰⁴ encountered when walking in the narrow streets of Copenhagen. Here, he would have conversations with the multitude, listen to their views on life, and inquire into their moral and religious habitus. How far had they advanced in the stages of life? From which perspective did they see the meaning of life? How close were they to God? Walking in the streets became a way of botanically collecting experiences from and with the people. Kierkegaard constantly sends his thinking to the testing ground of real life, to those who are living it beyond any philosophical

system, and this is what makes his thinking non-philosophy. He is not interested in an abstract logical system where there is no experience, but in how life is lived, with irony, laughter, seriousness, despair, solitude and angst.

2.4.

As a non-philosopher, I exist within the metaphysical knot of own, given and final being, just like everyone else. I cannot escape my body, my social world or my temporality, but must develop relations to each force imposing itself upon me. To do non-philosophy on a daily basis is to explore the way in which each dimension manifests itself in order to understand what I can do within them. I think about the world in which I live, because by doing so I also come to appreciate it: the joy of existing, of being present right now. There are ecstasies in the world and as a child I had access to this pure joy of living: laughing, giggling, self-absorption. '*Being starts with well-being.*'¹⁰⁵ (Bachelard). As an adult I can recover the original space of joy by being non-philosophical: understanding the specificity of my existence and determining possibilities of gaining access to the spaces of ecstasy. There are ecstasies to be explored just under the tip of my nose.

2.4.1.

From the inner recesses of my mind an image keeps returning as a flash: myself suddenly falling into a huge boiling tank of cooking water. My naked body dissolves in this burning whiteness, my skin slips off, I evaporate. I always experience the same rush into this image, a strange feeling of being illuminated but also consumed. Is it my *white energy*? A space of incandescent freedom to be whatever?

2.5.

To sum up the body and the existence of the non-philosopher, I would say that the body is that of the monstrous body, and the existence is that of movement. I exist within a bodily flesh, which is structured by the self, yet also displaces me. As a non-philosopher I work myself towards the *outside*: I take this flesh on adventures, I travel with it, I walk it – but I also train it, develop it, enjoy it. It is my primary locus of being in the world that exists on the same plane of existence as other human objects (it will get smashed when hit by a taxi), yet is an object with a tremendous power *to* exist: I can sustain a life with this body, in ecstasy, joy, generosity and presence. I can do all this with my body, because I have survived until now. I have *endured* not only being, but *my* being: the one inescapable fact of being me.

2.
SECTION A.
THE DEPTH OF EXPERIENCE

3.
NON-PHILOSOPHY AS A POSITION AND METHOD

WHAT DO I THINK?

*'All we must do is situate ourselves within the being we are dealing with, instead of looking at it from the outside – or, what amounts to the same thing, what we have to do is put it back into the fabric of our life.'*¹⁰⁶

(Merleau-Ponty)

3.

The freedom to think for oneself is non-philosophy. It is a *position* and it is a *method*. In this section I will try to outline these two aspects. As a position, it believes in its own power to think for itself, and therefore takes as a point of departure: *'What do I think?'* This is what makes non-philosophy so audacious. I do not live off thinking (as in thinking for a living), but I think because I am living. My way of doing non-philosophy is unrestrained by any institutional demands, yet coloured by the aberrations of my mind and the desires of my body. I do not claim any universal recognition for my non-philosophy – it is private and non-authorised; ultimately, I am writing my thoughts because I want to learn from them. I want thoughts that I have thought myself. So as a position it is solitary, but in this solitude I also have faith. I believe in my powers to think, and only death will be the end to this thinking that I am doing in my life.

3.1.

Can I describe the conditions of possibility for this position of the non-philosopher? First of all, I believe we have within us the ability for reflexive subjectivity that is embedded in the larger *structure of the mediating self*.¹⁰⁷ Every mature human being possesses some kind of

reflective reasoning, however skewed or false or psychopathological it might be. In a systemic modernity this is the governing rationale behind democracy as a political formation: that each adult has the right to decide for himself and cast a vote on the day of the election. Behind this act of casting a vote is the assumption that the human being is able to think for himself. Whether or not my thoughts are informed by ideological convictions or propaganda, whether more or less consciously, I am still able to think for myself. In this sense I am a Kantian, believing in the human faculty of thinking. But this thinking happening inside the brain is not necessarily universal, following consistent rules or applicable to all possible situations. Whatever the nature of the thinking – whether mythical, primitive, religious, analytical, sophisticated, scientific, poetic, capitalist, liberalist, socialist – it is still some kind of thinking and part of the human self. The non-philosophical position is possible and valid from the perspective that it affirms my human difference and my powers of self-reflexivity. Non-philosophy as self-positioning flourishes with the systemic securitisation of freedom in democracy: the establishment of civil society is the pouring forth of individuality and thus self-criticality and self-reflexivity.

3.1.1.

As stated, non-philosophy as a position begins when I ask myself: ‘*What do I think?*’, and not, ‘*What do others think?*’ or ‘*What should I think?*’. It opens itself as a position the moment I truly question myself because I want to understand a situation, a conflict or a dilemma. From this point, non-philosophy actualises itself as an act of self-definition and a *readiness to think*. I define myself: what do I think? Which forces are colouring my thinking right now? And this self-questioning is a readiness. Readiness to think is the act of exploring not only my own position, but also the positions of other philosophers; testing and investigating positions in order to discover which possibilities for life they have. It is to confront the world with theory, and confront theory with the world, a double movement similar to that of interpreting a text and implementing its meaning into the flux of life. From this perspective, non-philosophy becomes a kind of *translation*: translating existing theory into useful knowledge in a specific situation.

3.1.2.

Non-philosophy is private thinking, because it is marginal in relation to larger established frameworks for institutional thinking. It takes place at the supermarket, in a studio, during a dinner-party and between friends walking in the woods. It can be a thinking in solitude outside a scientific community, because non-philosophy is to institutional philosophy what the back street is to the main road. Non-philosophy is thinking *en plein air*, among the multitude, in the realm of lived life. This is the plane of immanence, the field of empirical exploration: the subway, the café, the street, the party, the chance encounter. Thus non-philosophy can never be scheduled or organised around seminars, conferences or lectures in an auditorium. It would collapse under the sheer weight of all those projected desires encapsulated in seated

bodies. Rather, non-philosophy can be seen as something that becomes a *life-form*, as a way of life. It is a way of *situating* oneself and in this process developing a form of life that allows me to enter into the multitude of experience: to allow myself to become experienced.

3.1.3.

The idea of positioning oneself within whatever situation and from there trying to develop a thought that is not derived from an already established system we find in the opening paragraph of the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty writes: '*If it is true that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudices what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been "worked over", both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them. Seeing, speaking, even thinking [...] are experiences of this kind, both irrecusable and enigmatic.*'¹⁰⁸ To arrive at this *locus of experience*, which has not yet been worked over by thought, is to arrive at the pinnacle of the contemporary. It is to immerse oneself in the present moment, surrender to the crash of the event happening right now. Non-philosophy is here to establish a space that is the contemporary: that which is taking place right now, which is in the making. Translated into concrete experience: take a look at the contemporary art scene, which is happening right now.

3.2.

What is the *method* of the non-philosophy I am advocating here? Does a procedure exist, a way of doing non-philosophy, that can be reiterated by a third party? Or am I the only one capable of doing non-philosophy? First of all, the method of non-philosophy derives from the position. I have to *position* myself: *What do I think?* This positioning is a mind-clearing: the dissolving of other voices telling me what to think, the de-authorisation of other thinkers whom I have allowed to become signifiers in my thought. If this position can be attained, then I must try to see the situation as clearly as possible. I must step back, attempt to grasp not only the forces constituting the situation, but also the forces internal to my thought that are making me see the situation in this way. I must be honest, not only to the situation, but also to myself: why am I thinking this? This is a double act of dismantling powers surrounding me and dismantling my own projections into this situation. Dismantling is an act of de-authorisation, but this act is never neutral or guided by the pure light of rational vision. In my experience, every dismantling will always be limited, because every human being has a form with a structure that determines what can be seen and what can be endured, what can be felt and what can be expressed. I cannot escape myself; I am part of the equation, but if I think this, I at least have a sense of what I am bringing with me *into the position*.

3.2.1.

Let's say we have arrived at this position. What then? The next step in the non-philosophical

method would be to *state the problem* and make a *distinction through a definition*. Henri Bergson (1859–1941) is very close to what I mean when he says: ‘*The truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a question of finding the problem and consequently of posing it, even more than of solving it. [...] Stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing. [...] Invention gives being to what did not exist; it might never have happened.*’¹⁰⁹ This means that non-philosophy is thinking in action, the constant production of propositions whereby aspects of a problem are illuminated. This production of propositions attempts to think the double-sidedness of every configuration of forces: to see the situation from many sides and not be afraid of playing devil’s advocate. Non-philosophy is to walk around a topic over a period of time, circumnavigating the different *aspects* of the complexity. This production of propositions testifies to the fact that as a non-philosopher I try to think what I can think by myself. The scope and depth of my self-thinking are infused by my experience in life, the texts I have read, the power of my imagination, the conversations I have had with people.

3.2.2.

In the process of producing propositions and constantly sending them to the testing ground of the real, an experience *emerges*. I re-read and add new thoughts, editing, writing in the margin, testing them, adjusting, questioning them. The propositions that build up become solutions to the problem, because they contain both the understanding and the power to make me act. If I understand something, I can act in a way that is meaningful, which gives me self-reliance and certainty. This is the operative nature of non-philosophy: *it becomes action*.

3.2.3.

A non-philosopher might be a street philosopher, bathing himself daily in other humans, writing notes on sheets of paper, filling notebooks with his thoughts and ideas to develop later on in the evening, but this doesn’t mean he never reads the thoughts of other philosophers or builds his own library. One cannot just enter directly into the space of thought without preparation. If I am to transform the transcendental into my empirical existence and transform my empirical existence into the transcendental, I need to know what the transcendental and the empirical are. The transcendental does not reveal itself; it must be uncovered, broken apart, destroyed, so that I can traverse it. To acquire the transcendental, to internalise it, is arduous and takes time. Not only does one have to sit in front of a lecturer or a book, listening or reading, but one has to return to the space of learning over and over again. The need for this constant return to philosophy, to the already established space of philosophy, demands that a non-philosopher builds his own library with key source texts to consult when necessary and when inspiration is there. This has been part of my process: keeping track of my own learning has a material base. In every book that I have read I have underlined the most important and the deepest insights for me at that moment of reading. In the margin I have made notes or drawings. I have re-read several books many times, entering the date and year of each reading, building up a precious space of interiority within my own private library. A non-philosopher

should have his own books; they should be visible and part of daily life, not stored away in boxes in the basement or the attic, away from the daily encounter.

3.2.4.

Each non-philosopher builds his library around the topics and themes that are of concern to him. Over time, a collection emerges, a back-bone is erected, a set of core books that means the world to the non-philosopher. A theme is like a magnetic field, it orders and sucks ideas into its force-field. Thoughts appear, aspects are uncovered, sketches are made on paper. A folder slowly accumulates, with ideas, articles, titles for further reading. It is slow, moving in circles, growing organically, but then a structure sees the light – the distribution of sections, the topics to be thought about. Aby Warburg's magnificent library, which today constitutes the Hamburg Institute, can be seen as such a non-philosophical library: it follows and mirrors the desires of its maker. It was the foundation for what he later called a *nameless science*.¹¹⁰

3.2.5.

Another aspect of the method touched upon earlier is: how do I extract the knowledge already presented in the infinite world of texts, and re-inscribe it in my own life that I am forced to live? Could non-philosophy be the passage from the wisdom of the text to the incarnated wisdom of my existence? When I have been reading paragraphs from Wittgenstein, the essays of Michel Foucault, the monographs of Gilles Deleuze, their ideas and ways of thinking enter into my mind and generate new understandings that broaden my horizon. I implement the thoughts of these great philosophers in my own life, yet of course as a distortion, a fragment; I can only internalise what my given form allows me to (yet this form can be worked upon). I let the thoughts seep into the flesh of the world in which I am living, and see how they react almost as something chemical. This sometimes happens, when, in a social situation, I repeat to myself (within my interior being) a sentence I know by heart. The iteration of the sentence dislocates my self, me, the speaking being, from the situation; the sentence superimposes itself upon the situation, creating a gap between the actuality of the situation and my consciousness thereof. It is as if my mind produces something that goes against the meaning of the situation, making it discontinuous. This cleavage between the presence of my body in a situation and the flight of my mind is the production of a distance where a certain aspect of my subjectivity appears: the possibility to view a situation in a different light; to zoom out, to put things in perspective, or enter into it from another position. By doing this, I allow contingency to be part of the situation, because I can produce this cleavage, this absence within the presence of a situation.

3.2.6.

What happens when thoughts enter into the life of a thinking mind, a mind that reads and has been reading for over a decade? Do they basically become matter? Non-philosophy is this activity of responding in a private manner, reflecting, having afterthoughts about a subject,

trying to find a passage between the life that matters and the matters of the thought. Non-philosophy is organic philosophy: slowly growing a subject-matter, going back and forth between understandings, writings in the margin, cutting up, taking away, adding new thoughts. It is to ignite a whirlwind in virtual space and, through the constant adding of new thoughts, to make the whole thing spin faster and faster. From this new energy of the text in motion I am propelled forward into my own life. Writing gives me energy.

2.
SECTION A.
THE DEPTH OF EXPERIENCE

4.
MERLEAU-PONTY

CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE EXPERIENCE

*'Philosophy finds help in poetry, art, etc., in a much closer relationship with them, it renews and re-interprets its own metaphysical past – which is not over.'*¹¹¹

(Merleau-Ponty)

'I'm not interested in process, but only insofar as the process is absorbed in the experience of the piece.'

(Smithson, p. 215).

*'The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty took on pronounced relevance to the art of this period [the 1960s], as his work served as a critical apparatus for historians, critics, and artists of minimalist art and of the sculpture that was shortly to follow. From Phenomenology of Perception to the posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible, there was perhaps no other philosopher as rigorous and eloquent as Merleau-Ponty in his discussion of the chiasmatic relationship between objects and subjects within space.'*¹¹²

(Pamela M. Lee)

4.

Merleau-Ponty was first and foremost a philosopher in the classical sense of the word: educated at the prestigious *École normale supérieure* and later to hold a professorship at *Collège de France*, he was grounded in Western philosophy. This long tradition was present within him as a natural source of dialogue and thus, for him, philosophising was not an act of denying or destroying all previous philosophy, but of understanding it as attempts to situate a thinking

body in the world. He was aware of his projections into the past as a search for a better understanding of his own present. The past was never dead for Merleau-Ponty; it was living flesh within the present. When it came to cultural developments and the arts, he mostly dealt with the works of Cézanne, Klee and Giacometti – already established artists of the modern movement. He entered into their space from the position of a philosopher whose main preoccupation was to think from the body. Thus he asked, what does Cézanne’s painting reveal about perception, depth, vision? How did the body of Cézanne install itself in the world? How did he not only translate, but also transform his perception into a coherent painterly style? And style for Merleau-Ponty was always the indication of the singularity of a body twisting and distorting the world in a manner singular to this body. It was a coherent deformation.¹¹³ Style was a means of communication, because it testified to the fact that we never perceive in a neutral objective way, but always through the filter our flesh has become. To enter into the world of a painter is to enter into a generalised matrix whereby one comes to see the world *through* the eyes of this person. Merleau-Ponty: ‘*The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.*’¹¹⁴ Cézanne incarnated this particularity of vision: he allowed the world to move through his body and in return presented the world in a sketchy, raw, unfinished state of being, presenting to the viewer that line of forces that makes the visible a living entity full of nascent meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, the act of painting in the works of Cézanne was an expressive *operation* whereby the ‘silent being’ [l’Être muet]¹¹⁵ of nature is allowed to *speak*, is given a voice: ‘*Cézanne’s painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself.*’¹¹⁶ Through the painter, nature is interpreted in an expressive act. Painting, just like verbal and linguistic expression, is a *silent* language for Merleau-Ponty, in the sense that in the process of its own making it conquers a new space that did not exist before. It is silence, not in the sense that nobody is saying anything, but as a poetic category designating that liminal space where something new emerges.

4.1.

When contemporary painters read Merleau-Ponty’s essays on painting, they are often dismissive of his approach. They never find what they are searching for: a conceptual approach to dealing with the *object* of painting, the *context* surrounding painting or the *content* of painting. They find a philosopher who is projecting his own philosophy into the space of painting and therefore only finds what he already knew. For many, Merleau-Ponty’s essays on painting represent a formalist viewpoint: he deals with painting as an idealised activity that has a discernible essence; an essence that resides in the relation between the painter’s embodied vision, the sense of perceptual depth and the gestural transfiguration of perception through the expressive operation. Pop art, collage, graffiti, political painting, photo-based painting or conceptual painting do not fit into his philosophical investigation. In this light, we have to be careful when we try to situate the influence of Merleau-Ponty in relation to contemporary art, because we will have to search elsewhere for his potential. Merleau-Ponty did have an

impact on the development of contemporary art, but not in his own lifetime, and not the way he himself imagined it.

4.2.

Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) was translated for an English-speaking audience in 1964 and was to receive great attention from emerging Minimalist artists of the day: Robert Morris, Richard Serra and Donald Judd. Even though Merleau-Ponty himself was interested in modernist painting, these artists saw in his philosophical evocation of the body as lived and moving through real space a new approach to engage with sculpture and artworks installed in space. From contemplating the 'flatness' of the painting, its gestures and self-reflexive awareness of being a painting (Greenberg), the new phenomenological ideas shifted the focus towards *the actual viewing experience*. What does it mean to be a body moving through a space blocked by simple geometric objects, perceiving my own bodily presence in the midst of objects who represent nothing, who are just what they are? Where there is no transcendence through the object, only the transcendence from my body moving through space? Minimalism represents a search for a straightforward material approach to space where the body is pulled back to its physical condition as a multi-sensuous object. As Merleau-Ponty states: '*The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing.*'¹¹⁷ which can be seen as the intention of Minimalist aesthetics: the attempt to establish a new structure around the object, the environment and the viewer that opens the space of perception in a multi-sensory way. In this light, the dictum: '*What you see is what you get!*' can be read as both an anti-metaphysical statement about the pure object-quality of the viewing experience, but also as a reminder to the viewer that within his own vision there is an infinite depth, a possibility of transcendence. What he sees – that is, what he actively and consciously perceives – is what he will receive from the artwork. And vision here is not just looking at something: '*Vision is an action, not, that is, an eternal operation [...] but an operation which fulfils more than it promises, which constantly outruns its premises and is inwardly prepared only by my primordial opening upon a field of transcendence, that is, once again, by an ek-stase.*'¹¹⁸ To see is to do something: it is to become aware of my own situation within a space. And this space in which I am situated, confronted with structural objects, is an *ideological space*. The viewing experience becomes a gateway to institutional awareness. As art critic Hal Foster puts it in his description of the Minimalist endeavour in *Return of the Real* of 1996: '*As an analysis of perception, minimalism prepared for a further analysis of the conditions of perception. This led to a critique of the space of art (as in the work of Michael Asher), of its exhibitions conventions (as in Daniel Buren), of its commodity status (as in Hans Haacke) – in short, to a critique of the institution of art.*'¹¹⁹

4.2.1.

The Minimalists transformed their reading of Merleau-Ponty into the making of actual artworks: sculptures, paintings, performances and Land art projects that in each case attempted to move beyond the classical modernist categories of these self-same media. They attempted

to break free of the rigid categories and instead move into an *expanded field* (Krauss)¹²⁰ where the viewing experience encompasses the object, the context and the viewing body itself; a new totality where surroundings are made visible, where the process of the work, in the words of Smithson, is absorbed into the experience. I think we can see this transformation of ideas as a non-philosophical reading of philosophy. The Minimalists read Merleau-Ponty's text and were inspired, and during the development of their own discursive position they used it to talk about their projects and this new way of engaging with physical space.

4.3.

One of the defining aspects for the possibility of non-philosophy is the *individuality of experience*; and in order to develop the non-philosophical relation to contemporary art with Merleau-Ponty in mind, I will sketch out the different aspects of experience that I have dealt with so far and tried to develop. This is the *perceptual*, *pragmatic* and *radical* aspect of experience which infuses both the existence of the artist and the contemporary art space.

4.3.1.

On the most basic level, we have the perceptual act of experiencing. Here, experience is what gives itself on a phenomenological level. I perceive a tree in the garden and thus have an experience of an object situated in an environment at a specific distance from me, the viewing subject. I can move closer, encircle it, or move away, whereupon the tree's scale, size and presence change. The ability to have this kind of everyday experience is located in my bodily perception apparatus: my eyes can see, my body can move around on its legs, I can feel and touch the object. At the age of 37, I have had thousands of such experiences, taken as singularities, though in reality most of my perceptual experiences have been habitual: the same house, the road to work, the shops I enter, the people I meet. I cannot remember all the times I have experienced the tree in the garden because it is part of my life-world; it goes unnoticed until the moment something happens to it: leaves starts to grow, flowers come out, apples fall to the ground or it is cut down. Within my body there is a system of perception that allows me to experience the world through an already established matrix of perception. I am tuned and geared to perceive this world and this ability is what allows me on the most basic level to have experiences of artworks. It is due to this primordial ability of the body to perceive the world that I can enter into a relationship with contemporary art, because even the most complex project demands some kind of visual configuration to be discerned, sensed and then conceptually grasped.

4.3.2.

I have survived until now, keeping this body alive, for almost four decades. Something within me is *functional* and *pragmatic*: I know how to live life, to make life *work* – on a scale where I am able to sustain social relationships, receive some kind of respect for my work and enjoy a level of freedom in what I do *in* and *with* my life. I am *experienced* not only in the accumulation

of perceptual experiences (the thousands of times I have perceived the tree in the garden), but also in the sense that I have within the structure of my bodily existence a certain power to *preserve* myself. I am not chaotic; nor do I lie in bed all day, living on a bare minimum. I *know* how to make artwork, to ride a bike, cook food, write letters, make a chair, talk on the phone etc. I know these actions and ways of behaving because I have done them over and over again. I have *practised* where I have failed, and tried again and again until the world of objects has fallen into a place that fits my body-space. Within my bodily constitution there is a power to exist that enables me to *endure* being: I can take so much without being destroyed by my encounter with life. My body has been a *testing site* for trying things out. The position I have in life comes from the decisions I have made, the stances I have taken, and the actions to which I have committed myself, the radical experiences I have not only survived, but also allowed to change me. So, together with my ability to *sense* the world comes an ability to *act* in the world. Yet the first level is informed by the second level, because I am tuned to perceive the world in a way that is specific to my ability to preserve myself. For example, he who works as a forester knows all the different kinds of trees and leaves and paths in the forest. For him, the perceptual experience of being in the forest is different from the office clerk who enters it for the first time. They both perceive trees, but the depth, scope and knowledge to be extracted from the experience are different.

4.3.3.

Living life is not one continuous movement without differentiation. It has its moments, as when I am confronted with challenges, conflicts or catastrophe, where I am no longer in control, but have to develop new strategies and understandings in order to survive. In these encounters with objects, other people, foreign environments, nature or death – an Otherness – I cannot remain the same. The unfamiliarity of the experience will leave a trace on my organism: a scar, a trauma, a split – but in return, the experience will expand my knowledge of the world. It will push me in a new direction, enlarge my capacities to endure the violence of being and transform my relations to the body, the social and time. These sorts of experiences have a *transformative* aspect, because they can enter into our lives and completely change it. They are *radical* experiences, pushing me to the limit of myself.¹²¹ Non-philosophy can be seen as the attempt to think a thought from the confrontation with such experiences, to situate oneself in the presence of Otherness.

4.3.4.

I am a totality of experiences: *perceptual*, *practical* and *radical* experiences, and all these aspects of experiences come into play when we try to understand contemporary art. A) Contemporary art has a perceptual aspect. It can be perceived: I see, touch, hear or smell something that is designated as the whatever artwork event. B) Contemporary art has a practical aspect: it is located in social contexts and my ability to engage in this artwork event is dependent on me sustaining and preserving myself in a practical manner so as to perceive the art. C) Contem-

porary art has a radical aspect to it: it presents experiences that have the power to transform my perception and understanding of the world. Contemporary art is a displacement both of the artist, the viewer and the institutional context presenting it.

4.4.

If non-philosophy is the act of *situating* oneself in the midst of the life there is to be lived, we can only do this from the horizon of a concept of experience. There is a depth of experience entailed by each situation as a complex field, because every one of us brings our own pool of experiences to the world, colouring, but also displacing it, in our own and always different way. By situating myself in the whatever of life – a contemporary art exhibition, a stranger, my neighbour, a chance encounter – I will arrive at a zone of indiscernibility where I will both make new experiences and be transformed by them. There is no certainty that they will lead to a better life, make me a better person, or that they will save the world. The opening towards the space of contingency that contemporary art presents to us will always be accompanied by a *risk*: I might have to change myself, my outlook and perspective, not only on the world, but also on *my* world.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

1.
CONTEMPORARY ART

THE RADICAL CONTINGENCY

*'The equality of materials and media is the artistic equation of our time. This media justice could also be defined as the postmedia condition.'*¹²²

(Peter Weibel)

*'Advance information about the concept of art and about an artist's concepts is necessary to the appreciation and understanding of contemporary art.'*¹²³

(Joseph Kosuth)

1.

Anyone who is acquainted with contemporary art knows it represents a vast field of phenomena all over the world. From the more than 300 worldwide art biennials, to the thousands of museums, art galleries and project spaces, to the independent artists working within mobile contexts, contemporary art exists on many different levels and with different degrees of success, attention and power. There is contemporary art in all major cities in the world, and a huge number of art spaces outside the art hubs co-constitute the contemporary art world. And these are just the physical spaces dedicated to contemporary art; to these we must add all those projects happening independently on the internet and the thousands of artists' websites that present art, but no longer with white walls and security guards as their frame. As a phenomenon and as a category, 'contemporary art' covers a wide spectrum of possible manifestations and ways of negotiating the presence of the artwork, the artist, the context, the mediation and finally the viewer. From object-based art to participatory art; from video art

to installation art; from performance art to intervention art; from digital art to mail art; from billboard art to poster art – all these are sub-categories of contemporary art. So, is it possible to see all these manifestations as basically belonging to the same space? Is there an underlying ontological structure that supports all these manifestations as equally valid and with the same distance or proximity to the generic category of contemporary art? I believe there is, and this is the *radical contingency of art* that was disclosed by Duchamp's readymade.

1.1.

Contemporary art as we think of it today has not always been termed as such. The name first came into use around the early 20th century, in auction houses that wanted to signify a difference between classical modern art and the new works made by artists moving away from the modern paradigm. Thus, contemporary art was the attempt to situate art both in relation to a historical present and as different from modern art. Later, during the 1950s and 1960s, it developed into a new category, binding forces with the neo-avant-garde movements as the advanced art at that moment: Conceptualism, Minimalism, Fluxus and Pop art. It was art that aimed to intervene directly into a present situation, but through the modalities of the new paradigm constituting contemporary art: the post-medium situation. Because the activities, values and institutions supporting modern art were still prevalent at the time, 'contemporary art' as the designation of a specific practice, rose to prominence among its own progenitors. Contemporary art became a *language game* (Wittgenstein) whose meaning was decipherable by its users: those producing and consuming contemporary art.

1.1.1.

Contemporary art as a social phenomenon has from the outset been marked by the pathos of distance favoured by Nietzsche: the awareness of being different from and something other than the prevailing society; of exercising this difference because of the future that is inscribed in the notion of contemporary art.¹²⁴ Contemporary art holds the promise of the future because it distances itself from the powers of the present that preserves modern art. And 'modern art' here means the absolute aesthetic autonomy of the artwork in relation to its medium and its historical traditions. Painting as painting. Sculpture as sculpture. Contemporary art basically wants to abandon this whole Western tradition of art and instead ventures into a territory that represents a new desire in art: contemporary art *wants* to be new, it presents itself as new, it is filled with courage and audacity, it opens towards the impure, it punishes the viewer, it is difficult, demands patience and endurance, it is like a secret language for the chosen few. Only those who are able to speak the language *really* understand the meaning – the hidden and the visible – of contemporary art.

1.2.

In the 1990s contemporary art came to designate an institutional fact: new departments in museums and collections, positions for specialist curators, galleries dedicated only to con-

temporary art, exhibitions solely of contemporary art. That this new institutional recognition surrounding contemporary art becomes real in historical time must be seen as part of the change towards a postmodern view of culture in general. The contemporary is that which supersedes modernity, because in postmodernity progressive historical time (where the present is viewed as the most developed) is replaced with a new time: that of historical synchronicity. The contemporary is the historical space where several time-horizons exist simultaneously. Thus the contemporary is the awareness that we are not moving forward in a clear direction, that we are not living for the sake of any bright and redemptive future, but quite to the contrary, we are living in the present, in which we must navigate and engage ourselves.

1.3.

Let us look at some recent attempts to conceptualise contemporary art. In his short, but programmatic article 'Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses',¹²⁵ the Mexican art critic and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina outlines aspects of the meaning that contemporary art has acquired today. First of all, he writes, contemporary art designates a chronological entanglement with modern art as its natural successor, and ultimately signals its *death*. Contemporary art is that which comes after modern art, and signals the death of Eurocentric art that has proliferated across the globe, opening up the space of art to voices outside the American-European axis of artists and institutions. Writing from Mexico City, Medina's view of contemporary art is that of *globalisation*.¹²⁶ Contemporary art is that moment in history when new art centres emerge as legitimate places to be, a de-centring of the art power contained in the axis between Paris and New York during the age of modern art (what he also calls 'NATO art'): '*Contemporary art marks the stage at which different geographies and localities are finally considered within the same network of questions and strategies.*'¹²⁷ Yet, according to Medina, the elitist aspects of modern art still continue into the space of contemporary art with its aspiration towards theoretical and formal innovation, its relations to the art market and the art-star economy, its insistence on the auratic power of the singular object and its sustaining of the white cube as spatial paradigm for the presentation of contemporary art.

1.3.1.

Medina rightly asserts that in the age of neo-liberal hegemony contemporary art as a practice and outlook on the world is one of the few spaces of criticism: '*As various intellectual traditions of the left appear to be losing ground in political arenas and social discourses, and despite the way art is entwined with the social structures of capitalism, contemporary art circuits are some of the only remaining spaces in which leftist thought still circulates as public discourse.*'¹²⁸ Contemporary art is for Medina a 'sanctuary of repressed experimentation', a 'space of revolt', an act of 'protecting utopia' because of its historical ties with the early avant-garde movements and the radical practices of the 1960s. Just as the contemporary art object possesses a space of resistance and reflection, so the: '*Institutions and power structures of contemporary art also function as the critical self-consciousness of capitalist hypermodernity.*'¹²⁹ This aspect of contemporary art – that it is

critical and conscious of its socio-economic context – draws its fundamental power from a sense of contingency.

1.4.

Contemporary art is a state of mind: that art can be made from contingency. The condition for this is the institutional force that insists on the radical contingency of the world, and the necessary context of framing art. Contemporary art is a transformation of the commonplace (Danto), where the outlook on the world is changed. Not only can anything enter into the framework of art, but art also enters into the contemporary in a different way. To understand and really live *with* contemporary art is to change an outlook on the world. It is to see, perceive and think differently. Therefore, contemporary art can exist parallel to modern art or historical art, because there are forces supporting these ways of making art. This is the reason why not all art being produced right now is contemporary.

1.5.

As a consequence of the radical contingency permeating contemporary art there is no strict border between reality and art. We can no longer distinguish from reality where a project by the Danish art group Superflex begins or ends. Their projects intervene into public discourses or social programs, all in the name of contemporary art. They are called ‘tools’ simply because they are meant to be *used* in social life, not contemplated for aesthetic pleasure or visual complexity.¹³⁰ Thus, the clear borders are gone, and instead there is a *dispersion* of contemporary art within the global field, because no one can police or completely control it. Contemporary art is disseminating itself into society through its radical contingency. Transdisciplinarity, crossovers, architects making art, artists designing architecture, artists writing, writers making exhibitions: the list of agents crossing the borders and returning again is long. Contemporary art is not a protected title; it doesn’t belong to anybody, except to those who occupy the whatever institution in order to place objects within the space.

1.6.

Joseph Kosuth states in the quote introducing this chapter that advance information about the concept of contemporary art and the artist’s concept is necessary for its *understanding* and *appreciation*. Kosuth here points to one central element in the situation of contemporary art today: that of the viewer. The viewer cannot access contemporary art without some kind of *foregrounding*. Thus, contemporary art exists in a different interstice from the historical art preceding it, because there are no longer any conventions that hold the truth of art. Nobody knows what contemporary art essentially is; there are only the pragmatic and strategic communities existing around temporary expressions defining the current shape of contemporary art. Contemporary art thus exists in a *mediated space*, because it can never exist without the context supporting it. And those who mediate art have risen to an unprecedented power: the curators, art critics and the commentators who explain, interpret and translate con-

temporary art to its viewers. From this perspective we can also understand the curator as a non-philosopher in action: someone who is making a statement through the displaying of artworks, objects, events and writing. Here, insights generated by philosophy and contemporary art are transposed into the institutional regime of discourse in order to be translated by the viewer. But there is a difference in the way in which the contemporary artist and the curator are non-philosophers. First and foremost is the way the artist has to live with his art. As an artist I have an intimacy with my artwork: I initiated it, I made it, I survived it. It has my name on it, and my name is attached to a certain position that I represent. A curator can select whatever he wants, the best from every artist or the worst from every non-artist, and stage it according to his exhibition concept.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

2.
BEING SITUATED

THE ARTIST AS GENERIC SINGULARITY

*'A being is special if it coincides with its own becoming visible, with its own revelation.'*¹³¹
(Giorgio Agamben)

2.

What does it mean to be a contemporary artist today and can we describe this *mode of existence*? First of all, we must *situate* the contemporary artist within *the space of the generalised human existence*. Artists are just like all other humans: they have a body, are social and temporal and in search of ecstasies in whatever form. At some point in their lives they enter into the art world with a mature body, committing themselves to some kind of artistic output generated by the act of social positioning. This entering is a fundamental gesture towards life; it is a *choice* that becomes absolute, because it transforms a human body into something specific: that of an artist in a social world. From this first decision comes a specific existential power: the power to place a *whatever* within the art context. This power is not automatically given once and for all, and it does not happen with the same intensity for all artists at the same time. For example, the budget to produce art for a Tate Modern Unilever project is only given to artists who have already established themselves, and never given to an artist who is still a student. Both are contemporary artists, but with a different power to exist, and situated differently. To exist in the art world as a contemporary artist is not the same experience for all its agents.

2.1.

In order to understand the subtleties of being an artistic agent, a person who *does* something

within a social field, in this case the art world, we must develop a hyper-reflection regarding the artistic existence. We must on the one hand grasp the condition of being situated within the metaphysical knot – own, given and final being – yet on the other hand understand the institutional transformation of the artist into someone specific: *a generic singularity*.¹³² Generic singularity as a concept points towards the double-sided aspect of being a human agent incarnating generic categories and yet being an absolute singularity. It is a being who becomes special by coinciding with his own becoming visible in a social world (Agamben). For example, my generic properties are those that I share with a number of other people depending on which context I inhabit, such as being male, white, Western, educated, middle-aged, father, brother, son, neighbour, consumer, artist, but my singularity in the art world derives from my specific power to exist as a human: a contemporary artist who has become known for a specific output. Only one person is incarnated into my flesh with my name right now. I am the one who in specific contexts (the art world) stands out from the crowd as that person known for this or that and who has the right to *choose* whatever to become works of art.¹³³ The power I have to exist is partly derived from the generic institutional qualifications I have acquired and the exhibitions and works I have done as the total sum of competences I have accumulated over the years, for example, the papers and documents from certified institutions stating I have an MFA degree in Art or an MA degree in literature. These titles are generic in nature – thousands of other people also have these degrees – but I am the one with this specific outlook because of the artworks and projects I have made. I am at once generic, qualified through institutions, and a singularity. Thus the singularity I have achieved as a living artist today takes place against a background of generic categories: I am categorised as a contemporary painter educated at the Royal Danish Art Academy who has exhibited in art institutions of various formats. The category ‘a contemporary painter’ is generic, meaning it represents an abstract field of possibility where nothing about the actual content or formal output is said. It means that I mainly work as a painter and my work has a contemporary outlook – a description that I share with thousands of other contemporary painters. But, following the argument of this book, I would also say that being a contemporary painter means I am aware of possibilities other than painting. I have experimented with video, installation, photography, sculpture, performance and interventions. I am aware of all these possibilities within each medium or way of engaging with space, and if the right idea or appropriate context is there, I do these non-painterly activities.¹³⁴ I don’t have to paint, but I paint because I want to. For me, there are still many ideas in painting and ways of creating spaces of reflection to be explored.¹³⁵

2.1.1.

So, to the art world I am first and foremost a contemporary painter, but to my three children I am their father, and to my neighbours I am the man next door. To the local café I am the good customer, to the guy in the video rental shop I am the one who watches TV series, but to the clerk at the embassy I am a Dane, to the woman in the local municipality office I am a citizen with social rights and obligations, to the vendor on the main square in Marrakesh

trying to sell me a wooden snake I am just another Western tourist whom he will overcharge, to a dog barking at me I am simply an unknown human. Depending on my context, I slip into different generic categories that construct operative spaces *within* and *around* me. There is no escape from the maze of categories, but I can act and behave differently according to each situation. Throughout all these encounters three transversals remain the same: that I exist in my *body*, and that I am present to a *social* situation in *time*. The transcendental foundation of my human existence is the intertwining of three essential dimensions of being: own, given and final being. The body, the social and time are all co-present in my life right now and in all situations I have ever experienced. Yet the number of categories, their inherent intensity and power over my existence is not the same, because the components feeding into the three dimensions change throughout life. As my listing of different generic categories reveals, the way I engage with the situations is not a given. I am granted the possibility of reflecting upon my relation to these three dimensions, which gives contemporary life an element of chance, indeterminacy and vitality.

2.1.2.

I have become something specific in an art world, because I have pushed myself in a certain direction. I have *decided* to become an artist and insisted on this existential form for more than fifteen years. My power to receive but also produce the world is derived from this initial gesture towards *my* life. I am a contemporary artist as a specific instantiation of a generic singularity existing alongside a huge number of other generic singularities. My artistic output is being tracked, recounted and is public in a new way due to the internet and my personal website. A totality of works and projects and writings is accumulating, generating a direction, a sense of where I am heading and which interests I have been pursuing. Yet, at any moment I might make a radical 'jump' almost as in quantum physics, where electrons leap between energy levels in an atom. From one day to the next I can make a fresh start, place myself differently in the way I make art if I really want to. I can re-invent myself and this is often the case for artists who stay in the game a whole life: they keep on moving. I have so many possibilities of becoming inspired by either historical or living artists and through my positioning and the absorption of concepts into my own existence. I can always become a *displacement* to myself and to the history of contemporary art. This is the radical freedom of art that derives from the radical contingency of art: that everything and anything is (still) possible.

2.2.

As a conceptual person the generic singularity has certain traits or components feeding into the specific empirical situation. Each generic singularity within the field of contemporary art represents a development of an artist-being, of a way of living a life as an artist: being visually talented, with an ability to execute projects and meet deadlines; being conscious of one's public appearance; having the will to keep going and overcome defeat and rejection; being conscious of the art world as a social system with internal differentiations; living a bohemian

lifestyle; being part of an educational environment, either as student or teacher; developing an artistic project while pursuing a specific interest. There is a fundamental *self-care* in the way artists manage and develop specific relations to all these aspects of life, because a generic singularity develops an *ethos* for life that contains an element of *honour* but also *risk*. The honour manifests itself whenever I am *invited* to do something, when I am *praised* for my artwork, when I am *included* in a prestigious collection, when I am *associated* with other established artists or when I am critically *assessed* in a written text or speech. The risk I am running is the possibility of poverty and precariousness.¹³⁶ I have no fixed income, my work is not paid for by the hour, I might not receive recognition for it in my own lifetime (or never at all) and be considered a failure in the eyes of others or more successful artists.

2.2.1.

These aspects constituting the space of the generic singularity as a mode of existence have developed over a long period of time and might have a historical origin. For example, there are many contemporary artists who live a bohemian lifestyle, yet this way of living was not invented by the contemporary artist.¹³⁷ I might be inspired by art movements from the 1960s or an artist from the 1980s: within me there are many sources of inspiration. I, just being the bricolage of these sources, never a pure repetition. This is the verticality of my existence: that I can go back in history, find sources of inspiration, which I translate, superimpose *into* and *upon* the present. This constant refolding of the past into the present is what aligns the latter with a sense of raw energy: we never know when the past will suddenly reappear in the present in a different disguise, coming back like a ghost with a forgotten message.

2.2.2.

My being as a generic singularity is an acquired existence in the sense that I have struggled and fought for it to be. I chose to become an artist, and I applied out of my own free will to an art academy, which accepted me as a student. Thus, behind the appearance of any kind of generic singularity an act of will reigns. It is a fundamental gesture towards a life to be lived. As a will it manifests itself in the public, declaring: *I want to be an artist; I am an artist*. And it is a will continuing through time, making me *endure* the initial choice to be an artist that I made a long time ago. With the being of an artist comes a being-ability of an artist, although, in the space of contemporary art and its radical contingency, there are no precise definitions of what such a being-ability should consist of. Unlike medical students, for example, who must appear before an examination board of authorities and show their abilities – knowledge of how the body functions on an anatomical, bio-chemical and physiological level – there is no judge that can fail an art student of today. The being-ability of an artist could be anything – from working a material, to sitting at a laptop, drawing on a computer, developing ideas via Skype – nobody can limit the space of contemporary art. Whatever is decided upon, which project or interests or possibilities to pursue, contemporary artists will ultimately develop the needed being-ability to make the artworks real. And if the projects exceed their knowledge, they

will contract experts, hire assistants, get friends and family to help them. Then they become a manager, someone who must organise the time and output of others. This is one of the effects of Minimal art on contemporary art: the moving away from the traditional idea of the artist as a craftsman in a classical sense. It doesn't mean that the craftsmanship of art disappears, it means a new kind of craftsmanship arises: that of developing ideas, convincing curators, contracting workers, considering the installation, organising employees etc.

2.3.

In *Generic Singularity* (2014) I developed this concept in order to explain how humans become something specific in their lives. My investigation was only limited to the cultural field of the contemporary artist and only included components that I saw as significant at that point. In five years time, I will probably include new aspects. For any other cultural field, the components are different and have another depth, the process of developing a specificity not being the same in each field. For example, there is a difference between the work process of a film director and a poet, architect and actor, novelist and set designer etc.

2.3.1.

For me, there is a reflective power within each generic singularity, because they have thought about what kind of life they want to live and they have taken inspiration from the past, aligning themselves with art movements, re-introducing actions and events to the present, not only thinking, but also actively pursuing a specific position in life. Each generic singularity has taken powerful decisions with repercussions far into the future. Every generic singularity thinks for himself, from his point of being in a body in a social context right now in time (situated). Every thinking derives its force from the epistemic rupture it has been through and surpassed.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

3.
ART AS PROPOSITION

CONCEPTUAL ART

*'ART IS ART. EVERYTHING ELSE IS EVERYTHING ELSE.'*¹³⁸

(Ad Reinhardt)

*'A work of art is evidence that an artist has proposed a work of art.'*¹³⁹

(Richard Hamilton)

*'The idea itself, even if not made visual is as much a work of art as any finished product.'*¹⁴⁰

(Sol LeWitt)

*'Conceptual art demonstrated the radical emptiness or blankness of the aesthetic in itself.'*¹⁴¹

(Peter Osborne)

3.

In order to understand the power behind the act of placing an object within a context and declaring it art, we must grasp two significant aspects of contemporary art: A) the historical situation in which the radical contingency appears and B) the proposition as art (the form-content proposition). There are two important cultural moments in history that challenge and ultimately displace the authority of Western culture: Dadaism and the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s. Both distance themselves from bourgeois society and its values placed on beauty, autonomy and traditional media. In the wake of this process, a new frame for thinking art emerges: that art no longer exists, but only comes into being as a proposition on art (the

choice of a whatever). I will, in the following, attempt to sketch out some of the consequences and their importance for my understanding of contemporary art.

3.1.

Dada is a destruction of art in a different sense from the desire of the Futurists to destroy the old world: *'We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind.'*¹⁴² (Marinetti). The futurists wanted a new world full of bright technological wonders, of shining automobiles and strong men marching to the beat of political machinery. Dada is a different kind of destruction, because it wants to save the individual man from culture, the state, the carnage of World War I. In Tristan Tzara's Dadaist Manifesto of 1918 we can read: *'Let each man proclaim: there is a great negative work of destruction to be accomplished. We must sweep and clean. Affirm the cleanliness of the individual after the state of madness, aggressive complete madness of a world abandoned to the hands of bandits, who rend one another and destroy the centuries. Without aim or design, without organization: indomitable madness, decomposition.'*¹⁴³ The whole foundation of bourgeois culture is shattered and in the aftermath Dada completes this destruction: the trinity of the truth, the good and beauty is left behind, swept away and instead an opening is made towards a new culture: *'Freedom: Dada Dada Dada, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE.'*¹⁴⁴ Dada opens to a space of radical questioning. The door might waver back and forth during the 20th century, but as a gesture towards the *whatever*: the ordinary banal object, the element of chance, wit, assemblage, shock – it will never close again. *'Every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: Dada.'*¹⁴⁵ As an attack on established culture and the status of art, Dada will feed into the artworks of Claes Oldenburg and his *Store* in 1961, into the early videos of Paul McCarthy and the counter-culture of the 1960s, into the videos and performances of John Bock in the 21st century. Dada is non-philosophy transposed to the mind of the artist: *'Philosophy is the question: from which side shall we look at life, God, the idea or other phenomena? Everything one looks at is false. I do not consider the relative result more important than the choice between cake and cherries after dinner.'*¹⁴⁶ (Tzara).

3.2.

The second time the Western world receives a blow from the art world is the 1960s, when the number of art movements explodes: Minimalism, Pop art, Conceptual art, Performance art, Land art, Fluxus, feminist art, Arte Povera, New Realism, environments and happenings, Op art, light art, process art, hyper-realism, Capitalist Realism ... Each movement or tendency represents a strategic ideational armature that can be discerned and explicated, because contemporary art is *about* something. Again, the world is facing absolute self-destruction through the armed nuclear race of the Cold War (The Cuba Crisis). And following this crisis, the Vietnam War brings out the rage directed towards the state-machine of USA and its allegiances. A growing atmosphere of *against* fills the air: the student riots, the racial demonstrations, feminism, the anti-war movement, the hippie movement, the sexual revolution – all respond-

ing to a number of manifestations: the assassination of JFK and Martin Luther King; the rock music of Elvis Presley, The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, Woodstock ... all political events and cultural responses that shatter the foundation of the modern Western world. At its inner core its values are questioned, bringing about the onset of postmodernism.

3.2.1.

In these two periods when art movements *exploded*, the culture of the West was *displaced*. This cultural upheaval was triggered by a generation of artists, thinkers and writers who fundamentally questioned the foundation of the West. This landslide was what transformed the idea of art, opening it as a space towards non-philosophy. Until then, art was still considered a craft, with strict rules and media generating its production, painting being the supreme medium. The neo-avant-garde acknowledged that art was conceptual on a completely new scale. Art no longer had a presence. Only a work of art has presence: the proposition is the artwork. As Lawrence Weiner said in his *Untitled Statement* from 1970: '*1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*'¹⁴⁷ Whether the proposition has a material base or not is essentially unimportant, because art no longer exists through pre-qualified media or objects. This is what Rosalind Krauss calls the 'post-medium condition' and which for me is the central idea of conceptual art: that art can exist as a proposition on art. Whatever is proposed by the artist for the context is art, because 'Art is art, and everything else is everything else' (Reinhardt).

3.2.2.

The act of proposing a sentence (Cia Rinne), a breath (Kane Do), a social project (Superflex), a historical object (Danh Vo), a human action (Marina Abramovic), wine dripping from the ceiling (A-Kassen), a workshop (Jens Haaning), a wrong gallery (Maurizio Cattelan), a lecture (Annika Lundgren), a slide (Carsten Höller), a waterfall (Olafur Eliasson), a political party (Joseph Beuys) – *whatever* can be designated as art, but conditioned by two elements before the viewer enters: the context, granting the artist the right to designate the whatever as art, and the artist, who has committed himself to the gesture of *being* an artist. And this gesture is reflexive of the self that executes the proposition. I, the artist, am aware that I am designating the whatever as an artwork, and I am allowed to do this because I have chosen to become an artist. Thus a work of art is a proposition: an operation within an institutional framework that can designate anything as art. A work of art arises from the act of stating this or that to be art: a sovereign gesture towards whatever in the world. My proposition becomes my *contribution* to the concept of art. Because art does not exist, only works of art that are propositions on art are real; art can basically exist everywhere and be anything. And everywhere and anything is the profane space of the *everyday* and its banal objects: everything from the modern world ranging from the images of Hollywood (Cindy Sherman), to television contests and casting programs (Phil Collins), to objects found in households (Jeff Koons), to

the simple forms of communication in language (Bruce Nauman) or the violence of a rock crushing a car (Jimmie Durham).

3.3.

What is the status of conceptual art today? We could say it has become its own tradition, its own truth-procedure, whereby the participants know the rules for producing a valid piece of conceptual art. These are to *work* from the level of the *idea* itself and develop this idea conceptually: encircling the different possibilities, testing the idea with peers, judging the responses to the idea and then deciding which solution to pursue. To make conceptual art is to extend the duration of the undecided, to resist the immediate call for actualisation and instead absorb virtual forces.

3.3.1.

Is there a difference between conceptual art and contemporary art? It is helpful to make the differentiation between the historical emergence of Conceptual art as a *movement* (Flindt, Atkinson, Baldwin, Huebler, Barry, Witt, Kosuth, Weiner, Darboeven, Kawara, Broodthaers et al.), and conceptual art as a *methodological position*.¹⁴⁸ Conceptual art as a movement designates a group of artists who became known in the 1960s and 1970s for a new practice and artistic positioning away from earlier generations of Abstract Expressionist and European classical art. Conceptual art as a methodological position points towards a new way of producing but also viewing contemporary art. The producer works from and generates ideas, in which a process, a context, a material or a project are proposed but remain a concept. For the viewer this means to enter into a productive dialogue with the artwork where you allow your own mental activity to be part of the work, or rather the *realisation* of the work. Today, however, I can be a whatever artist – painter, performer, video maker, sculptor, sound or transmedia artist – and work conceptually, but it doesn't mean my artistic output is only linguistic or resembles the works of LeWitt, Kosuth or Weiner.

3.4.

That conceptual art has come to survive as the definitive trait of contemporary art could be because it designates the *mental transformation* of the artist and the viewer. It represents an epistemic rupture, a state of mind. When something is conceptual, it is an idea. In order to grasp an idea, I must change my gaze upon the world and its relations. I must see them from another position. I must see the virtual, which hovers around the actual. I must dissociate myself from any conventional ideas about art. I must *step back* and consider the ideas manifested in the proposition and question whether or not this is an interesting idea actualised in an interesting way. Around each whatever work hovers the virtual: those possibilities that were part of the process but were disregarded or judged as bad or boring.

3.4.1.

The proposition is always a double-sided phenomenon: a form-content proposition. Form

and content can be taken apart and analysed separately, but are reversible sides of each other: the form intervenes in the content and the content intervenes in the form. Both aspects are infused with contingency: form can be anything and content can be anything. Yet what actually becomes a work of art is thus an instantiation of decisions taking place on each side of the border. Formal works are decisions made on behalf of form: medium, materials, surfaces, spatial installation. Here, content is the form itself, not something outside the actual work. Content-based works are decisions made on behalf of content: themes and issues from the political sphere, such as identity, sexuality, nature, justice. Here, form is the presentation of content that refers to the world outside the space. This is the division within the form-content proposition, tracing out a spectrum on which every artwork appears but does not remain the same. Through time, the division is changed, old works appear in a new light, the understanding of form and content evolve. There is no proposition on art that is not an intertwining of either aspect.

3.5.

At the moment conceptual art asserted itself in history as the *modus operandi* of contemporary art, a new thinking was added to the creative process: art is the production of ideas and to be an artist is to develop ideas through mental activity. This is a thinking that is real and it is coloured by the existence of the generic singularity: my ideas are dependent upon me as a person (my cognitive abilities), of the choices I have made regarding my art (how far I have pushed myself), the experiences that I have had (encounters with artworks, educational environments, other artists and life in general), the artworks I have already made (the body of work I have accomplished, my interests), the context in which I am exhibiting (whether I am invited, there is a budget, or I am intervening) and finally my economic situation (which materials I can use, how many I have, how much money I can spend). In each situation my thinking confronts the fact of contingency: anything and everything is still possible.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

4.
COMPETING INTERESTS

THE ARTISTIC PROJECT

*'No amount of technical skill and craftsmanship can take the place of vital interest; "inspiration" without it is fleeting and futile ... it lacks the push and centralizing energy of interest.'*¹⁴⁹

(John Dewey)

4.

My interests form a knowledge, and it is knowledge as a background that I can treat as a source of inspiration. I have interests, because through my interests I get ideas for artworks. Thus my research arises from this personal knowledge that I have of my subject. My research arises from the *system of competing interests* – the totality of several interests at a given moment. These interests in the world are at once public and accessible, and yet also contain an element of *secrecy*. I can of course refer back to a psycho-biographical reason for an interest in this or that, but in the end the interests will contain an element of non-knowledge even to me, the artist. I feel *attracted* to a certain topic, idea or subject for numerous reasons. They can resonate within my interior being, become a revelation about my self – the interest as *self-quest*. They can position me within a larger context of artistic positions – the interest as *self-positioning*. They can pull me in a new direction for my artistic output – the interest as *self-transformation*. The relation between he who is interested and the topic of interest is *reversible*. It is a mutual transformation: I, the interested, approach the field of interest depending on the form I have; the field of interest is shaped through my interest. What gives itself depends on the form I have and my form depends on what has been given to me.

4.1.

Why do interests compete with each other? Interests compete with each other because within each artist there can be several interests overlapping simultaneously. They compete over being actualised, being transposed from the sphere of the virtual into the actual reality of works accomplished. As an artist, I have many interests, and some never come to be important for me as an artist; I am simply interested. Together, all these interests, those that are at the forefront and those that remain at the back – form a system, because my knowledge is embedded in who I am at this moment. It is a system because through me they are forced into having a relation (at times a very distant relation) and thus colour each other. My interests designate the intentionality of my knowledge, of how I accumulate knowledge at this given point. For example, over a longer period my interests have been architecture (modernism) and psychoanalysis (the uncanny), each topic designating vast areas of knowledge, information and key agents, but feeding into each other, doubling themselves, blending together. For example, architecture opens towards Ancient, Gothic, Neo-Classical, Modern, Postmodern, urban planning, interior design, public housing; it can be further subdivided into different regions (Mediterranean, Nordic, Japanese, American etc.) or different types of architecture (private, public, industrial, institutional) etc. And the same splitting can also be applied to psychoanalysis: between Freudian, Lacanian, Jungian analysis; between different methodological approaches: Existential, Structural, Phenomenological or Behaviorial; between American, French or German psychoanalysis. So, within each field of interest there will always be a vast possibility of acquiring knowledge, of researching, and most importantly, of responding with artworks that deal with themes arising from these interests. Through my interests I come to know something about the world; they form an experience that reveals itself through my response. My response is an experience that I present to the viewer to reflect upon.

4.2.

The way I engage with my interests forms a system of knowledge, with values and ultimately a certain kind of *power*. I am searching for the interesting, testing the limits and the possibilities of transgression, always on the lookout for new books, lectures, seminars, exhibitions and spaces to visit, because through my interest I can become inspired. And inspiration means: new ideas for artworks and projects.

4.3.

'*A work needs only to be interesting.*'¹⁵⁰ (Donald Judd). This new quality of the contemporary artwork stated in his famous text *Specific Objects* (1965) designates a fundamental change in the judgement of an artwork. A work *needs* only to be interesting, which means it does not have to be beautiful, well-composed or even autonomous. The interesting designates a new zone for the valorisation of art, because it refers back to a new position of the artist: as someone interested; not the artist as a craftsman, but someone who follows his interests and thereby comes to a point where he can formulate relevant problems. For example, if an art

student goes around the academy filling all the garbage bins with more than they can contain in order to infuriate both his fellow students and the cleaning staff, the project does not fulfil any classical requirement of work, but it is interesting, because the artist is *testing the social*. He is investigating the limits of social tolerance, of the boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. Thus, through his project he is dislocating the users from their embeddedness and making them reflect on how they themselves are situated within an institutional framework.

4.4.

Through the sustained effort of being interested over time, my encounter with the object of this interest will reveal my own matrix: my way of being. My flesh will impregnate itself into the material of the interest and in return I will learn to find the interesting cracks in my interests: points of access that allow for a new perception to arise. My filter – if I believe in it – becomes my voice: my voice as a way of stating art. I begin to *manifest* myself through my filter.

4.4.1.

The thousands of manifestoes or statements or written texts in which contemporary artists lay down their principles, their ideas and intentions can be seen as a way of designating the force-field of their interests. The manifesto presents a *project* that positions the speaker, but also announces what is to come. Each project represents a totality of interests that connect the artist with the world, because it is not only knowledge, but *operative knowledge*. Something is being said about something that is being done. It is non-philosophy rendered experiential.

4.4.2.

The *artistic project* of an artist is the transversal interest that cuts across the number of *individual projects* realised. The artistic project is the generalised position within the space of contemporary art; the individual projects can be very different in duration, scope and impact. However, the generalised position emerges after realising individual projects: it is the auto-poetic, becoming real through engagement with specific circumstances, responding to contexts, developing a method, a practice, allowing the responses to feed back in to the structure.

4.4.3.

We could say that through one's interests knowledge is developed that has the characteristics of non-philosophy in action. It is knowledge accumulated with the aim of transforming it, adding something new – *and interesting*. The system of competing interests is non-philosophical *content production* that becomes the foundation of my artistic project. Throughout time, my interests will reveal some kind of knowledge of the world, and through each individual project I realise, I add a new dimension to my already existing knowledge. My artworks express my knowledge, in the sense that they reveal a certain *approach* to a theme, a subject or

generalised content. My approach is the *position* I have taken towards the content of the work. For example, I responded to an open call for an exhibition in Berlin, 2010, by inviting the curator to dress up as a cowboy with me and to pose in front of the local Turkish community house. The wedding photographer next door took the photograph that was then presented in the exhibition with the title *The New Pioneers*.¹⁵¹ The idea for the work came from my interest in gentrification and how artists and their activities spur this process, being the first to enter into cheaper areas of town for accommodation. I wanted to make a comment on how I, as an artist, am aware that my way of being and what I do is being exploited by housing companies who speculate in changing the image of Wedding by inviting the creative class to perform its activities there, which will in turn raise the price of living space. The idea for the work came during my research into what gentrification means for the city of Berlin, into how and why it happens.¹⁵² And this research into gentrification is part of my system of competing interests that gravitates around architecture and desire: what do we want from space?

4.5.

It is through my artistic project that I confront the space of contingency (that everything is still possible), but through my interests I also surpass contingency, because I build internal necessities into my work (necessary to me) and my artistic project. My artistic project is formed by my system of competing interests that leads to the production of justified form-content propositions. It is from my sustained practice that I receive my authority as an artist. I am justified in my artwork because over time I have developed this structure that allows me both to act (make artwork) and to propose new ideas for exhibitions or projects (propositions). The form-content proposition is the 'meaning' inherent to my artwork – that which I can display, distribute and produce in a number of ways and modalities. It is what I communicate to the world, and it derives its force from my artistic project.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

5.
THE ART OF CONTEMPORANEITY

THINKING IN TIME

*'The reference to our own time is necessary precisely because it is time for non-philosophy.'*¹⁵³
(Merleau-Ponty)

*'The contemporary is an operative fiction: it regulates the division between the past and the present within the present.'*¹⁵⁴
(Peter Osborne)

*"'Con-temporary' in German is 'zeitgenössisch.' As Genosse means 'comrade,' to be here-and-now – zeitgenössisch – can thus be understood as being a 'comrade of time' – as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has difficulties.'*¹⁵⁵
(Boris Groys)

5.

Boris Groys rightly states that each contemporary artist is a 'comrade of time' because the artist exists with the aim of being *in* time and *with* time. He is a comrade as in the use of the term by the Communist Party as a person at the vanguard of society: belonging to the future, getting a foothold in what is new at his moment of appearance, but also helping time with its 'problems'. The contemporary artist addresses current conflicts of society or issues that should be current, because through the critical stance towards time *another* time might be possible. Thus, contemporary art opens the space of non-philosophy as a point where artists think for themselves following two main paths: the act of engaging in the current social world

(situating a thinking of the present *in* time); the act of presenting a critique or a utopia to the world (thinking a *difference* and *resistance* to the present *with* time).

5.1.

A contemporary artist therefore never coincides with his own time, because he always holds a distance from the totality of the contemporary. In both ways he is referring to his own time, which marks the nature of his non-philosophy. He is situating himself *in* time, but also ahead of time. We find a pertinent formulation of this in *What is the Contemporary?* by Giorgio Agamben: '*Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it.*'¹⁵⁶ The contemporary artist is 'pulled' into the contemporary, because this is where time materialises itself as *new* time (the spaces of the contemporary), yet this new time is also a *disjunctive* time that is at a distance from the surrounding time. A contemporary artist never coincides completely with his own time because he is at once *with it* and *against it*. This distance is what allows him actually to *see* his own time and, more specifically, its darkness: '*The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.*'¹⁵⁷ Darkness is the problems and repressed conflicts of the public, of all those truths that nobody has the courage to confront.

5.2.

Yet, arriving at the present as a ground to take action can never happen without knowledge of the past. Every contemporary artist is faced with the already existing amount of contemporary artworks and projects realised. For any young emerging artist, just the simple task of getting to know the history of contemporary art, of going to endless exhibitions, being informed about what has already happened, is in itself an enormous task. There is so much art in the world, and how can I as an artist make something that has not already been made? One has to arrive in the present with a *desire* to make art. One really has to *want* to, and this wanting has to be with the aim of *making the new*. The desire to make art with the desire to make it new will lead to *a negation of the negation*. When contemporary artists succeed in surpassing already existing art, they bring something radically *different* to art. They have attacked what seemed the death of art, the accomplished world of contemporary art (in itself a first negation of traditional art), and managed to make a new experience that *pushes* not only the art world further, but also the established system of perception and conceptualisation (the second negation of the first negation). In this light we can better understand Peter Osborne's statement that the contemporary is an *operative fiction* mediating between the past and the present *within* the present. In order to surpass the past, I need the contemporary as that dividing force that pushes me towards the future. And it is an operative fiction, because in reality times overlap, enmesh with one another, creating a flux of diachronicity within the present.

5.3.

The contemporary artist assesses the present, develops some kind of value judgement of the

current situation, which legitimates a number of actions taken – either against the present or for the present. This is the nature of the *commentary*. To comment on something means to develop a proper response to a situation that pushes the contemporary in a different direction. A commentary wants to challenge a current perception or to shed new light on a subject. Here, the art of being contemporary is thus the ability to situate oneself in a context and comment on the defining forces at a given moment. Through the comment, a *distancing* away from the past still active in the present (conservative forces preserving the past) and an *approximation* towards the future (progressive forces embracing the future) are taking place: towards the fresh energy emanating from future time unburdened by the constraint of the present real.

5.3.1.

Contemporary art references its *own* time because it is non-philosophy in action: the contemporary artist is *situated* and it is from this situation, by confronting myself with the present as a force imposing itself upon me, that the contemporary time begins. I must install myself right there in what is happening now and to do this I must translate, transform and ultimately distort every theory about the world I know, so I am able to exist on the brink of the contemporary as that present just emerging before my eyes, and to which no theory is available in its completed form.

5.4.

Another aspect of the art of contemporaneity is the act of drawing in an audience: making oneself visible, but also producing the event that attracts an audience around an *art scene*. Contemporary art is also characterized by the crowd that attends its events: the hipster quality of art-exhibitions, the amount of young artists and ‘cool’ people who are attending the opening. Thus the art of contemporaneity is to establish a progressive difference within the cultural field: to draw in those who are new and at the forefront. It is basically to open a *frontier*. This world of the contemporary forms the community around art: it is the social context that supports it, makes it real. It enters into the consciousness of those who constitute an art scene. It represents a social and spatial desire to present the *new* and to *be* the new.

5.4.1.

Every art scene is historical, because it is in flux with the urban developments around the world. During modernism, Paris was *the* art scene to be in, until New York after World War II became the new hotspot. Today, with the globalisation of the contemporary, we are witnesses to an explosion of art scenes. New York, London, Berlin and Beijing are major art scenes, but because the contemporary artist is a nomad – achievable through the Internet and cheap flights – the power of these city centres is not the same as during the 20th century. The 21st century will be the century where a new horizontality will prevail between the urban scenes. So much is happening all over the place that no city holds the contemporary flame. The 21st century will be the century of the contemporary: a hyper-awareness of global hyper-presence.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

6.
THE FRAMING OF ART

THE INSTITUTION

“Non-art,” “anti-art,” “non-art art” and “anti-art art” are useless. If someone says his work is art, it’s art.’¹⁵⁸

(Donald Judd)

‘By exposing the effect of context on art, of the container of the contained, Duchamp recognized an area of art that hadn’t yet been invented.’¹⁵⁹

(Brian O’Doherty)

6.

With the emergence of contemporary art, the emphasis has shifted from the act of executing art in a specific medium to the institutional framing and designating of art. Why this change? As stated earlier, the first to designate the institutional role in the act of framing art was Marcel Duchamp. By placing in a gallery an everyday object industrially manufactured and without any traditional traits of what is expected from an artwork, Duchamp pointed towards a strange yet powerful context that constitutes that which is visible: *the institutional context*. At its moment of historical appearance, *Fountain* caused an uproar and a dismissive reaction among the jury who judged it, and only generations later was it appropriately recognised as *the* artwork of the 20th century. It was a beginning, but first understood (Foster) only when the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s once again enacted a fundamental critique of Western cultural hegemony. In every cultural field, radical questions were asked, and established hierarchies were either subverted, overthrown or ridiculed. The *contingency* of the

West came into being as the full-scale hegemonic superpower of the world – contingency because the display of this enormous power was also its power to self-destruct. The Western world was once again bankrupt: a morally debased system of exploitation, domination and hypocrisy. It was the end. In the words of Fredric Jameson in ‘*End of Art*’ or ‘*End of History*’: ‘*the very deployment of the theory of the ‘end of art’ was also political, insofar as it was meant to suggest or register the profound complicity of the cultural institutions and canons of the museums and the university system, the state prestige of all the high arts, in the Vietnam War as a defence of Western values.*’¹⁶⁰ The art world wanted to liberate itself from the state apparatus, because the latter had no cultural legitimacy. Instead, there was a whole new openness to the global, to other cultural understandings, which became valid, but also necessary as a way of escape. Hence, the interest in Eastern mysticism, Zen Buddhism, New Age, radical theory, left-wing utopianism: all attempts to escape the framework of the Western logo-centric world.

6.1.

What arises from this new consciousness is the idea of the institution as at once contingent, yet inscribed in a socio-political framework of dominance, hegemony and self-authorisation. The art-world institution is recognised as the spatial-discursive context that gives meaning to the activities of art, yet it has no eternal content. Art is something to which the prevailing power structures have decided to give meaning in a certain way. Thus, in the wake of the neo-avant-garde, a new awareness arose: what takes place inside or outside depends on what we want from the institution (what is framed). We, the artists, no longer believe in the institution as the sanctuary of beauty, good or truth. Thus, *the institution must be restated in the name of the contemporary*. From this moment on, art *outside* the traditional spaces explodes: exhibitions in private studios, performances on the street, political interventions, happenings, mail-art, project-spaces, site-specific art, not to mention all the experimental art academies *outside* the established educational programs. From this moment on, art can happen anywhere, as long as there’s an artist to designate the activity as art and a viewing community who accepts it as art. Art becomes micro-mobile¹⁶¹ and, in principle, independent of the huge corporative white museum walls. It enters into the fray of daily life, the struggle of humans. It is exactly philosophy rendered experiential: non-philosophical praxis.

6.2.

One of the powers of art is to highlight the *background* of our lives: the life-world of objects, spaces and human relations. Without the context of art, the object would only have a use-value derived from a being-ability who knows how to engage with the object in order to optimise it. Outside the frame of art, Duchamp’s urinal has different meanings depending on whether you are a toilet salesman, a plumber, or simply an adult male. Once the urinal enters into the frame of art, and is signed as an art piece, the object is transformed, and this is due to the frame. The art world is a context that creates a frame around art, because an art space is a suspended space that can frame objects by distorting their functionality. The exhibited found

object (readymade) is not there to be used, but to be reflected upon. And here, reflection is a displacement of the viewer's ideas about the object. Within the art context I suddenly see the object anew, and this is the power of the suspended space: things are cut off from their matrix within the ordinary, and now float de-functionalised in a space where the outside world is stripped away. Within the white cube, the object becomes a projectile: it goes directly into my nerves. So the new framing allows for a re-interpretation of the object, and in this process also proposes a different use of the object, because the art space is a space of virtuality that proposes possibilities to us so that we may translate a new possibility back into our own lives. The ultimate museum would be one so large that we could place the whole world inside of it – and then see it in a new light, all at once, ready to change.

6.3.

Robert Smithson arguably developed the most pertinent reflections on this new relation between the institution and the outside world through his concepts of *site/non-site*. As one of the most influential proponents of Land art, he realised a number of projects outside the white walls of the institution on a *site*, but documented objects and brought them back from the site, into the gallery space. In this context, the work in the institution becomes the *non-site*, because it is an event, intervention, installation or sculpture that is only present as a postulated trace: 'The Non-site (*in this case an indoor earthwork*) is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (*The Pine Barrens Plains*). It is by this three dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it – thus The Non-Site.'¹⁶² Standing in the gallery space I see the photographs, the rocks on the floor, the maps indicating the intervention, the film documenting the making (a cameraman was sent by the Ace Gallery in Los Angeles to film the construction of *Spiral Jetty*¹⁶³), but this is only a residue, not its actual physical appearance. To reach that space I must travel to the site, which could be thousands of miles away and might not even exist today. Nonetheless, the site is where the artwork event took place, where the surroundings fed themselves into the perception of the artwork: 'As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the *Spiral Jetty*.'¹⁶⁴ (Smithson). When art engages in physical space *outside* the museum, it can enter into a dialogue with prehistoric time: the geological layers of time can be part of the artwork itself and thus another *sense* of time emerges where the chronological temporality of the last few thousand years of civilisation are but layers of dust in comparison with the time of the earth, which is trillions of years old. This engagement with context outside the established museum does not necessarily have to involve geological time, but could also simply be social and human time: that of the local, the specific context of a situation.

6.4.

In her article *Institutions as Sites of Agonistic Intervention*, philosopher and sociologist Chantal Mouffe (born in 1943) evokes different approaches to the institution today within the landscape of artistic activism and intervention. Her basic question is: are art institutions complicit in the prevailing dominance of neo-liberal capitalistic discourse and value-formation? If this is the case, then any artistic activity will only reproduce the already existing structures and change nothing. The alternative to this is to withdraw from any kind of activity associated with or dependent on the established art world. A problem with this approach, she suggests, is both its naïve belief that a situation without conflicts exists outside the art world, and that nothing can be done from within: *'To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting for subverting their form of articulation.'*¹⁶⁵ Against this position of withdrawal, Mouffe advocates a different strategy: the 'engagement with institutions', where artists and curators take on the role of producing 'agonistic interventions' *within* the institution. This means that the institution has the potential to become something other, an alternative, a critique, a challenge to both common sense and any kind of oppressive discourse sustaining the status quo. Mouffe raises the question of where to locate the artistic struggle against the social, of where to present a generalised *being against*, an aesthetic of resistance. Her view represents a position of immanence where artists must fight from within. I see her point, because today contemporary art institutions are under attack from the neo-liberal transformation of the museum-space into an experience economy based on a cultural model of commercialisation and numbers rather than content or resistance: how many viewers, how many good reviews, how many 'likes' on Facebook, how much surplus is made. If we want to preserve art institutions as the locus of the contemporary, we must insist on them as spaces of freedom and criticality. The institution is not a given, because it too is haunted by contingency: it can be closed down, taken over and used for different purposes (the staging of fashion shows, populist exhibitions, dinner parties for the rich). If the institution wants to survive as a space with redemptive power, it must be creative and honour its own institutional program: the development of a position vis-à-vis the current market economy. And the politicians, those elected by the multitude to preserve the spirit of civic society, must understand the necessity of contemporary art. It must be preserved because it represents the freedom of expression and the right to experiment, investigate and develop new differences within the social matrix.

6.4.1.

On the other hand, we must not forget that contemporary art originated *outside* of the institution: in the legendary Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich founded by Hugo Ball in 1916, for example. Today, just as then, there are possibilities to make art in parallel with the established institutions: *in the self-organised spaces where you can do what you want.*

6.4.2.

I have myself on several occasions initiated various artistic projects that tap the fundamental freedom of making art outside the institution. *Melting Barricades* (2004) with Greenlandic artist Inuk Silis Høegh consisted of a performance on the main street of Nuuk, thereafter constituting an installation at a school, and finally an exhibition within a cultural centre in Copenhagen. Through the staging of a mock army for Greenland, we discussed the values that Greenland wishes to protect from, but also contribute to, a globalised world. Dressed up as generals, proclaiming the invasion of the world with icebergs, leading a fake army around the city, we entered with this project into public consciousness both as a humorous gesture and as a thought-provoking campaign. It used video and collage for propaganda, theatre for performance and graphics for the website. A year later it was absorbed into the art world when it was shown in Iceland as part of *Re-Thinking Nordic Colonialism*,¹⁶⁶ where it became a non-site, since it presented documentation and traces from the activities at the different sites.

6.4.3.

Another collaborative project was with writer Boris Boll-Johansen, when we initiated *Bureau für Urban Praktik* (2009–10), an urban collective art project tracing out new areas of Berlin, each time producing a happening. An interesting event in this context was the *Galerie Tiergarten*¹⁶⁷ (2009) where a group of 25 people wound tape around four trees, cut a hole in it, and installed their artwork inside. A vernissage was announced, and afterwards the artworks were rolled together into a great ball and kicked to the nearest rubbish-dump. An ephemeral art space was constructed in which those who were present could participate.

6.4.4.

At this moment of writing (January 2015), flyers, posters and heat blankets are arriving from the printers and a factory in Hamburg to be used in my next collaborative project with artist April Gertler. During the next two weeks we will invite as many people as possible to join us for *HEAT* – a demo *against* winter and *for* summer. This absurd, almost Dadaist demand makes people laugh because it demands the impossible. Walking around the streets of Prenzlauer Berg, each participant will wear a heat blanket over their shoulders, and those bystanders who want to join in will be offered one too. In the name of art, we are creating an intervention on the streets, igniting a sense of community through one denominator: the golden heat blanket.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

7.
NIHILISM AND EXPERIMENTATION

NOTHING IS THE WAY IT HAS TO BE

*'I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism.'*¹⁶⁸
(Friedrich Nietzsche)

*'Art has become the pure potentiality of negation, nihilism reigns in its essence.'*¹⁶⁹
(Giorgio Agamben)

*'Who can foresee what will happen when the experimental outlook has once become thoroughly acclimatized in a common culture?'*¹⁷⁰
(John Dewey)

7.

Contemporary art is a state of mind: *a radical questioning of art*. It views art not as an essence, but as propositions about art. When art reaches this consciousness of itself as propositions on art (a generic concept of art), it is also a moment of the ultimate *de-valuation* of art as an essence. There is no fixed truth to art, just the different propositions stated. This moment is a new freedom, because it establishes contemporary art as a space of *non-necessity* (radical contingency) and *possibility* (virtuality). With the advent of contemporary art, everything and anything is possible. We must understand this radical contingency and the nominalist concept of art in relation to nihilism in the manner that Nietzsche anticipated the development of Western culture. Widely read by the historical avant garde,¹⁷¹ the Dadaists among them, Nietzsche was able to grasp the consequences of nihilism for artistic production in relation to

experimentation, the affirmation of new values and the creation of concepts. These are some of the themes I will discuss here. Before entering into *my* understanding of nihilism, I must stress that I am *not* saying that all contemporary artists are nihilists. I am interested in how the generalised economy of today's culture is influenced by nihilism as both a radical questioning and an affirmative relation to a world of *immanence*.

7.1.

The central aspect of nihilism is the declaration: 'God is dead', and he who has killed him is man himself. God – the name for the ideal being who holds the world in place – is killed in order to enact a new liberation of man so as to profit from another *form* of life.¹⁷² This liberation from God (religious dogmas) means that the supernatural world is no longer active in *this* life to be lived.¹⁷³ A new immanence appears, because a nothingness is set loose, pushing the ideas of substantives towards a modern nominalism: the substantives that we use to describe the world do not have an ultimate fixed reference. They are not 'out there' as eternal substances, but general concepts that we use to communicate depending on the context. As Charles Taylor has written regarding the constructive powers of nominalism found in Descartes' representational model of knowledge: '*Words are ultimately given their meaning arbitrarily through definitions which attach them to certain things and ideas.*'¹⁷⁴ This detachment from any substance in a concept is the gateway to a generic understanding of contemporary art: 'Art' doesn't exist; only propositions on art exist.

7.2.

The process of nihilism does not begin with Nietzsche; it can be traced back to a new conception of God present in the thinking of Descartes.¹⁷⁵ Here, God is severed from the world, becoming a will that set the world in motion but does not intervene. Following the Enlightenment, God becomes more and more 'empty' as a concept until he is finally declared dead, but the world is there in all its meaninglessness, to be questioned, manipulated and experimented with. As Nietzsche says in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*: '*Do we not stray as through an infinite nothingness?*'¹⁷⁶ We humans are confronted with a nothingness against which we protect ourselves through a shield of values, rituals and socially instituted meanings. We have to *invent* values that can accommodate our precarious being here on earth. Nihilism acknowledges the *violence of being*, a being indifferent to human nature that gives itself whether we want it or not, forcing us to live in the most joyous and pragmatic way. Nihilism thinks the material base of human reality: how matter and organic life vibrate, pulsate and explode with energy, but not with pre-given meaning. Schopenhauer called it the groundless, unknowing will, which has no purpose; a striving, blind drive that can manifest itself as both a *life-drive* and *death-drive* within the same organism, and later Nietzsche called it a *will to power* that was devastatingly misinterpreted in the 20th century.¹⁷⁷

7.2.1.

In modernity, nihilism views the world as without any pre-given meaning or value, which leads to the *existential* version of nihilism. The world is absurd, so everything is permitted, because there is no divine principle that holds the world in place, just a blind life-force that is directed for the purposes of society and religion. From this perspective, nihilism becomes the attempt to break the bonds between man and the constraints imposed upon him by the social and religious world; to break every rule and regulation that limits the joyous life-affirming being in the world. Nihilism can thus be seen as a destructive force (destroying the 'old' world, the conservative bourgeoisie, the authority of the church) but also as a radical emancipatory force (creating new values, experimenting with life, affirming it). Nihilism cuts through the modern world as the attempt to understand the world from an immanence: *that the cause of life is immanent, yet holds no transcendence beyond this world*. There is a raw energy, a will, a life-force that can lead to suffering but also to the elevation of human life.

7.3.

There are several responses to this 'the most uncanny of guests', as Nietzsche called the advent of nihilism in Western culture. There is the passive acceptance of values, a resignation in the face of a world without god (passive nihilism) or the practical creation of new values through experimentation (active nihilism).¹⁷⁸ The latter becomes the figure of the *Dionysian* way of life, someone who 'overcomes' himself in the sense that he fights against the values *incarnated* into his own being. And to fight is to experiment, de-authorise and question whatever is presented as truth, ultimately leading to an *epistemic rupture* within the individual. From this moment, the world is suddenly seen in a new light: it has to be re-created in an act of non-necessity: virtuality and contingency. The nihilist in this Nietzschean sense becomes a 'beast-god', a living creature with the powers of destruction and creation, but who also *'explodes all logic and subjectivity and opens man up to the manifest otherness of existence.'*¹⁷⁹ It is the triumph of difference over identity that will play a pivotal role in the reinterpretation of Nietzsche in France during the 1960s (Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard) and lead to the breakthrough of postmodernism in the cultural sphere.

7.3.1.

Nihilism was in vogue among the Russians during the second half of the 19th century. It appeared in the soul of young Søren Kierkegaard as the dark meaninglessness of his existence, and it became a philosophical position for Nietzsche through his embracing of the Dionysian way of life. Nihilism infused the spirit of the historical avant garde as the call for a new society and a new mode of expression. And then, following the atrocities of World War I and II – the mass-slaughter, gas-chambers, concentration camps and the nuclear bomb – nihilism was seen as the spirit of the destructive forces immanent to modernity and the fact that human life could be annihilated on a monumental scale never seen before through the unleashing of violence generated by technological civilisation. Nihilism was accused, because only a man

without humanistic values could enact such terrible events. So, nihilism is a dangerous fire, permitting everything and yet giving no guidance as to what is allowed.

7.3.2.

We must understand nihilism as both part of the crisis and the solution. Its intention is basically to set man free in a universe without any absolute direction for his behaviour (to do evil) and yet it is also to unleash his creative energies arising from his power to exist (to do good). But nihilism has no guardians, no one ensuring that it will be used for the right purposes. For example, the experience economy and cognitive capitalism can be seen as expressions of a new infusion of nihilism into society in the 21st century. Art has become a new norm permeating every sector within society, aligning every process and service with an experience coloured by aesthetics: the hedonistic self-pleasure of consuming as an individual. The advanced workforce of Western societies are viewed as artists, letting their 'creativity' be part of their work. In both instances there are nihilist aspects: we live only once in this world and want to enjoy it (experience economy); humans have a creative resource that can be exploited (cognitive capitalism). Contemporary art as a social phenomenon in 2015 exists within this situation, where nihilism has become so widespread that we are no longer aware of it. Yet contemporary art shares the same origin as the experience economy and cognitive capitalism (and is quite often seen as emblematic of the two: the contemporary artist delivering 'experiences' to museums and working as a 'creative entrepreneur'). But the difference is that contemporary artists have the possibility of reworking their own past, of going back to the rich history of contemporary art and finding inspiration and energy there to go against the flattened boring version of nihilism that prevails today. I will touch on two aspects that belong to nihilism in relation to artistic production: *the experiment* and *the act of value-questioning*.

7.4.

In a nominalist art world there is no essence of art, there are only propositions on art. And these propositions on art are sucked up and presented in the manifesto that informs our fundamental sense of the historical avant garde and later that of contemporary art. To state a manifesto is a performative act that is an active creation of values (active nihilism), a positioning *against* a historical art and *for* a future art. From this futurological aspect of the manifesto comes the act of *experimentation*. How else can future art come into being if not through an experiment? Nihilism is the essence of *experimentation*. And experimentation means to try out, to make tests, to engage in chance, to set up rules and see what they bring, to question authority, to propose whatever as an object of art. In contemporary art there are no dogmas that cannot be challenged, no ethical viewpoints that cannot be questioned, no artistic positions that cannot be criticised. No one is *safe*, because there is no essence, and the experiment is the expression of this.

7.4.1.

From experimental nihilism comes the manifesto, which performs the blueprint for a life to come. Every manifesto implies a new art practice. A manifesto is *for* art, and *against* art, it designates a specific *division of art* and a new *distribution* of art. Through the manifesto a new existence is brought into play, new ways of relating to *outside forces* (Foucault). Through the manifesto or the artist's statement, artists propose their concepts and experiences as a valid foundation for their art. I might be inspired by others, read their manifesto and join their ranks. But in the end, I have to write or state my own manifesto because as an artist I am my own position.

7.5.

Nihilism is ultimately a game of values that is open for everyone who has the courage to enter into the nihil: the nothingness of being, '*If a philosopher could be a nihilist, he would be one, for he finds only Nothingness behind all human ideals.*'¹⁸⁰ (Nietzsche). A nihilist is a fundamental questioner, someone who looks at the world and sees nothing. As a human being I am traversed by a feeling of nothingness: there is nothing at the centre of my being, there is just the current configuration of forces impeding themselves upon me in this specific moment. The way I relate to these forces is through the values I have, protecting me from the violence of being: indifferent nature imposing itself upon me, ultimately making me crumble, so that I end up in a coffin six feet under, devoured by worms and microbes. Changing my values means changing my relations to being and thereby opening up towards a path of self-transformation. I can experiment with my values, try them out, implement new ones, copy values from other people, because at the centre of my being there is a radical contingency. Nothing is the way it has to be.

7.5.1.

Nihilism is surpassed not by returning to already established values, but confronting oneself with the radical nothingness of the world. Yet to confront oneself with a nothing is to create new concepts that make the world visible once again. As Deleuze and Guattari stated: '*The concept is the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come. [...] The philosophical concept does not refer to the lived, by way of compensation, but consists, through its own creation, in setting up an event that surveys [survol] the whole of the lived no less than every state of affairs. Each concept shapes and reshapes the event in its own way.*'¹⁸¹ A new concept is a future event waiting to arrive; it makes us perceive the world in a new way. To invent a new name for an artistic movement is to produce a new distribution of the visible (Rancière) that allows for a different organisation and conceptualisation of artworks and historical trajectories. Artists and their critics constantly give themselves new names, and this is good, because it is a sign of invention and a need to install the artist, the viewer and the institution in a new understanding of the world. New concepts mean that we can situate ourselves differently. For example, the emergence of *Relational Aesthetics* as a novel concept defined by Nicolas Bourriaud allowed

the art world to understand new projects and interventions in social contexts (Christine Hill, Dominique Gonzalez-Foster, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Jens Haaning, Pierre Huyghe et al.) that were fundamentally different from those of the generation before, but also to re-interpret projects from the 1970s such as Gordon Matta Clark's *Food* as an early manifestation of relational aesthetics. In this sense, inventing new ways of making art and giving them new names is important, because every time the ways of making and the ways of talking are transformed they ultimately displace us from our safe positions. Nihilism opens us towards an ecstatic being in the world because it affirms the joy of creation. *Nihilism is white energy*.

2.
SECTION B.
ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

8.
SYSTEMIC HYSTERIA

AMBITION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

*'Subversive forms are none other than the lower forms transformed with a view to the struggle against the sovereign forms. The necessity inherent to subversive forms requires that what is low becomes high, that what is high becomes low; this is the requirement in which the nature of subversion is expressed.'*¹⁸²
(George Bataille)

8.

One last aspect of the artistic production of knowledge and experience is what I will call *systemic hysteria*. With this concept I want to point towards the relationship between ambition, the power of institutions and very successful artists (art-stars). This can be expanded to include curators, critics, gallery owners or collectors – in short, the powerful agents of the art world and how they infuse the social system of the art world with hierarchies, agency and virtuality. As a phenomenon, systemic hysteria is historical, because it emerges simultaneously with the possibility of making a *career* within the institutional framework of a contemporary art world (the system) where art has both become public on a global scale and an economic and cultural capital to be invested in. The agents are aware of each other (internal co-habitation), of what is going on, and who is associated with each other (represented by, organised by, exhibited by, criticised by, sold by, bought by). Thus the contemporary art world is both being protected and preserved by those in 'art' power: there are *interests* in contemporary art and this is what makes it at times *hysterical* – both *hysteria within me* and the *hysteria of the system*. I will in the following limit myself to the systemic hysteria surrounding the contemporary artist and point to some of the potentials but also problems of systemic hysteria.

8.1.

The concept of *hysteria* has been used since the age of Hippocrates to designate (especially female) unmanageable emotional excesses, but today no longer has any clinical meaning. In daily language, though, we still say someone is hysterical when he insists vehemently on something, or overreacts to every situation. I will use the word here to point to a certain psychological trait of the contemporary artist and those who surround and service the artist. As a working definition, my first tentative suggestion is a very Lacanian one: *a hysteric has internalised a specific vision of his world that is absolute.*¹⁸³ This vision is partly his own absolute, but also a projection of what the hysteric thinks the system will authorise. The artist becomes hysterical when the object or situation in question does not comply with the standards of the system to which he is presenting himself. A hysteric is someone who has internalised an authority and his hysteria comes from the sense that he is judged by the very best, the most powerful people. It is not to conform to the expectations of your neighbour, your parents or old school friends. It is to insist on a form, a certain expression of art that complies with the system of the advanced art world. From this perspective, hysteria is ambition permeating concrete existence.

8.1.1.

The first premise of the hysteric is: I am the absolute centre of the world. And because I am the centre, the world turns around me and my desires. I am the most important. The contemporary artist at his pinnacle is the most hysterical and so is the discourse accompanying the artist. Both present themselves as redemptive figures, as absolute signifiers, who are allowed to designate the world and its ontological properties. And this shows itself through the insistence on a certain visibility surrounding the art space: the artworks chosen and how they are presented; who is invited and attends; what is written and how the exhibition is received. Hysteria is most intense in spaces that regard themselves as the centre of the art world. Everybody who exhibits here or is in charge of exhibitions is hysterical regarding the final presentation. Everything has to be perfect.

8.2.

The contemporary artist as a hysteric is super-sensitive to the opinion not of the common world, but of the specific group that makes up the art world: the peers, curators, collectors and critics who will attend the show and who all co-constitute the art world as a social system. Thus, systemic hysteria is hysteria regarding the system: the consciousness of being watched and judged by all these different people. The hysteric internalises these significant others to the point where they almost command the artist as an actor to perform in this or that way. For the outside world, the hysteric can seem to have an irrational focus, an obsession: insisting on a form against all tendencies towards the easy solution. Hysteria is the necessary condition for art to resist all the attempts to degrade it, to pull it down towards the conventional. Hysteria becomes *edgy* and as an artist I can be judged for *not* being hysterical

enough, as when I am accused of not pushing art far enough or remaining within conventional 'safe' space.

8.2.1.

As stated, hysteria testifies to an ambition, a certain internalisation of the art world as a *judge*. How can the art world become a judge? Only if the art world has the power to either *recommend* (push me upwards in the system) or *punish* (reject me through silence or publicly degrade me). Thus, systemic hysteria testifies to a systemic awareness and a systemic virtuality. In principle, all kinds of important people could come to my exhibition and either invite me to participate in another more important exhibition, recommend me for a commission, write an article about me, buy my artwork or simply be impressed and praise me. Or, in reverse, they could come to my exhibition and completely diminish, bad-mouth or belittle my artworks and me as an artist.

8.3.

On a different level, systemic hysteria reveals itself in the relation between art-stars (or other VIPs of the art world) and their surroundings. In his essay on the structure of fascism, *La structure psychologique du fascisme* of 1933, Georges Bataille (1897–1962), describes a certain cultic personification of the leader as a heterogeneous existence: the leader is he who is granted a mythical and supernatural power that can transform but also heighten people's lives. The leader represents a verticality in life, because he can transform the space of the ordinary into something sacred. He is a 'priest', and just by being in the mere presence of the sacred, the 'ordinary person' is brought upwards towards a higher more valuable realm than that of the everyday. According to Bataille, the leader represents the heterogeneous existence that increases the level of affect of other persons – either through attraction or repulsion; there is an intensity, madness and an excessive aspect to this existence. In the words of Bataille: '*Compared to everyday life, heterogeneous existence can be represented as something other, as incommensurate, by charging these words with the positive value they have in affective experience.*'¹⁸⁴ The art star shares some of these characteristics, because he exists with a *force* that breaks with the regulations and limitations of the homogenous order (the everyday).

8.3.1.

It is my experience that people who become very famous and successful ('art-stars') have the force to push people and objects around as if they were of a higher nature. They attract the favours of others; they attract young people who are willing to work for free; they have devoted followers and passionate defenders who will defend them when criticism is voiced. They are the subject of adoration, are given prizes, and their artwork commands high prices. They are the centre of attention, gossip, worship, saturating magazines, festivals, biennials, galleries, museums as public gods walking on two legs. The art-stars suck people into their orbit, be-

come the rulers of their world. They unleash a new manifestation of hysteria, because those servicing the art-star are hysterical on his behalf. They think as he says; they comply with his orders, they try to think what he needs – they become foot soldiers in his army.

8.3.2.

This hysteria regarding the leading world art-stars (a rough estimate could be the thousand artists who produce or participate in 90 per cent of all exhibitions currently on display world wide)¹⁸⁵ – can be viewed as a certain fascist aspect of contemporary art. It plays on some of the psychological mechanisms that govern fascism as a psychological structure: that of establishing non-democratic hierarchies, the cult of the god-like personality and the power delegated to one subject through the act of exhibition power. Of course, contemporary art-stars are not fascist as in historical fascism; they are the complete opposite. There is nothing political about this hysteria that happens in the art world. It is devoid of this, but it has some structural equivalence on a psychological level because of the hierarchies it produces.¹⁸⁶ By entering into the orbit or circuit of an art-star (or another VIP), as in becoming friends with him or working as his assistant, my being suddenly becomes potential in a different way. Not only am I close to another body that is somebody – a famous person – which then makes me special, because this special being is giving me his attention, prioritises me, but the art-star will also bring me along, introduce me to other influential people. Thus my potential as a human being is suddenly increased in the presence of very powerful people, because they show their power by changing and influencing other people in a beneficial way towards me. Once they have decided to support me they will lift me upwards. But, to be lifted upwards I must comply with what they say: the values and opinions of the art-star. I must internalise their value judgements, their *world view*, and the moment I go against their system, I am excommunicated, ignored, left on my own.

8.4.

Systemic hysteria regarding art-stars is at once a *concentration* of power, fame and economic surplus within the global art-world system, but also a *symptom* of financial and cultural strategic speculation. It reflects the invasion of neo-liberal economics into the sphere of art and it produces a new elite that preserves the prevailing power structures of the institutions and the economic systems supporting them. The problem with this art-star circuit is when it becomes its own *norm*: when it defines the criteria of artistic success (systemic success) and thereby an operative distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art. When it no longer respects the fundamental gesture of an artist as a gesture towards life (each struggling in his own way), it instead, in a selfish way, instrumentalises every human relation according to what can be useful in the sustaining and increasing of its own power: systemic arrogance.

8.4.1.

The positive aspect of this systemic hysteria is when art-stars become points of aspiration and

inspiration to do things differently: they have ‘weight’ in relation to social systems outside the art world and can influence public opinion, make the public think.

8.4.2.

And one could also say that systemic hysteria leads to a *professionalisation* of contemporary art practice: artists today are ambitious, focused and work hard in order to succeed. The level of contemporary art around the world is of a very high quality, because so many agents within the art world demand the very best.

8.5.

What is the thinking embedded in systemic hysteria, as when I become hysterical on behalf of my artwork? The power of my hysteria resides in the internalisation of my ambition to rise to a higher level of art. My hysteria is my insistence on form, focus and precision. My hysteria is reduction: to focus on the most necessary. If hysteria is ambition translated into existence, it pushes me and my artwork further. This is the potential of hysteria, yet also its danger, because I become afraid of letting go. I become trapped in my own idea of immaculate perfection, of always being *strategic* in the way I deal with myself and my artwork. Systemic hysteria can make me uninteresting, because I am afraid of doing the embarrassing, the foolish and stupid thing, when maybe this is what is needed – as when Duchamp presented a urinal to the committee.

8.5.1.

Another danger inherent to systemic hysteria resides in the internalisation of a specific kind of viewer: the curator, the art-star, the collector, the professor, the critic or the gallerist. Systemic hysteria means that art is no longer made for the multitude without any understanding of art, but made for the system of the art world itself. *Contemporary art has become systemic*. Thus, artists communicate with the art world and actually don’t care what ‘the man on the ground’ thinks, because the latter is unimportant: he cannot do anything for the artist’s career except be a number in viewer ratings necessary for the institutional success and further funding of future exhibitions. From this perspective, systemic hysteria is to contemporary art what ‘Scholasticism’ is to philosophy: art made by specialists for other specialists. With the infusion of the experience economy and the high level of capitalism within the art world, we are now witnessing a new consequence of this widespread systemic hysteria: art has also become boring and safe, because the agents no longer take any risks; everybody is afraid of the embarrassing and disturbing, the experience that disappoints or goes against the norm, leaving the viewer feeling uncomfortable and weird.

8.6.

What to do? Become more free, anarchic, indifferent and less cynical and strategic regarding art? De-authorise the system of art within my brain? Return to Dada as a courageous spirit,

because it dared to destroy everything? Return to the nihilism of the 'rage against the system'? Return to the stage of the cabaret? Return to the manifesto, declaring a new art beyond the system? Create an art not for collectors with money, but for those who collect experiences of radical ruptures? Invent new subversive forms where what is high becomes low, and that which is low becomes high? (Bataille). Not an 'I don't know', but a joyful skidding off the cliff, a 'Uiiieee!' towards the not-known on the other side of the established hierarchies?

3. CONCLUSION

THE FUTURE OF CONTEMPORARY ART AS NON-PHILOSOPHY IN ACTION

*'I think the only important limitations on art are the ones imposed or accepted by the artist himself.'*¹⁸⁷
(Michael Heizer)

1.

The reflections gathered together in this book are *speculative* propositions on artistic activity and existence as a way of *non-philosophical thinking*. Inspired by the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty and his view on non-philosophy, I have tried to present my ideas on how this thinking derives its force from a number of aspects feeding into *the individual experience* of being a contemporary artist. This thinking-experience is what I call a *non-philosophy in action*, because the artist is first of all *situated* in a social space and with the power to *propose* whatever as artworks in the context of art. The non-philosophical thinking embedded in art comes from the epistemic rupture of contingency: that art has no essence, and there are only propositions on art as a generic concept. This is the ontological *paradigm* underlying the way contemporary art is being produced today, whose origin is the radical contingency of art revealed by the ready-made of Duchamp. To not only understand, but also act from this experience, represents a non-philosophy in action, because it is to think from the position that everything and anything is (still) possible. On a concrete level contemporary artists therefore think through the decisions they make (to make art in a horizontal wet world), the interests they have (to know something about the world), their sources of inspiration (relating to historical movements), the careers they pursue (to exhibit in the contemporary art world), the actual artworks they

produce (whether objects, events or projects) and finally what they *state* about their artworks (to give interviews or statements about their work). All these aspects inform the way artists *frame* their work according to different contexts and larger conceptual structures, which reveals a *situated* thinking: *a non-philosophy*.

1.1.

This paradigm of radical contingency is the dominating force within the art world. It is the theory that underpins the institutions governing and mediating contemporary art, because it is the most stable in a systemic sense: it is able to incorporate whatever object, event, performance and medium into its system, and still remain intact.¹⁸⁸ The radical situation of contingency allows for the absolute virtuality of contemporary art. Contemporary art as a category and phenomenon can thereby take place wherever and whenever somebody agrees to it, because it is a generic space of appearance.

1.1.1.

Duchamp was the first to place the readymade in the gallery; he was not invited by the institution to do it. They asked for traditional artworks: painting or sculpture. He saw it as a possibility and he had the courage to make that provocation. He was an artist, and this position designates for me a very important aspect regarding contemporary art and its future. The system has power, but the most powerful are the artists, because they have the power to place whatever into the system and thereby push it in new directions ('I believe in the artist', as Duchamp said). They have the power to believe and authorise what they do – whether the institution wants it or not. Smoke, water, fire, digital bits, poured concrete, tape, cake – *everything is possible within the ontology of the whatever*. If it is interesting, persistent and enduring, the institution will eventually include it in its programme. An artist might be out of synch with his own time, but time will be forced to catch up with him. Artists always embarrass their own time, because they perform the new. The necessity to constantly rewrite art history testifies to this fact.

1.2.

And in another sense, this book is speculative because I have strictly limited myself in the number of examples of contemporary artworks. I speculate on the structure underlying the paradigm of contemporary art: the institution, the generic singularity, the artwork as proposition and the artistic project, not the actual artworks being produced right now. I do not want to promote one way of making art or specific artists, but rather understand the *ontological* reasons for the manifold appearance of art. If I were to defend anything at all, it would be the fundamental *institutional freedom of art*. In my view, anything can in principle enter into the system of contemporary art, as long as artists, curators, collectors or the audience want it there. This is the basic tenet of a nihilistic view of the institution. The institution is in principle open for everyone. It is we, humans, who decide what we want, and if I disagree, I can either

protest or do it myself: a gallery space does not need to be bigger than a portable box.¹⁸⁹ I say 'in principle' because in reality and for numerous reasons only a limited number of actual artistic projects are supported by the institution and its agents for reasons developed from strategic necessities, economic conditions, personal tastes and the definitions of institutional profiles. Nonetheless, the greatest power of institutional freedom is that *new communities* can arise around their own concepts of art, independent of what the established institution might think or appreciate. Art can always arise among those who want it.

1.2.1.

We could call this the institutional paradox of contemporary art: it was born from the radical questioning of the institution, as a *destruction* of the institution, yet today contemporary art is preserved by the institutions and artists presenting contemporary art. Thus, every contemporary artist, and with him every curator, collector, critic and city mayor believes in the value of and the recognition that comes from the institution. But this is not the origin of contemporary art and we should not forget that. I am aware of this paradox in my own practice, as in my continuous attempts to receive attention and recognition from the institution, while being conscious that there is a possibility for art *outside* the institution. Just as there is more to life than art, so there is more to art than the established institution.

1.3.

I believe in contemporary art and that it has a future, given that it can be anything. I believe in the radical contingency of contemporary art and the possibility of establishing contexts, such as making new language games with other people. We might be at the end of art in an ontological sense (no essence, anything is possible), but this end is exactly its future: as artists, we are free; the only limitations to art are our own self-inflicted prohibitions, as Michael Heizer wrote in the epigraph above. Thus the future of art is dependent on how I negotiate the limits that I myself impose or the art world imposes upon me. Hence the need for a new *therapeutics of art*: the de-authorisation of myself and the generalised systemic hysteria haunting the art world.

1.3.1.

Will contemporary art ever become something other than this? Well, it can regress, it can be censored and it can fail to be economically supported (state cutbacks on funds for artist spaces and art education). Contemporary art is not a given, because there are political powers that are constantly filling up the space of contingency with ideas of the people, the nation-state, entertainment, financial speculation, viewer ratings, celebrity factors or other notions of substances thought to be the essence of art. *Contemporary art can be destroyed*. For example, the current situation for critical contemporary art is very poor in Russia because of president Vladimir Putin and the state censorship that prosecutes any criticism voiced against the state apparatus. Contemporary art as a public phenomenon (open access to the people)

is conditioned by the spirit of civic society, and if the latter is destroyed, contemporary art either disappears completely or only exists as a clandestine activity for the few.

1.4.

From another perspective, there will be a future to contemporary art exactly because it is non-philosophy rendered experiential: If contemporary art resides in the space of non-philosophy, and non-philosophy is the attempt to transform the lived life into works of art, then the future of contemporary art will depend on the future of life. It is how we will be living 10, 20 or 30 years from now that will shape the future of art – perhaps not in an ontological sense, but the strategic definitions (new concepts) and ways of making art (new technological possibilities) will develop together with the unknown life of future generations. Richard Huelsenbeck put it this way in his *Collective Dada Manifesto* from 1920: ‘*Art in its execution and direction is dependent on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosion of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday’s crash.*’¹⁹⁰ Each new generation reinvents the institution of art, because they have different *needs* for art. The needs for art are never the same, because the excess of being is not an essence or a sameness. The excess of being is difference, and this fundamental difference is what propels artists to make art.

1.5.

The contemporary artist as non-philosopher is also the translation of concepts designating artistic positions into concrete existence. Thus, the moment new concepts are invented for contemporary art, as in the creation of new movements and concepts to designate art, art is invigorated. The contemporary artist should not be afraid of absorbing concepts, but eat them and digest them for his own practice as a distorted and displaced artist. It is cultural cannibalism, an anthropophagy: the infinite process of re-creating past achievements into the present.¹⁹¹ To re-fold the space of contemporary art, then, means to learn its history: to understand all the art that happened in the 20th century in order to make art for the 21st century. When the contemporary artist thinks about all the possibilities that have already been fulfilled and how he is to move onwards – well, then he becomes a *non-philosopher in action*. In this moment he is confronting contingency with *what* he *wants*. The contemporary artist is on fire and wants the world to enter into the flames of virtuality.

4.
AFTERWORD

REMARKS ON BEING A CONTEMPORARY ARTIST AND A NON-PHILOSOPHER

1.

Why have I written this book? Should I not just have stayed in the studio focusing on the laborious work of producing artwork? I regard myself as a contemporary artist who works primarily with painting, but I have over the course of my practice explored several other possibilities of producing art and writing. I have engaged in collaborative art projects: *Collapsing Structures* (2004), *Melting Barricades* (2004), *Supernumeral* (2007), *Bureau für Urban Praktik* (2009–10), *The New Pioneers* (2010), *HEAT-art-demo* (2015); and in art critical projects: the seminars *Ideas and Processes* (2006), *Desire for Spaces, Spaces of Desire* (2007) and *Group-crit* (2013 onwards) – a monthly session for artists in Berlin to discuss their own work. All these projects have involved performance, installation, photography, lectures, seminars and publications. And then I have been engaged in theoretical writings: *Propositions on Painting* (2013), *Generic Singularity* (2014) and now *Non-philosophy and Contemporary Art*. So, I might be known for making and exhibiting painting, but there is this other side to my artistic output that goes against the image of the pure painter working in solitude. This book is an ontological investigation into the possibility of having a multi-faceted art practice: a contemporary artist can move across disciplines and media, and be allowed to follow whatever lines of flight go by... This position is a state of mind: allowing oneself to be the locus of a conflicting system of forces, while constantly moving onwards in the battle with the forces of virtuality.

1.1.

Another reason is to clear my brain of all the thoughts that have been murmuring inside my

skull. Writing down thoughts is actually cleansing. I want to rid myself of my thoughts. I had an idea: *The contemporary artist can be seen as a non-philosopher, because he thinks from his embedded situation where he is confronting contingency*. He thinks from what he is, what he has done and what he wants to do. This idea is now out there in the world for others and for myself to think about. I think differently about what I have written when it is objectified in the printed matter of a book. Then it speaks to me differently, and this difference is important. I have presented the ideas here so they can *inspire* me to think and live differently, and if they then can also help other artists and agents related to the art world to see the potential of contemporary art in a new light, then I am a happy man.

1.2.

So, there has been and still is a thinking present in what I have done. I will claim it is a non-philosophical thinking, which is neither the same as scientific thinking nor strict philosophical thinking. There is too much of myself in these thoughts for them to adhere to either category. They are in between spaces, just as I am in my real life. It has taken time for me to appreciate the potential of this position, but through the writing of this book and the others, I comprehend myself better. Throughout my artistic life I have attempted to *situate* myself, to *understand* myself and my *current conflicts* in relation to my interests. I have tried to think about how the tangible world felt to me (Guston).¹⁹² This constant oscillation between abstract thought-processing and artistic output is non-philosophy in action. I have been displaced by my art and yet art has also been displaced by me. My non-philosophy is a kind of Dadaism for the 21st century: what interests me is my own mode of life.¹⁹³

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert Smithson, 'Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 202.

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- 2 Joseph Kosuth, 'Art after Philosophy', in *Art after Philosophy and After*, p. 18.
- 3 Philip Guston, 'The Image', in *Philip Guston – Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, p. 129.
- 4 As Peter Osborne so rightly notes: 'As the 1960s progressed, the classification of artworks into rigid medium-based categories certainly did become increasingly critically irrelevant nonetheless. And the process was not unconnected to the flowering of a certain idea of freedom: the freedom to make art from any of a potential infinity of material and 'immaterial' means. However, this was neither an uncontested process nor a definitive one, critically or institutionally. If the critical destruction of medium as an ontological category was the decisive, collective historical act of the most important art of the 1960s, it is not surprising that it faced a barrage of institutionally reactive and reappropriative criticism and curation from the outset.' *Anywhere or not at all*, p. 99.
- 5 In his brilliant *Kant after Duchamp* of 1996, art philosopher Thierry de Duve introduces this concept of the whatever in relation to Dadaism and Duchamp in chapter six: *Do Whatever*, pp. 327–68.
- 6 See Pascal Gielen, *Institutional Attitudes*, where he describes the new position of the contemporary artist in the age of the neo-liberal culture economy, in which there is no longer any security. He is sceptical of this new situation, because it makes the artist precarious and vulnerable to neo-liberal exploitation of his creative output. He says: 'In the flat world, this space of digging deep, of reflexivity and 'slowness' or verticality, but also isolation and dealing with materiality, is predictably exchanged for an immaterial discourse that is all about mobility.' 'Institutional Imagination', in *Institutional Attitudes*, p. 20. My idea of re-framing the contemporary artist in relation to the act of non-philosophy can be seen as an attempt to ascribe thought, reflection and agency to the contemporary artist. In short, a new kind of verticality.

- 7 Later, in the chapter *Nihilism and Experimentation*, I will clarify my understanding of nihilism. As a preliminary remark, I believe nihilism to be a positive event, because it designates a position where values are not taken for granted or accepted uncritically. Nihilism means that life is open as a game whose values must be investigated, experimented, played with and, most importantly, invented. This is active affirmative nihilism in the sense that Nietzsche envisioned it as a way of saying ‘yes’ to life, but also as a way of coming to terms with the fact that we don’t all need to have the same values in order to live our lives (perspectivism).
- 8 Joseph Kosuth, ‘Art after Philosophy’, in *Art after Philosophy and After*, p. 18.
- 9 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I, pp. 11, 103.
- 10 For a more detailed description of this concept see *Generic Singularity*, 3.B.2. *Systemic Modernity*, p. 169–95 where I present central aspects of systemic modernity, such as democracy, capitalism, institutions, nation-states and the media world.
- 11 Recent scholarship by Irene Gammel attributes the original idea of the urinal to actress and poet Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874–1927), whom Duchamp knew in New York. That Duchamp never credited her and took the honour for what has been called the most important artwork in the 20th century is of course problematic. Nevertheless, the effect of the readymade, what Duchamp wrote about it and what has since been thought and written about it has brought monumental consequences for the development of contemporary art. For this reason, I will credit it to Duchamp.
- 12 Several other interpretations are also given regarding the meaning of R. Mutt: a reference to the comic strip *Mutt and Jeff*, or to the plumbing company J.L. Mott Iron Works, from where Duchamp allegedly acquired it. A third is *Urmutter*, which would be ‘Great Grand Mother’. A fourth reading is the initials R.M. as a short version of ‘Readymade’. In my interpretation I will keep to the two meanings suggested: that of poverty and mud.
- 13 As Tristan Tzara states in 1923: ‘*As Dada marches it continuously destroys, not in extension but in itself. From all these disgusts, may I add, it draws no conclusion, no pride, no benefit. [...] Dada is a state of mind.*’ ‘Lecture on Dada’, in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 251.
- 14 Marcel Duchamp, ‘*The Richard Mutt Case*’, in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 817.
- 15 Art critic Lars Bang Larsen has in his three essays ‘Kunst er Norm’ (2008), ‘Organisationsformer’ (2009) and ‘Spredt Væren’ (2010) attempted to clarify the consequences of this cultural transformation in relation to the experience economy. In his view, the main problem is that the viewer in the experience economy self-consumes his own experience, thereby making art part of a general identity project, not something that challenges and tests the viewer. Within the experience economy I remain within the loop of my own experience, thus leaving no possibility to enter into other more ambiguous and non-instrumental relations to art.

16 Hugo Ball, 'Dada Fragments', in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 51.

17 During my investigation into the contemporary artist as a non-philosopher I will be referring to a he, both for reasons of semantic concision and because I myself am a male subject in the act of making contemporary art and thinking non-philosophical thoughts, but female artists are of course included as contemporary artists and non-philosophers.

18 See *Generic Singularity*, 1.A.2. *Philosophical Activism*, paragraph 2.2. and section 5.B.1.1. *The Conceptual Person* for a further discussion of the conceptual person in the act of thinking. The conceptual person generates movements, effectuates events and delineates a field of experience and thereby becomes the incarnation of a concept into concrete empirical existence. In this context, the figure of the contemporary artist as a non-philosopher is a way of trying to grasp the thinking inherent to the artistic existence as a gesture towards life. It is a figure and thus specific contemporary artists only incarnate aspects, not the totality of the figure. The figure is not an essence, a fixed category once and for all; it is a method of attaining a certain velocity in the act of thinking and must be seen in this way. The conceptual figure is an *invitation* to think.

19 Several now classic texts constitute the theoretical foundation of this approach and open up the space of contemporary art in a new way. Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer* (1934) and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1967) and Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* (1969).

20 A number of publications testify to the richness and multiplicity of the ways in which artists think. I have in mind the anthology *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art – a sourcebook of artists' writings* edited by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. To this list of compilations can be added: *We are All Normal, Artist Manifestoes*, *Art in Theory*, *Institutional Critique: an anthology of artists writings*, not to mention the publications with collected writings/texts of artists from the 20th century. More recently, there has been growing institutional attention to 'artistic research' or 'art-based research' as a way for artists to receive a PhD through a theoretical reflection about their own practice and exhibition-making. Doctorates are given within academic contexts and represent a new model for the development of thought in relation to art-practice. There is of course a thinking happening here, but it would be wrong to locate this space as the only space of artistic thinking and this new institutionalisation of artistic research also holds some dangers. As artist Jeremiah Day points out in his critical essay 'Digging': '*the shift in the academy from departments of art to departments of "artistic research" could in fact represent an integration of the demand for "direct applicability" – or, in other words, for a more radical instrumentalization of art than for city-branding and high-society trophy-making. At this point we have had much discussion but little demonstration, and many good symposia but few good exhibitions, thus risking that the whole thing, the connection between art and research, could become another department of academia.*' *Art as a Thinking Process*, p. 63. The art magazine *Texte zur Kunst* has devoted an edition to the question of artistic research, see *Texte zur Kunst*, June 2011, no. 82.

- 21 Marcel Duchamp, *The Duchamp Dictionary*, p. 22.
- 22 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'La vie devient idées et les idées retournent à la vie, chacun est pris dans le tourbillon où il n'engageait d'abord qu'une mise mesurée, mené par ce qu'il a dit et ce qu'on lui a répondu, mené par sa pensée dont il n'est plus le seul penseur.' *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 159 / *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 119.
- 23 Philosopher François Laurelle (born in 1937) has over the last 40 years developed his own vision of non-philosophy, and I will in 1.1. Excursus: *François Laurelle and Non-philosophy* discuss his work more in depth.
- 24 Art critic and philosopher Boris Groys attempts to develop a concept of anti-philosophy by designating those philosophers who brought philosophical practice into question. Inspired by Duchamp, he treats the writers in his book *Anti-philosophy* (2009) as: 'readymade philosophers, by analogy with the readymade artists.' (p. viii). And further on: 'Readymade (anti) philosophy dispenses with the heroic philosophical act and substitutes it by ascribing philosophical dignity to the practices of ordinary life' (p. xi), the idea being that anti-philosophy treats thoughts as already established objects that can be organised by the philosopher in new contexts like a contemporary art curator. For Groys, the fundamental insight from Duchamp is that art becomes a question of production, distribution and consumption, and he believes that anti-philosophy deals with the same issues. Even though his book contains many illuminating ideas, I think he misses the fundamental point that Duchamp's readymade reveals about the art world: contingency. The use of 'Anti-philosophy' can be traced further back to an announcement made by Jacques Lacan in 1974, when he said, in relation to the transmission of psychoanalysis in academic contexts, that he was not a philosopher. Alain Badiou has also developed this concept in his book *L'antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein* (2009).
- 25 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Un homme ne peut recevoir un héritage d'idées sans le transformer par le fait même qu'il en prend connaissance, sans y injecter sa manière d'être proper, et toujours autre.' 'L'Homme et l'adversité', in *Signes*, p. 365 (my translation).
- 26 The concept of experience has different meanings depending on which philosophical tradition is used. In this context I will be using it in a sense closer to the German *Erfahrung*, which is different from *Erlebnis* – both being translated into English as 'experience'. *Erfahrung* is the experience that contains a new knowledge, that pushes me to expand my understanding of my world. *Erlebnis* is the perceptual experience of an event or an object, as when I experience a tree in the garden or a trip to the shopping mall. Both are perceptual experiences, but neither alters my understanding of the world radically, yet they are dependent on me being 'experienced' enough to navigate in two such different environments. Later, in the section *The Depth of Experience*, I will develop my concept of experience, which I believe we must understand as a totality of experiences: perceptual, pragmatic and radical.

- 27 The number of different movements (Pop art, Minimalism, Conceptual art, feminism, Land art, performance art, Arte Povera, Fluxus, concrete art, relational aesthetics etc.) within the space of the contemporary points to this activity. Artists or their critical followers give their activities new names in order to define their individual contributions, and in return, new artists absorb these movements into their own practice as point of inspiration, spaces of production and reference. Every artist is a hybrid, consisting of many concepts, but each in his own way pushes these movements into new territories, fills them with new content, so that in the end they are transformed.
- 28 Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, p. 81.
- 29 I am using the concept of the ontological as the condition of possibility for the ontic, the latter being those already established relations to being that function as a metaphysical knot within a human. The ontic level is the sedimented reality of institutions, cultural life-worlds, accumulated knowledge-systems and those laws and regulations that make human life functional and negotiable. The ontological is the radical contingency of being: the human world can exist in a myriad of cultural formations and the virtual is always hovering amidst the ontic. There is a fundamental openness to the existence of a human. See *Generic Singularity*, 1.B.4. *The Relations to Being*, pp. 37–41 for a further discussion of the ontological difference.
- 30 G.W.F. Hegel: ‘*Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig.*’ *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, p. 11.
- 31 G.W.F. Hegel: ‘*Diese Dialektische Bewegung, welche das Bewußtsein an ihm selbst, sowohl an seinem Wissen als an seinem Gegenstande ausübt, insofern ihm der neue wahre Gegenstand daraus entspringt, ist eigentlich dasjenige, was Erfahrung genannt wird.*’ *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 78 / *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 24.
- 32 See *Generic Singularity*, 2.A.2.4. *Experience*, pp. 73–75.
- 33 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘*L’expérience, c’est-à-dire assumption effective d’un être, est seule capable de donner lieu à une dialectique parce qu’elle est ouverture à des latences, qui peut se dévoiler, qui a des profondeurs, des latences, qui peut donc donner lieu à l’ek-stase d’où sortira le vrai nouveau.*’ ‘Préface’ by Claude Lefort in *Notes de cours – 1959–61*, p. 26 (my translation).
- 34 For an interesting discussion regarding the power of ‘Zerrissenheit’ within the Hegelian system, see Jørgen Dehs, *Refleksion og Erfaring* in *Kritik* nr. 40/1976.
- 35 A subject for further investigation would be to look at a number of the art movements in the light of the philosophical space opened by Marxism, Existentialism and the philosophy of Nietzschean vitalism. Any manifesto written in the name of art has the Communist Manifesto as the blueprint for its own existence. Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism, Fluxus, Situationism – all share a belief in art’s transformative powers regarding the social space.

- 36 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from a Lecture*, p. 101, quoted in Hugh J. Silverman, *Inscriptions*, p. 131.
- 37 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘Partout [le] sol [est] reconnu comme contingent’, ‘La Philosophie aujourd’hui’, in *Notes de cours*, 1959–61, p. 46.
- 38 Consider two quotations from Tony Godfrey’s introduction to *Conceptual Art*: ‘Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings. It cannot be defined in terms of any medium or style, but rather by the way it questions what art is’, p. 4; ‘If a work of Conceptual art begins with the question ‘What is art?’, rather than a particular style or medium, one could argue that it is completed by the proposition ‘This could be art’: ‘this’ being presented as object, image, performance or idea revealed in some other way. Conceptual art is therefore ‘reflexive’: the object refers back to the subject, as in the phrase ‘I am thinking about how I think.’ It represents a state of continual self-critique,’ p. 12.
- 39 Giorgio Agamben develops in his historical sketch of the potential of thought the possibility not-to-think. A true potential does not have to be, thus opens a space of contingency into the act of reflecting the world and its possibilities. See his ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency’, in *Potentialities – collected essays in Philosophy*, pp. 243–74. In a more recent approach, the Speculative Realism of Quentin Meillassoux has evoked contingency as a philosophical possibility that he seems to locate in the absolute realm of mathematics that is beyond the human world of natural laws. Thus the question for philosophy according to Meillassoux is: ‘How is mathematical discourse able to describe a world where humanity is absent; a world crammed with things and events that are not the correlates of any manifestation; a world that is not the correlate of a relation to the world?’ *After Finitude*, p. 26. The answer he gives to this question is to ‘re-absolutize’ mathematics as the new form that philosophy should take. As he states at the end: ‘Philosophy’s task consists in re-absolutizing the scope of mathematics – thereby remaining, contrary to correlationism, faithful to thought’s Copernican de-centring – but without lapsing back into any sort of metaphysical necessity, which has indeed become obsolete’, p. 126. This solution of making philosophy an errand boy for mathematics in order to free a space for contingency is fine if you want to remain behind the desk in an office. I want to put philosophy to work as non-philosophy in the concrete space of human life where contingency is our possibility to enact non-necessity in our relations to the world.
- 40 Architect Louis Kahn’s lecture ‘Silence and Light’, delivered at ETH Zürich on 12 February 1969 has inspired this proposition. His original statement is: ‘The most important thing to teach is to know that architecture has no presence. You can’t get a hold of architecture. It just has no presence. Only a work of architecture has presence, and a work of architecture is presented as an offering to architecture’, p. 33.
- 41 See *Generic Singularity*, 1.B.1. *The Transcendental and the Metaphysical Knot*, pp. 27–31.
- 42 The work of Arthur C. Danto, especially *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, has been of great importance for my own understanding of how institutions can transform the everyday object into a worthy object of aesthetic consciousness through its inclusion in

their spatial discourse. Danto's ideas, which are partly based on the late Wittgenstein and his elaboration of the language game as the constitution of meaning and reality, will also form the basis of my own arguments presented here.

43 What Richard Hulsenbeck said of Dada could also be said of contemporary art: '*Dada is a state of mind that can be revealed in any conversation whatever, so that you are compelled to say: this man is a DADAIST – that man is not; the Dada Club consequently has members all over the world, in Honolulu as well as New Orleans and Meseritz.*' 'First German Dada Manifesto' (1918) in *100 Artists' Manifestos*, p. 148.

44 And here the contemporary art world must be understood in the widest sense possible, including all project spaces, public interventions and art projects taking place outside the institution. These latter operations that deliberately engage with spaces outside the established institution will for that period of engagement be related to the art world, because the artist will be framing the project as art – a framing that receives its authority from the general condition and status of contemporary art. The project will be documented and become part of an artistic practice that will ultimately be shown in an art institution.

45 See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea – Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition* (2000), where she discusses the work of Marcel Broodthaers as an example of this new condition for contemporary art.

46 Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 29.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

p. 28-66 Section A.

48 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: '*Pourquoi ce detour? Parce que nous ne savons pas ce que nous pensons.*' 'L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui', in *Notes de cours 1959–61*, p. 163 (my translation).

49 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: '*Ce monde, c'est Être, facticité et idéalité indivisées, qui n'est pas un, au sens des individus qu'il contient, et encore moins deux ou plusieurs, dans le même sens, il n'est rien de mystérieux: c'est en lui qu'habitent, quoi que nous en disions, notre vie, notre science et notre philosophie.*' *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 157 / *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 117.

50 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: '*Univers des constructa. L'univers tout humain et tout inhumain.*' 'La philosophie aujourd'hui', in *Notes de cours 1959–61*, p. 42 (my translation).

51 Between 1956 and 1960 Merleau-Ponty gave lectures on nature at Collège de France. His main ambition was to outline a concept of nature where the human body was viewed in terms of its evolutionary past and seen as related to the animal and nature in general. Nature was the primordial as the non-instituted and yet the enigmatic ground that carries our existence. In light of the recent developments of *Speculative Realism* I find it interesting that Merleau-Ponty – ahead of his time – attempted to think of a relation between man and nature. He thinks of the correlation, but also the conditions of the

correlation: of that which exists independently of humans. It is interesting that one of the marginalised figures of philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead, who is now enjoying a resurgence thanks to the philosophers of *Speculative Realism*, is quoted by Merleau-Ponty several times. Instead of dismissing all Continental philosophy after Kant as ‘pure correlationism’ (following Meillassoux) it might be relevant for Speculative Realists to re-read the works of Merleau-Ponty, where they will find a philosopher who actually works with a speculative concept of nature as something *beyond* the human correlation. As Merleau-Ponty says regarding the role of nature in relation to phenomenology: ‘*Ce qui résiste en nous à la phénoménologie – l’être naturel, le principe «barbare» dont parlait Schelling – ne peut pas demeurer hors de la phénoménologie et doit avoir sa place en elle.*’ ‘Le philosophe et son ombre’, in *Signes*, p. 290. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature – Notes, Cours du Collège de France* for the full scope of his investigation into a new concept of nature.

- 52 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘*La Terre est la matrice de notre temps comme de notre espace: toute notion construite du temps presuppose notre proto-histoire d’être charnels présents à un seul monde.*’ ‘Le philosophe et son ombre’, in *Signes*, p. 294 (my translation).
- 53 See the exhibition series: *Das Antropozän-Projekt – Ein Bericht* at HKW, Berlin, which from January 2013 to October 2014 organised exhibitions, seminars and publications around this topic. A very short and poignant definition of the Anthropocene is given on the cover of the accompanying catalogue: ‘*The Anthropocene hypothesis regards humanity as a geological force, its activities effectively altering the Earth system’s metabolic structures: sediments, currents, and rays are redistributed towards unknown configurations.*’
- 54 Martin Heidegger pointed to similar aspects in his essay *Die Technik und die Kehre* (1949), stating that modern science has made nature an object through the *Gestell*, which is a way of positing nature as an object to be exploited, used for capitalist ends.
- 55 Hugh J. Silverman, *Inscriptions*, p. 147.
- 56 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘*Il faut retrouver dimension d’avant l’objectivation. Un monde qui ne sera pas théorique: la theoria est un type de praxis d’attitude humaine – Retrouver un monde sauvage d’avant - [un] monde donc, où la distinction du subjectif (psychique) et de l’objectif (en soi) ne sera pas encore faite.*’ ‘La philosophie aujourd’hui’, in *Notes de cours, 1959–61*, p. 77 (my translation).
- 57 Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, pp. 181–82.
- 58 See the presentation by Claude Lefort to *Notes de Cours*, who also published the lecture notes, pp. 271–73. He writes regarding the course: *Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel*: ‘*Le texte ici présenté n’est pas destiné à une édition ultérieure. La première raison en est que les discontinuités dans l’écriture, les tours elliptiques, les condensations en une phrase, en un mot, d’arguments entiers, la profusion de termes allemands empruntés au vocabulaire de Hegel et de Heidegger en rendraient l’intelligence difficile à un large public,*’ p. 271. This description gives a fairly good impression regarding the nature of the text and the difficulties in

interpreting them.

- 59 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'La philosophie aujourd'hui', in *Notes de cours*, 1959–61, pp. 66–91.
- 60 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Il y a un Être universel qui enveloppe les deux corrélatifs du Dasein et du monde.' *Ibid.*, p. 95 (my translation).
- 61 See *Generic Singularity*, 1.A.5. *Raw Phenomenology*, pp. 22–25.
- 62 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Il n'y a pas de Grund der Sein, c'est le Sein lui-même qui est Grund de tout le reste [...]. Le Sein comme "abîme", "fond abyssal".' 'La philosophie aujourd'hui', in *Notes de cours*, 1959–61, p. 109 (my translation).
- 63 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *ibid.*, p. 116 for his discussion of Heidegger's thoughts on language. To get a sense of Heidegger's move towards language as the constituting part of being, see his *Brief über den Humanismus* (1946), which had a major impact, not only on Merleau-Ponty, but the generations of poststructuralists to come. See Richard Wolin, *Antihumanism in Postwar French Discourse*.
- 64 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Ce n'est pas l'homme qui parle, ou qui a le langage, c'est le langage qui parle en lui.' *Ibid.*, p. 133 (my translation).
- 65 *Ibid.*, pp. 160–268.
- 66 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Vérité définie par certitude immanente (pensée).' 'L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui', in *ibid.*, p. 182 (my translation).
- 67 Friedrich Nietzsche: 'Ein Philosoph kann eben nicht anders als seinen Zustand jedes Mal in die geistigste Form und Ferne umzusetzen – diese Kunst der Transfiguration ist eben Philosophie. Es steht uns Philosophen nicht frei, zwischen Seele und Leib zu trennen, wie das Volk trennt, es steht uns noch weniger frei, zwischen Seele und Geist zu trennen. Wir sind keine denkenden Frösche, keine Objektivir- und Registrir – Apparate mit kalt gestellten Eingeweiden [...]. Leben – das heisst für uns Alles, was wir sind beständig in Licht und Flamme verwandeln, auch Alles was uns trifft, wir können gar nicht anders.' *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 3, pp. 349–50 / English translation by Merleau-Ponty himself according to translator Hugh J. Silverman, see note 5, *Philosophy and Non-philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 298.
- 68 Merleau-Ponty partly bases his analysis on Heidegger's *Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung* (1942/43) in *Holzwege*. My aim here is not the critical discussion of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Heidegger.
- 69 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Il s'agit de prendre le rapport de l'Erkennen à l'absolu comme donné dans notre vie (donc un absolu qui sera Erkennen aussi), de refondre vraiment les concepts de subjectif et objectif, absolu et connaissance au contact de notre vie.' 'Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel', in *Notes de cours*, 1959–61, p. 282 / *Philosophy and Non-philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 15.
- 70 Hugh J. Silverman, *Inscriptions*, p. 131.
- 71 G.W.F. Hegel: 'Das Bewußtsein [muß sein] Wissen ändern [...] um es dem Gegenstande gemäß zu machen; aber in der Veränderung des Wissens ändert sich ihm in der Tat auch der Gegenstand selbst, denn das vorhandene Wissen war wesentlich ein Wissen von dem Gegenstande. [...] Indem

- es [Bewußtsein] also an seinem Gegenstande sein Wissen diesem nicht entsprechend findet, halt auch der Gegenstand selbst nicht aus; oder der Maßstab der Prüfung ändert sich, wenn dasjenige, dessen Maßstab er sein sollte, in der Prüfung nicht besteht; und die Prüfung ist nicht nur eine Prüfung des Wissens, sonder auch ihres Maßstabes.' *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 78 / *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 23–24.
- 72 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'elle est comprise, transformée en sa vérité, mais alors elle est dépassée,' 'Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel', in *Notes de cours, 1959–61*, p. 312 / *Philosophy and Non-philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 46.
- 73 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'dans le milieu de l'expérience, il en est la membrure, elle est la figure, la manifestation de l'intimité de l'un à l'autre que Bewußtsein ne réussit jamais à atteindre,' *ibid.*, p. 319 / p. 52.
- 74 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Ce qu'il critique chez Hegel: l'attitude théorique, la philosophie comme exhaustation – retour à la phenomenology – praxis contra theoria – recherche d'une pensée-action qui n'ait pas la positivité de toute pensée, le caractère profane de toute action, l'extériorité de toute action.' *Ibid.* p. 319 / p. 52
- 75 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'L'action est la stratégie et la technique du renversement du capitalisme', *ibid.*, p. 337 / p. 69.
- 76 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'I texte de Kierkegaard – I texte de Nietzsche', *ibid.*, p. 336/p. 68.
- 77 See *Generic Singularity*, pp. 219–224, where I discuss these different types of events.
- 78 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'qu'il n'y a pas de nom en philosophie traditionnelle pour designer.' *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 183 / *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 139.
- 79 I have attempted to make this explicit through the analysis of the dimensions of own, given, and final being in *Generic Singularity*, sections 2–4, pp. 47–294.
- 80 Merleau-Ponty: 'le corps visible, par un travail sur lui-même, aménage le creux d'où se fera une vision. [...] Ce que nous appelons chair, cette masse intérieurement travaillée, n'a de nom dans aucune philosophie. [...]. Il faut penser la chair, non pas à partir des substances, corps et esprit, car alors elle serait l'union de contradictoires, mais disions-nous, comme élément, emblème concret d'une manière d'être générale.' *Le visible et l'invisible*, pp. 193–94 / *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 147.
- 81 In *Generic Singularity*, 3.B.2.1. *The spectacle, the media*, pp. 176–79 I have attempted to discern the basic tenets of Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle, which can be summarised as the intimate relation between capitalism and the production of images through the media and commercial world, which together create a new level of estrangement.
- 82 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'qu'il s'agit d'une réversibilité toujours imminente et jamais réalisée en fait.' *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 194 / *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 147.
- 83 My concept of systemic modernity only gives an understanding of how certain Western cultures are organised, especially Northern welfare states. It is not a universal concept that can be applied to all manifestations of human life. It is not an absolute system. But the concept of flesh is an absolute for Merleau-Ponty, because there is no body that is not a flesh and not intertwined into a social world in time.

- 84 François Laurelle, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, p. 166.
- 85 François Laurelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, p. 20.
- 86 François Laurelle, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, p. 51.
- 87 François Laurelle, *A Summary of Non-Philosophy in The Non-Philosophy Project*, p. 25.
- 88 François Laurelle, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, p. 78.
- 89 Ray Brassier himself gives a thorough and lengthy introduction to François Laurelle in *Nihil Unbound*, Ch. 5, *Being Nothing*, pp. 118–49.
- 90 Speculative Realism is a recent philosophical movement that encompasses Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Levi Bryant, Iain Hamilton Grant and other loosely associated philosophers and thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Timothy Morton, Alberto Toscano and Armen Avanessian. Internally there are great differences to be discerned, but one of the achievements of Speculative Realism is its attempt to think objects and material facts beyond their human correlation (all Post-Kantian philosophy on continental grounds). As is stated in the introduction to the anthology *The Speculative Turn* about the writers included: ‘*All of them, one way or the other, have begun speculating once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally*’, p. 3.
- 91 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 118.
- 92 See Brassier’s preface to *Nihil Unbound*, where he presents his own position and the aim of his book, which is to engage with the two aspects of nihilism that he finds pertinent: the disenchantment of the world by the Enlightenment and the realist conviction that there is an independent reality indifferent to human existence.
- 93 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 132.
- 94 François Laurelle, “‘I, the Philosopher, Am Lying’: A Reply to Deleuze”, in *The Non-Philosophy Project*, p. 51.
- 95 Merleau-Ponty: ‘*Philosophie vraie est non-philosophie - entrer dans la profondeur de l’Erfahrung.*’ ‘*Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel*’, in *Notes de cours, 1959–61*, p. 312 / *Philosophy and Non-philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 46.
- 96 One of the most remarkable and inspiring books regarding the relationship between philosophy and living a life is *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1981, UK translation 1995) by Pierre Hadot (1922–2010). In the last essay he sums up the relation between Ancient philosophy and the attempts to actualise philosophy as ‘*how to transform, radically and concretely, one’s own being*’, p. 271. For Hadot, philosophy is a spiritual exercise with the aim of changing one’s way of being in the world. Philosophers should be judged not by their writings, but by the way they live.
- 97 Here I am extending Spinoza’s famous definition of the body in *Ethics*, III, prop. II, p. 87 to encompass the social and time as spaces of virtuality. Just as the body-space is still expanding, so too are we still on the verge of evolving new temporalities and forms of sociality that will add a new depth of experience to contemporary life.
- 98 See Deleuze & Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?: ‘Contempler, c’est créer’*, p. 200, where they invoke Plotinus in relation to the creative potential of contemplation. In the

- third ennead of Plotinus' eighth tractate *Nature, Contemplation, and the One* we find the following: 'The act of production is seen to be in Nature an act of contemplation, for creation is the outcome of a contemplation which never becomes anything else, which never does anything else, but creates by simply being a contemplation', p. 236. For Plotinus, contemplation is a creative act of seeing that becomes a way of producing a vision of the world that then produces its own contemplation: 'To bring anything into being is to produce an Idea-Form and that again is to enrich the universe with contemplation', p. 241.
- 99 Maurice Merleau-Ponty's contemporary, George Bataille (1897–1962), developed a concept of 'base materialism' that shares some similarities with the concept of 'the monstrous body' that I have developed in *Generic Singularity*, 2.A.2. *The monstrous body*, p. 58–86.
- 100 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'L'expression et partout créatrice et l'exprime en est toujours inseparable.' *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 448 / *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 455.
- 101 See the book *McDonaldization: The Reader* (2010) edited by sociologist George Ritzer, who coined the term to describe the effects of how larger food corporations produce standardised experiences.
- 102 I am grateful to Boris Boll-Johansen for the numerous walks we have undertaken in the outskirts of Berlin exploring the city fringe and its non-sites (Marc Augé); going in and out of woods, encircling lakes, traversing suburbs and simultaneously thinking about the life we are living and the life we have encountered. Every time I have returned home, it has been with a feeling of re-invigoration and a sense of breaking out of the everyday pattern. Walking is simply inspiring.
- 103 Friedrich Nietzsche: 'So wenig als möglich sitzen; keinen Gedanken Glauben schenken, der nicht im Freien geboren ist und bei freier Bewegung, - in dem nicht auch die Muskeln ein Fest feiern. Alle Vorurtheile kommen aus den Eingeweiden.' *Ecce Homo*, KSK, vol. 6., p. 281 / *Why I am so Wise*, p. 28-29.
- 104 The tradition of walking and philosophising goes back to Aristotle, who is known to have developed his thoughts during walks. Søren Kierkegaard developed the concept of the 'human bath' as a way of engaging with 'the man on the street' and from here developed his philosophy. For an interesting example of how the human bath infuses his philosophy, see 'Gjentagelsen', in *Samlede Værker*, vol. 5, pp. 133–54, where he visits the Königstädter Theater in Berlin.
- 105 Gaston Bachelard: 'L'être commence par le bien-être', in *La poétique de l'espace*, p. 103 / *The Poetics of Space*, p. 104.
- 106 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Il n'est que de se placer dans l'être, don't on traite, au lieu de le regarder du dehors, ou bien, ce qui revient au même, il n'est que de le remettre dans le tissu de notre vie.' *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 157 / *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 117.
- 107 See *Generic Singularity*, 2.B.2.6. *Self-reflexivity or: The Reflexive Subject*, pp. 118–121, where I discuss further the nature of our reflexive capabilities.
- 108 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'S'il est vrai que la philosophie, dès qu'elle se declare reflexion ou

coïncidence, préjugé de ce qu'elle trouvera, il lui fait encore une fois tout reprendre, rejeter les instruments que la réflexion et l'intuition se sont donnés, s'installer en un lieu où elles ne se distinguent pas encore, dans des expériences qui n'aient pas encore été "travaillées", qui nous offrent tout à la fois, pêle-mêle, et le "sujet" et l'"objet", et l'existence et l'essence, et lui donnent donc les moyens de les redéfinir. Voir, parler, même penser [...] sont des expériences de ce genre, à la fois ir-récusables et énigmatiques.' *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 172 / *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 130.

- 109 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, pp. 58–9.
- 110 See Giorgio Agamben, 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science', in *Potentialities*, pp. 89–103.
- 111 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'La philosophie trouvera aide dans poésie, art, etc., dans un rapport beaucoup plus étroit avec elles, elle renâtra et réinterprétera ainsi son propre passé de métaphysique – qui n'est pas passé.' 'La philosophie aujourd'hui', in *Notes de cours*, 1959–61, p. 39 (my translation).
- 112 Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed – The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, p. 133.
- 113 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'For each painter, style is the system of equivalences that he sets up for himself for that labor of manifestation. It is the universal index of the "coherent deformation" by which he concentrates the still scattered meaning of his perception and makes it exist expressly.' 'Le langage indirect et les voix du silence', in *Signes*, p. 88 / 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, pp. 91–92.
- 114 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Le peintre reprend et convertit justement en objet visible ce qui sans lui reste enfermé dans la vie séparée de chaque conscience: la vibration des apparences qui est le berceau des choses.' 'Le doute de Cézanne', in *Sens et non-sens*, p. 23 / 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 68.
- 115 As Merleau-Ponty writes later in *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* regarding the morphing of painter and nature in the creative act: 'Vision is the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all the aspects of Being. "A certain fire wills to live; it wakes. Working its way along the hand's conductor, it reaches the canvas and invades it; then, a leaping spark, it arcs the gap in the circle it was to trace: the return to the eye, and beyond." There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins. It is, silent Being [l'Être muet] that itself comes to show forth its own meaning.' *L'Oeil et l'Esprit*, pp. 86–87 / 'Eye and Mind', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 146.
- 116 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'La peinture de Cézanne met en suspens ces habitudes et révèle le fond de nature inhumaine sur lequel l'homme s'installe.' 'Le doute de Cézanne', in *Sens et non-sens*, p. 22 / 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 66.
- 117 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Les sens communiquent entre eux en s'ouvrant à la structure de la chose.' *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 265 / *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 266.
- 118 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'La vision est une action, c'est-à-dire non pas une opération qui tient plus qu'elle ne promettait, qui dépasse toujours ses prémisses et n'est préparée intérieurement que par mon ouverture primordiale à un champ de transcendance, c'est-à-dire encore par une extase.' *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 432 / *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 439.

- 119 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 59.
- 120 See Rosalind Krauss, 'Richard Serra, a Translation' and 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* pp. 261–74, 276–90. In the first essay, Krauss shows how Merleau-Ponty's impact on the development of Minimalist aesthetics was very different from the first existential readings of Minimalism in relation to the sculpture of Giacometti: '*The Phenomenology of Perception became, in the hands of the Americans, a text that was consistently interpreted in the light of their own ambitions toward meaning within an art that was abstract*', p. 264. One can see my own re-actualisation of Merleau-Ponty as a double movement that integrates the original insights he formulated and the original interpretation made by the artists of the 1960s into a new synthesis: the contemporary artist as a non-philosopher who engages with experience on many levels and who thinks through his propositions on art.
- 121 See Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (1954), which traces the physical and mental journey into these spaces of radical experience. For Bataille, the experience is something that rips me apart and opens me towards a new kind of communication.

p. 68-116 Section B.

- 122 Peter Weibel, 'Globalization and Contemporary Art', in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, p. 25.
- 123 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, p. 23.
- 124 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzendämmerung*, vol. 6, p. 138.
- 125 Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses', in *What is Contemporary Art*, pp. 10–21.
- 126 We find a similar position from Peter Weibel: '*We are at present witnessing the beginning of a transformation process that needs and utilizes the plethora of biennials in Asia, South America, and the Arab world to take form, whereas modern art, naturally, is defending its position hysterically in the capitalist world system's fairs and auctions by charging high prices. The art that is part of this transformation process can be considered as contemporary, because modern art is not.*' 'Globalization and Contemporary Art', in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, p. 24.
- 127 Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses* in *What is Contemporary Art*, p. 17.
- 128 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 129 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 130 See the website www.superflex.net for an overview of their practice.
- 131 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, p. 57.
- 132 See the last section of *Generic Singularity*, which attempts to describe different aspects of this existence as a generic singularity within the art world: a contemporary artist. It is important to understand that generic singularities exist within all human disciplines where people can become known for this or that. In each field – whether it is politics, science, philosophy, architecture, literature, theatre, film etc. – the specific aspects have

to be developed in a way sensitive to the historical situation of the agent. Thus, to exist as a generic singularity is not the same for a film director, an author, an architect and a contemporary artist.

- 133 Even though I am mostly known for my architectural paintings, I have made public on my website www.asmundhavsteen.net a number of other projects that engage with performance, video, photography, writing and cartographic manipulation. The possibility of moving horizontally across different media and genres is one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary art practice.
- 134 There are several painters who have worked across a range of media and thereby point towards a contemporary art practice as one of trans-disciplinarity. I am thinking of Gerhard Richter, Ed Ruscha, Martin Kippenberger, Michael Majerus, Luc Tuymans, Wilhem Sasnal and Ivan Seal, among others.
- 135 See my *Propositions on Painting* (2013), where I outline the different aspects of painting as both an object and a screen for mental projections.
- 136 See Isabell Lorey, 'Governmentality and Self-Precarization' at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en> for a critical approach to the new social position of project-based work. Lorey addresses a conflict inherent to the existence of the project-worker who does not have a fixed position within a company, yet she does not take into account the ethos behind the choice of that existence and the freedom it also entails.
- 137 See *Generic Singularity*, 5.B.3.1. *The bohemian lifestyle* for a reflection on the consequences of being an artist in relation to time and the artist critique embedded in the life-form as a mode of *existing differently* in the world.
- 138 Ad Reinhardt, '25 Lines of Words on Art: Statement', in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 90.
- 139 Richard Hamilton, 'Propositions', in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 300.
- 140 Sol le Witt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 825.
- 141 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, p. 49.
- 142 Filippo Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', in *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, p. 147.
- 143 Tristan Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto 1918', in *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, p. 252.
- 144 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- 145 *Ibid.*
- 146 *Ibid.*
- 147 Lawrence Weiner, 'Untitled Statement', in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 839.
- 148 Peter Osborne develops this distinction in *Anywhere or not at all*, but calls the methodological position 'postconceptual': 'The reason that the idea of postconceptual art may be said to determine the contemporaneity of 'contemporary art' is that it condenses and reflects the critical historical experience of conceptual art in relation to the totality of current art practices', p. 53. Thus,

- postconceptual art encompasses the situation of transmediality where all categories of modern art have been surpassed towards a situation of trans-categorialisation. I agree with Osborne in his analysis, but my problem with the use of 'postconceptual' is the semantic connotations regarding the 'after'. It is clearer simply to say 'conceptual' because the emphasis is on working from ideas in a virtual realm confronting contingency.
- 149 John Dewey, *Experience*, pp. 277–78.
- 150 Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', in *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, p. 813.
- 151 See www.asmundhavsteen.net/#projects for an image of the work.
- 152 Andrej Holm's book *Wir Bleiben Alle!* (2010) has inspired this idea.
- 153 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'La référence à notre temps [est] nécessaire justement parce qu'il est temps de non-philosophie.' 'La philosophie aujourd'hui', in *Notes de cours*, 1959–61, p. 38 (my translation).
- 154 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, p. 23.
- 155 Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', in *What is Contemporary Art?*, p. 32.
- 156 Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus?*, p. 41.
- 157 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 158 Quoted from Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, p. 65.
- 159 Brian O' Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, p. 69.
- 160 Fredric Jameson, 'End of Art or End of History', in *The Cultural Turn*, p. 75.
- 161 I have recently published a small manual on how to make art outside the institution: *Mobile Verdener*, A Mock Book, Copenhagen, 2014.
- 162 Robert Smithson, 'A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites', in *The Collected Writings*, p. 364.
- 163 Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty', in *The Collected Writings*, p. 147.
- 164 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 165 Chantal Mouffe, 'Institutions as Sites of Agonistic Interventions', in *Institutional Attitudes*, p. 66.
- 166 See the website www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org for more information on *Melting Barricades* and the artworks that were produced for the project.
- 167 See www.asmundhavsteen.net/#projects for images of the event.
- 168 Friedrich Nietzsche: 'Ich beschreibe, was kommt: die Heraufkunft des Nihilismus. Ich kann hier beschreiben, weil hier etwas Nothwendiges sich begiebt.' *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, KSA, vol. 13, p. 56 / *The Will to Power*, p. 3.
- 169 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 57.
- 170 John Dewey, *Experience*, p. 353.
- 171 As Ara H. Merjian writes: 'Nietzsche's reception was so extensive, one historian notes of pre-war Paris, as to seem "synonymous with avant-garde experimentation itself".' *Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City*, p. 3.
- 172 See Gilles Deleuze 'Annexe: sur la mort de l'homme et le surhomme' in his book on Foucault: 'Nietzsche says: man has imprisoned life; the overman is he who liberates life in man to profit from another form of life.' *Foucault*, p.139 (my translation).

- 173 In light of the terror attacks against *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, 7 January 2015, one could argue that Islam is in need of nihilism: that God is not a real entity, only a nominal concept. During the massacre, the two terrorists shouted: '*Allah Akhbar!*' ('God is great!') thereby invoking his name as the absolute authority legitimising their act. Afterwards, the largest demonstrations in the history of France occurred with 1.5 million marching on the streets of Paris and other French cities. The demonstrators went on the streets for two main reasons: to declare solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* and protest against the terrorist act ('*Je suis Charlie*'); to protest for the right of *freedom of expression*: the right to express whatever (to which the number of symbolic pencils that were brandished testified). This freedom of expression could be seen as the essential consequence for humans after the declaration of 'God is dead'.
- 174 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 197.
- 175 See Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, which traces the intellectual and spiritual origin of nihilism back to Ockham and the nominalist revolution. My brief presentation of nihilism is based on this book, but also important is Martin Heidegger's essay 'Nietzsches Wort "Gott ist tot"' (1943), in *Holzwege*, pp. 209–67 and the interpretation by Gilles Deleuze in *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (1962).
- 176 Friedrich Nietzsche: '*Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts?*' *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 481 / *The Joyful Wisdom*, p. 168.
- 177 See Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, p. 201 for a discussion of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and their interpretations of the will. As is well-known, the thoughts of Nietzsche were heavily manipulated by the Nazis to justify their political programme of war and Aryan supremacy.
- 178 Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, p. 179.
- 179 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 180 Friedrich Nietzsche: '*Wenn ein Philosoph Nihilist sein könnte, so würde er sein, weil er das Nichts hinter allen Idealen des Menschen findet.*' *Götzen-Dämmerung*, p. 131 / *Twilight of the Idols*, p.84 (translation modified).
- 181 Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari: '*Le concept est le contour, la configuration, la constellation d'un événement à venir. [...] Le concept philosophique ne se réfère pas au vécu, par compensation, mais consiste, par sa propre création, à dresser un événement qui survole tout vécu, non moins que tout état de chose. Chaque concept taille l'événement, le retaille à sa façon.*' *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 37 / *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 32–34.
- 182 Georges Bataille: '*Ces formes subversives ne sont autres que les formes inférieures transformées en vue de la lutte contre les formes souveraines. La nécessité propre des formes subversives exige que ce qui est bas devienne haut, que ce qui est haut devienne bas, et c'est dans cette exigence que s'exprime la nature de la subversion.*' *La structure psychologique du fascisme*, p. 157 / *The Psychological Structure of Fascism*, p. 85.
- 183 For Lacan, the hysteric converts the desire of the other into his own desire, thereby becoming hysterical when the situation or object does not conform with the desire of

the other. I will not go further into the Lacanian implications of hysteria as a discourse, because I am keeping my analysis of hysteria on a very basic level from the position of being an agent within the art world myself.

184 Georges Bataille: '*L'existence heterogene peut être representée par rapport à la vie courante (quotidienne) comme tout autre, comme incommensurable, en chargeant ces mots de la valeur positive qu'ils ont dans l'expérience vécue affective.*' *La structure psychologique du fascisme*, p. 143 / *The Psychological Structure of Fascism*, p. 70.

185 The website www.artfacts.net gathers information on all exhibitions in established and recognised art institutions around the whole world. This means that all contemporary artists – including modern artists who are still being exhibited and who died in the 20th century – have profiles that can be searched for in the database. The principle behind [artfacts.net](http://www.artfacts.net) comes from the economic discipline of benchmarking companies against each other. It is a ranking system based, according to the website, on the following assessment: '*An artist's career depends very much on the success of his or her exhibitions. Exhibitions listed on ArtFacts.Net™ rate the different artists with a points system, which indicate the amount of attention each particular artist has received from art institutions. These points help to determine the artist's future auction and gallery sales. The ranking method is a valuable tool that enables users of ArtFacts.Net™ to track upcoming trends in the market.*' This means that all artists are listed in a hierarchical system with a number and an indication of whether their careers are going upwards (a green plus) or declining (a red minus). Points are awarded to each artist according to numerous factors such as their exhibition history, whether they are in solo or group shows with other famous artists, the prestige of the exhibition space and the price reached in auction houses. The database is primarily developed for the use of art collectors, who can monitor the career development of their collected artists in relation to their global ranking. The database gives clear information about the artists' exhibitions, their primary means of expression, nationality, and in some cases, also links to their websites and catalogues. What the database also reveals is that the top 1000 artists are the most exhibited around the world, and thus responsible for the greatest activity, participating in the most group and solo shows. My assessment that the top 1000 also participate in 90% of all exhibitions worldwide comes from the exponential growth behind the ranking. For example, Andy Warhol, currently (2015) listed as number 1, has had 2929 public exhibitions, while number 1132, Ivan Moudov, has had 129 public exhibitions. The difference between 1 and 1132 is a difference in 2800 exhibitions. The difference in position between Victoria Vesna (number 20519, 28 public exhibitions) and Arnaldo Morales (number 33471, 16 public exhibitions) is 12952 positions, but the difference in public exhibitions is only twelve. Of course, these numbers that I have picked from the website must be viewed with caution because they only reveal an aspect of an artist's exhibition history, not the quality of his artwork, but I do believe they give a fundamental insight into the hierarchy of the contemporary art world and how contemporary art also is a space of economic speculation.

186 It might be fruitful in another context to elaborate this perspective in relation to the decline of religion in secularised Western nation states and the emergence of contemporary art as a new religion. The art-stars would then be the new gods wandering on Earth, representing a new verticality, and the art museums the new cathedrals of worship and aesthetic community.

p. 118-122 Conclusion

187 'Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson – Discussion', in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 536.

188 I am using the concept of contingency as developed by Niklas Luhmann in his *Systemtheorie*. See introduction by Ole Thyssen in *Iagttagelse og Paradoks*, p. 19.

189 Maurizio Cattelan opened the 'Wrong Gallery', no bigger than a box, in 2002 in New York and during my residency at the CCA Kitakyushu Research Program 2004–5 it briefly opened in the main gallery of CCA. Curator Jacob Fabricius ran 'KBH Kunsthal' from a public glass vitrine no bigger than 1m³, located on Vesterbrogade 6C, between October 2005 and November 2006.

190 Richard Huelsenbeck, 'Collective Dada Manifesto', in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, pp. 242–43.

191 See Lars Bang Larsen's *Organisationsformer*, pp. 46–52 for a presentation of the Brazilian concept of *antropofagia* in relation to the art practice of Oiticica. The manifesto of anthropophagy was written by the surrealist Oswald de Andrade in 1928 as a way of creating a position for Brazilian culture *vis-à-vis* Western European culture dominance.

p. 124-126 Afterword

192 Philip Guston: '*I'm not a thinker, so much. I think, but I think in terms of the way the tangible world feels to me. My thinking comes out of the way things feel. And this demonstrated to me that I could never be an ideologue.*' 'Conversations with Louis Finkelstein', in *Philip Guston – Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, p. 165. In another context it would be interesting to analyse the thinking of Guston as non-philosophy. One has the clear sense of a highly intelligent man reflecting on painting, art, life etc., yet his thinking never becomes strictly philosophical. It is completely embedded in his life as an artist and what he wants to achieve with his art.

193 The sentence is a re-formulation of Tristan Tzara's statement: '*What interests a Dadaist is his own mode of life.*' 'Lecture on Dada', in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 246.

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