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**CRISIS AND ENGAGEMENT:
A PHILOSOPHY OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	V
DECLARATION.....	IX
ABSTRACT	XI
INTRODUCTION	1
0.1. AT THE TATE MODERN.....	1
0.2. YOU ARE HERE.....	3
0.3. STUDYING CONTEMPORARY ART.....	6
0.4. THE PLAN.....	9
CHAPTER 1: WHAT MAKES ART CONTEMPORARY?	13
1.1. INTRODUCTION	13
1.2. THE PUZZLE OF CONTEMPORARY ART	14
1.3. CONTEMPORARY ART AND ART <i>AS SUCH</i>	20
1.4. POST-HISTORICAL ART	25
1.5. BEING CONTEMPORARY.....	31
1.6. INTENSIFICATION AND CONTEMPORANEITY	37
1.7. CONCLUSION	43
CHAPTER 2: CRISIS AND ENGAGEMENT	45
2.1. INTRODUCTION	45
2.2. CRISIS.....	46
2.3. ENGAGEMENT	54
2.4. ENGAGED AND NON-ENGAGED ART.....	60
2.5. CONCLUSION.....	67
CHAPTER 3: COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE	69
3.1. INTRODUCTION	69
3.2. COGNISING CRISES.....	70
3.3. INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE.....	73
3.4. COGNITIVISM AND KNOWLEDGE.....	77

3.5. NARROW K-COGNITIVISM.....	79
3.6. BROAD K-COGNITIVISM.....	89
3.7. THE SCOPE OF CRISES AND THE LIMITATIONS OF KNOWING.....	92
3.8. CONCLUSION.....	95
CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING.....	97
4.1. INTRODUCTION.....	97
4.2. FRIENDSHIP OF NATIONS.....	98
4.3. UNDERSTANDING.....	103
4.4. UNDERSTANDING <i>THROUGH ART</i>	110
4.5. CO-PRODUCTION AND REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM.....	114
4.6. EMPHASIS AND PROVOCATION.....	122
4.7. CONCLUSION.....	126
CHAPTER 5: CO-PRODUCING ARTISTIC VALUE	129
5.1. INTRODUCTION.....	129
5.2. ARTISTIC VALUE.....	130
5.3. MISUNDERSTANDING AND RESPONSIBILITY IN CO-PRODUCTIONS.....	141
5.4. ARTISTIC EXCEPTIONALISM.....	147
5.5. NORMATIVE OPACITY AND RISK.....	156
5.6. MEDIATION.....	160
5.7. CONCLUSION.....	163
CONCLUSION	165
6.1. WHERE WE HAVE BEEN.....	165
6.2. THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS.....	167
6.3. THE BROADER SIGNIFICANCE OF CONTEMPORARY ART.....	170
6.4. ARMCHAIR COGNITIVISM.....	171
6.5. THE FUTURE OF CONTEMPORARY ART.....	173
REFERENCES	179
ILLUSTRATIONS	195

List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1 - Nicole Eisenman, *The Darkward Trail*, 2018, oil on canvas. (Tate, London). 195
- Fig. 2 - Cildo Miereles, *Babel*, 2001, radios, lighting and sound. (Tate, London). 196
- Fig. 3 - Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1987, steel, wood, paint, plastic and dust. (Tate, London).. 197
- Fig. 4 - Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007, installation documentation. (Tate, London). 198
- Fig. 5 - Tate Modern Natalie Bell Building, 2022, photograph,
(<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/10/01/tania-bruguera-renames-tate-modern-after-local-london-activist-as-part-of-turbine-hall-commission> [accessed 23/01/23])..... 199
- Fig. 6 - Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Half-length Figure of Saskia in a Red Hat*, 1633, oil on canvas (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel). 200
- Fig. 7 - Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'Untitled' (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), 1991, candies in variously coloured wrappers, endless supply.
(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mark6mauno/10788507753/> [accessed 13/07/21]).
..... 201
- Fig. 8 - Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964, synthetic polymer paint and screenprint on wood.
(Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton). 202
- Fig. 9 - Wilhelm Sansnal, *Gaddafi 1*, 2011, oil on canvas. (Tate, London). 203
- Fig. 10 - Wilhelm Sansnal, *Gaddafi 2*, 2011, oil on canvas. (Tate, London). 204
- Fig. 11 - Wilhelm Sansnal, *Gaddafi 3*, 2011, oil on canvas. (Tate, London). 205
- Fig. 12 - Anish Kapoor, *At the Edge of the World*, 1998, fibreglass and pigment. (Anish Kapoor Archive)..... 206
- Fig. 13 - Hans Haacke, *Sol Goldman and Alex DiLorenzo Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971, 31 works on paper, maps, and typescript with gelatin silver contact prints. (Tate, London). 207
- Fig. 14 - Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971, gelatin silver print and typed ink on paper. (MACBA, Barcelona).
..... 208
- Fig. 15 - Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971, typed ink on paper. (MACBA, Barcelona). 209
- Fig. 16 - Santiago Sierra, *Space Closed by Corrugated Metal*, 2002, installation documentation.
(The Lisson Gallery, London)..... 210

Fig. 17 - Doh Suh, <i>The Perfect Home. Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home</i> , 1999-ongoing, silk and stainless steel tubes (21 st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan).	211
Fig. 18 - Thomas Hirschhorn, <i>Musée Precaire Albinet</i> , 2004, installation documentation (Thomas Hirschhorn Archive).....	212
Fig. 19 - Slavs and Tatars, <i>Friendship of Nations – Polish Shi’ite Showbiz</i> , 2011, installation view (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).	213
Fig. 20 - Slavs and Tatars, <i>Friendship of Nations – Polish Shi’ite Showbiz</i> , 2011, installation view (https://www.frieze.com/article/sharjah-biennial-10-%E2%80%82 [accessed 2/03/22]).....	214
Fig. 21 - Slavs and Tatars, <i>Simorgh Solidarność</i> , 2011, fabric needlework, leather, synthetic velvet, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).....	215
Fig. 22 - Slavs and Tatars, <i>Beware the Anti-Imperialist Imperialist</i> , 2011, digital print, polyester, plastic beads, string crochet, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin)..	216
Fig. 23 - Slavs and Tatars, <i>Men of Iran</i> , 2011, needlework, silk, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).....	217
Fig. 24 - Slavs and Tatars, <i>Only Solidarity and Patience Will Secure Our Victory</i> , 2011, faux leather, synthetic velvet, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).	218
Fig. 25 - Adrian Piper, <i>Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems</i> , 1981, installation view (Hammer Museum, Los Angeles).....	219
Fig. 26 - Adrian Piper, <i>Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems</i> , 1981, installation view (Hammer Museum, Los Angeles).....	219

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Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

The work presented was carried out by the author.

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Abstract

Contemporary art is a global success story. It is regularly lauded for its formal experimentation, its diversity, and its interrogation of pressing issues. However, it is also a category of art that creates deep confusion, seemingly floating free of any attempts to clarify its historical determination, conceptual definition, or criteria for critical judgement. The aim of this thesis is to move against this confusion by attempting to answer a central question: what makes art contemporary? In response, I develop three main lines of argument.

I begin by arguing that contemporary art has two key features. First, it is made in contexts of absolute heterogeneity, in which artists are free to use any material, art form, genre, or style they please. Second, it attempts to engage with the crises of contemporaneity. This thesis focuses on understanding the second feature which has not been subject to extended philosophical reflection.

Next, I argue that one of the main ways contemporary art attempts to grapple with contemporaneity is by getting its audience to improve their cognitive standing on crises. I argue that contemporary art aims not just to provide its audiences with knowledge, but also to make them active co-producers of understanding. In doing so, contemporary artists attempt to help their audiences become participants in shaping the present.

Finally, I explore the ways in which the preceding arguments can help us to understand what it means to appreciate an artwork *as* contemporary art. I endorse a functionalist approach to artistic value. But I also argue that realising the artistic value of contemporary art is often a risky endeavour. I claim that, when dealing with experimental and challenging art, we have to be closely attentive to the way artists exempt themselves from various norms and the impact this has on the activity of audiences and mediators.

Introduction

0.1. At the Tate Modern

The Tate Modern in London is one of the world's leading museums of modern and contemporary art. Housed in a gigantic former power station in a prominent location on the bank of the river Thames, it is hugely popular. In 2018 and 2020 it ranked as the most visited museum in the UK.¹ Across its main floors, it shows a changing selection of artworks from its permanent collection. The display represents artists from around the world, some living, some dead. There are works in all manner of different media, form, genre, and style. Let me take you on a brief tour past several of the works on display at the time of writing.

First, we encounter *The Darkward Trail* (2018), a large (3260 x 2670 mm) oil painting on canvas by the American artist Nicole Eisenman (Fig. 1.). The figures depicted in the work drift across an arid landscape, following a dense beam from a flashlight that seems to more obscure than illumine. One chubby figure rides a diminutive steed, another stares with one eye at a drone they are piloting. Commenting on the work, critic and curator Mark Godfrey (2018) interprets the painting as an allegorical reflection on America's post-2016 political climate. It is a work that depicts people going somewhere, but also makes it entirely unclear where they might be going. The chubby character rides an overburdened donkey – the traditional symbol for the Democratic party. The character with the drone is caught in a paranoid loop of recording themselves. The figures drift towards an uncertain destination, directed by darkness that looks like light, being carried complacently forward or walking with only one eye on the path ahead.

In another room we are confronted by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles's *Babel* (2001), a large circular tower made from layers of hundreds of second-hand analogue radios (Fig. 2.). Each radio is tuned to a random station from around the world and plays at the lowest volume at which it is audible. The result is a sound that is both hushed and cacophonous, speech and song of different languages intermingling in the space. If you stand close, you can attempt to attune your attention to just one of these broadcasts. As soon as you step back signal meshes into noise. The work captures “relations between distinct nations and communities ...

¹ See ALVA (2018; 2020).

recognising the existence of a territory with uncertain boundaries, one that accommodates multiple oppositions and produces the multiple contamination of cultural expressions previously separated by geographical and historical injunctions.” (Dos Anjos, 2008: 173) The whole world is together in one place, but it’s not easy to hear what it’s saying.

In a different room we encounter two works by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. *Untitled* (1987) is a freestanding sculpture made from different pieces of discarded hospital furniture – bed frames, cribs, a gynaecologist’s foot stool (Fig. 3.). All components for the sculpture were collected in the city of Medellín, the centre of Pablo Escobar’s drug cartel. The work carries with it a memory of violence, furniture usually associated with care dismembered and reassembled into cage-like structures. Alongside the work is a digital recreation of Salcedo’s installation *Shibboleth* (2007). This work was originally staged in the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, the space that the museum regularly uses to stage monumental new commissions. Salcedo intervened into the very architecture of the space, creating a 548-foot-long crack in the poured concrete floor (Fig. 4.). Today, the crack has been filled in, but it is still just about visible. Rather than move from care to violence, in this work a violent act of division and destruction has been healed, leaving a barely visible yet still present scar.

Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari’s *Dance to the End of Love* (2011) offers us humour, love, and friendship. The piece consists of four video channels and sound. Each displays various clips of found YouTube footage produced between 2005-2010 of young men from across West Asia and North Africa.² They play guitar, sing popular songs, and recreate scenes from sci-fi films, doing their own stunts and rudimentary special effects. Though the various men are separated by physical space, online they can participate in a nascent meme culture, performing the same songs, recreating the same scenes, and appreciating each other’s everyday aesthetic productions. Through the work, created during the run-up to the Arab Spring, the artist draws attention to the intimacy and friendship that can be formed between strangers on the internet, and how they can become autonomous creators of shared aesthetic worlds.

Finally, as any good tour guide should, let me draw attention to an artwork that is often easily missed. When we make our way out of the permanent display, we pass under a sign that

² The complete work can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/19581172>.

informs us that we are leaving “The Natalie Bell Building.” (Fig. 5.) Galleries around the world bear many such dedications, usually carrying the name of an individual donor or corporate sponsor. But this dedication is different. It was instituted by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera as part of her own Tate Turbine Hall commission *10,148,451* (2018). As part of this project, Bruguera decided to change the name of the Tate Modern’s main building – formally named the ‘Boiler House’ – asking local residents in the neighbourhoods near the Tate who should be honoured. They chose Natalie Bell, a community worker and activist who has lived near the Tate for 25 years. The name change is permanent and represents a novel act of uplifting and honouring not a moneyed donor, but a person who is actually trying to make a difference to the wider neighbourhood in which the museum is situated. It is a subtle intervention into the arrangement of public space, since it is so easy to miss. But once one sees it, the subtle gesture becomes a powerful and pointed redirection of the cultural capital that contemporary art institutions wield.

0.2. You Are Here

Contemporary art is a global success story. Most major metropolises around the world have huge public museums like the Tate, all boasting similarly eclectic and international displays of recent art. Alongside these museums, cities are also filled with many smaller commercial galleries, project spaces, auction houses, annual art fairs, and specialised art schools also devoted to contemporary art. Like the Tate Modern, these institutions and events draw crowds from around the world. The works of living artists are regularly in the press, accrue rich critical literatures, and are often sold for eye-watering prices. Contemporary art’s aesthetic and intellectual influence even spreads out from the world of galleries to the worlds of fashion, pop music, and advertising.

The works we have encountered on our brief tour all participate in this booming global phenomenon. But stepping back, we may question what exactly brings them together under the label of ‘contemporary art’? At first pass, one could just say that they are all fairly recent. But this seems somewhat vague. At the time of writing, a work made in 2018 certainly feels recent, but can the same be said of a work made in 1987? Alternatively, we might say that these works are all experimental or formally inventive, exploring non-traditional materials or media like installation, architectural intervention, found objects, appropriated sound and video, and acts of dedication. This gets us closer, but it might not quite suffice. Eisenmann’s

work is a figurative oil painting, displayed in a conventional way, sharing many formal affinities with the works of earlier artists like Philip Guston or Georg Grosz. The work does not seem to be striving for formal or material innovation. Finally, we may simply assert that contemporary art is defined by its very diversity. Not only is this variation felt at the level of material, art form, genre, or style, but also in tone and theme. Some of these works are austere and challenging, dealing with difficult political events. Some require significant curatorial support to understand and appreciate. Some are more playful and welcoming. All the works carry with them reference to very different cultural contexts, some local to London, others local to the artist's home country, others tending towards more international concerns.

However, trying to account for this vertigo-inducing diversity seems to move us further from understanding what unites these works under one label. Indeed, this diversity often simply raises more questions. If it seems contemporary artists can use anything to make art, then what are the limits of our concept of art? If artists deal with different themes in completely different ways, how can we tell which of these works is a good or bad piece of contemporary art? If some of these works are hard to tell apart from works that are usually consigned to the category of 'modernism', then what makes them also distinctly contemporary? For contemporary art's many detractors, these are simply unsolvable puzzles signalling that recent art has fallen into relativistic chaos. For those who take contemporary art seriously, a pressing task is to try and show how these questions have some answers.

The goal of this thesis is to show how subjecting contemporary art to philosophical scrutiny can help us to better grapple with its distinct challenges and achievements. My central question is '*what makes art contemporary?*' I will attempt to provide an answer that I think best illuminates the distinctive features of work that is placed within this category, exploring how this helps us to make sense of what it means to understand and appreciate a work *as* contemporary art. By showing how philosophy can help to shed light upon this particularly puzzling domain of art making, I put forward a distinct philosophy of contemporary art.

At the heart of my account is the identification of two key features of contemporary art. First, I claim that contemporary art's diversity – or what I will call its *absolute heterogeneity* – must be central to any understanding of the domain. It shapes how we understand the historical emergence of contemporary art, shapes the kinds of distinct philosophical questions it allows us to pose, and places particular demands on our critical practices. However, I claim that

there is a second feature that is equally important to understanding what makes an artwork contemporary. I argue contemporary art is also distinguished by its attempts *to engage with the crises of contemporaneity*. It tries to use its diverse artistic means to get its audience to better grapple with the problems that define their particular place in history. I argue that we cannot fully understand what makes an artwork contemporary without paying close attention to this second feature.

Think back to our tour of the Tate Modern. The artists we encountered were all committed, in some measure, to trying to grapple with live political, social, or cultural problems. Eisenman attempts to deal with a world in which populism and polarisation seem to be becoming a regular part of political life; Miereles deals with the difficulties of communicating with each other in an increasingly globalised, interconnected world; Salcedo deals with the way materials and institutions register social, political, and personal traumas; Zaatari responds to political and social alienation with a positive picture of the communities that can emerge through online life; Bruguera responds to the distancing of art institutions from the communities they exist alongside by making the community part of the institution. Whether or not these artworks represent their target problems well or serve as good responses to them is an open question. But when applied to all the works under consideration, across their formal and thematic variety, I claim that it is this question that brings into view what makes them distinctly contemporary.

My central project is thus to show that grasping the way an artwork responds to crises of the present through heterogenous means is central to understanding and evaluating a work *as* contemporary art. Seeing how the two central features of contemporary art interact opens many further lines of inquiry. I will attempt to show how the ways art actively negotiates its place in historical time makes a deep difference to how we appreciate it. I will explain why two works made at exactly the same time may have very different claims to being contemporary art. I explore the ways in which engagement with crises can be illuminated by understanding how contemporary art alters its audiences' cognition of the world around them, how it can get them to experience their own intellectual autonomy, and how it can make them active participants in shaping the present. I will try to demonstrate that better understanding the demands contemporary art places on evaluation helps us to emphasise the central importance of experimentation, difficulty, and risk in our judgements of artistic value. Pursuing these diverse, extended lines of inquiry is necessary to develop a full answer to my

initial question. I hope to show that getting contemporary art into focus opens up a wide terrain for innovative philosophical inquiry.

0.3. Studying Contemporary Art

From at least the middle of the twentieth century, contemporary art has been a subject of much interest to scholars from many different domains. To begin to delineate the scope of my particular project and the methods I will use to pursue it, it is useful to contrast my approach with others.

I am by no means the first person to find contemporary art to be a subject of philosophical intrigue. As we will see in chapter 1, philosophers coming from many different traditions have been puzzled by the questions that contemporary art raises. Contemporary art is often brought into the fold of philosophy as a repository of problem cases that can be used to reshape our attempts to understand the definition and ontology of art, the nature of aesthetic experience, or the concept of artistic value. By responding to contemporary art in this way, philosophers have shown that recent art can reveal many new lines of inquiry that can apply to art made at many different points in time. Call this the standard approach.

This is a noble project. However, my approach is distinct. Rather than just move from contemporary art out to wider philosophical questions, I intend to use tools developed in wider philosophical inquiry to focus in on understanding the distinctive features of the category of contemporary art. This latter task is central to pursuing a distinct philosophy *of* contemporary art, rather than simply trying to show how contemporary art bears on philosophical inquiry into the art of any period.³ I claim that focussing closely on what makes an artwork contemporary and showing how this explains characteristic historical and critical features of the domain helps to bring into view lines of inquiry that are simply missed by standard philosophical approaches. Only once we have an answer to the question ‘what makes an artwork contemporary?’ can we begin to really see the wider philosophical significance of much recent art. Over the course of this study, contemporary art leads me to

³ Examples of similar kinds of project could include the various diverse philosophies *of* specific art forms or specific genres of art. Take, for instance, Noël Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), which provides a theory of the distinctive features of the genre, the ways it uses its particular artistic resources to affect audiences, and the distinct philosophical problems it poses.

put forward views on our capacity to learn from art, the scope of audience autonomy in appreciating art, artistic value, and the norms of artworlds, all of which have broad application. But it is not my intent in this thesis to then fully demonstrate what comes from applying these views to art of other periods. Whilst no doubt interesting, these further lines of inquiry take me away from grappling with the immediate issues posed by contemporary art.

The project I am pursuing is thus somewhat narrower than standard philosophical approaches. However, my approach is also significantly broader than the way contemporary art is studied within history of art. The problem the art historian faces is not trying to show how contemporary art bears upon our ideas about art in general, but rather how to pursue empirically substantiated study of particular artworks, whilst also delivering broad statements on a field as heavily and diversely populated as contemporary art. Some have boldly attempted to survey the whole domain, but such an approach is usually reserved for introductory textbooks or works for popular audiences.⁴ The struggle these studies face is that they have to present swathes of art in snapshot form, often only providing a paragraph or two on each artist they present. As art historical studies of contemporary art aspire to greater academic rigour, they increase in particularity. Three popular genres are the thematic study, the medium-based study, and the single-artist monograph. In thematic studies, historians look at how a specific group of artists – usually five or six – engage with a particular theme that is distinctly pressing in contemporary art. Some recurrent thematic topics include studies on the relation between contemporary art and climate change, the internet, terrorism, or migration.⁵ These studies look in detail at why artists have become interested in these topics, how the chosen artists reflect upon them in interesting ways, and how they compare and contrast in their approaches. In medium-based studies, historians look at the way contemporary artists have increased heterogeneity by bringing new media into art or have attempted to persist with using traditional media in contexts of absolute heterogeneity.⁶ In these studies, focus is put on the way artists have expanded the expressive possibilities of these specific media, and how they have contributed, in local ways, to the expansion of our art concepts. Finally, in

⁴ See Hopkins (2000); Smith (2011); Kalb (2013); Bois et al. (2016); Godfrey (2020).

⁵ On climate change, see Demos (2016); Demos, Scott, and Banarjee, (2021); on the internet, see Kholeif (2014); Cornell and Halter (2015); on terrorism, see Harris (2021); Cvoro and Messham-Muir (2021); on migration, see Tello (2016).

⁶ For studies of specific innovations in media and form associated with contemporary art see Kwon (2002); Buskirk, (2003); Bishop (2005; 2012); Kester (2010); Moss (2019). For consideration of the role of traditional media, see the debate around the role of painting in contemporary art in Joselit (2009) and Graw and Lajer-Burcharth (2016).

single-artist studies, historians attempt to look at an artists' oeuvre – or more precisely, since the artists are usually still alive, some part of their extant oeuvre. Here, focus is placed on charting the details of the construction, conception, and exhibition of works, looking at how these fit into their wider practice and what contextual factors influenced their production.

In all cases, attempts to make general claims about contemporary art are not of central concern. One clear motivation behind delimiting the field in this way is that there is a difficulty in working out how to do the kind of attentive empirical study that art historians valorise on a domain as large and diverse as contemporary art. The problem faced by general studies of contemporary art is that they are either light on serious engagement with specific works, or, when they do engage with specific works, it is implausible that the few works they cite can really speak for the diverse field as a whole. Particularity makes contemporary art's kaleidoscopic difference tractable for academic study.

My approach goes in the opposite direction. The account of contemporary art I develop is broader than many art historical approaches because it is supposed to apply to the whole category across its absolute heterogeneity. Art historical study often simply passes the buck on what makes the artworks they are looking at contemporary art. As such, it is often unclear why the works under consideration fall within the wider category, why they tend to be regularly exhibited under this label, why they are grouped with other works produced within a particular timeframe, or why they are notable and interesting exemplars of this wider category. We thus have many specific, empirically rich accounts of subdomains of contemporary art, but it is often left open as to what might link all these different studies. The purpose of my thesis is to try and work out what is going on at the general level. Philosophy is ideally equipped with the tools to study a domain of human life with such wide scope.

However, my approach is not supposed to then be at odds with art history. Rather, I think that taking a more general approach should be seen as an attempt to complement more localised studies. I propose that understanding what makes any artwork contemporary can help to further refine our attention to the particularities of individual practices. But it can also help to further connect together what specific contemporary practices might share beyond their immediate formal or topical concerns. My approach aims to help build new bridges between different areas of the art historical study of contemporary art.

The philosophy of contemporary art thus aspires to a middle ground between the broad scope of standard philosophical approaches to contemporary art, and the narrower scope of art history. The methodology I pursue throughout is what I take to be a fairly standard kind of discursive philosophy, conducted broadly in the Anglo-American style, but with frequent incorporation of ways of thinking from Continental, Pragmatist, and critical theory traditions. I call this work only *a* philosophy of contemporary art for, as I shall make clear at various points, there is much more philosophical work that is needed to provide comprehensive coverage of the domain. However, one methodological point I would like to emphasise is that throughout this thesis I have endeavoured to regularly pay close and extended attention to specific artworks by leading contemporary artists. Sometimes these examples serve to illustrate wider philosophical arguments, but at other points they are used to lead the development of lines of inquiry. Here I must admit a limitation of this thesis. The examples I reference do not come close to tracking the full scope of contemporary art. There is no extended consideration of some key media like performance, moving image, or internet art. There is also a distinct (and unfortunate) emphasis on artists that come from the global West – something that reflects more where power and attention are focussed, rather than all the places where contemporary art is made and appreciated. These are limitations that I do not wish to excuse away. I hope they are reasonable costs that comes with the benefits of developing claims with broad application. I see this thesis as an attempt to provide a sample demonstration for how to achieve reflective equilibrium between the local details and the big picture. It falls to further study to keep filling in all the details.

Finally, let me make one note about the relation between this work and art criticism. Though I am attempting to respond to the puzzles that surround our practices of understanding and appreciating contemporary art, my goal is simply to help us understand what makes works of contemporary art good *or bad*. Though I have focussed on many works that I find deeply compelling, I have attempted to forestall the pull of producing my own evaluative judgements. I have attempted to take a more distanced approach, providing appreciative frameworks that help us to see both when an artwork succeeds or fails *as* contemporary art. My aim is to provide the reader useful ways to arrive at their own evaluative judgements.

0.4. The Plan

This thesis is structured as a sequence of inquiries, each of which builds systematically upon

the others. I begin, in **chapter 1**, by surveying philosophical and art historical attempts to say what makes art contemporary. Framed by an agenda-setting provocation by the art historian Hal Foster, I show that this question creates significant confusion and disagreement both at the level of artworld practice and within philosophical debate. I present four different ways to respond to this question, the first attempting to reckon with contemporary art's absolute heterogeneity, the second attempting to show how this helps to explain its historical emergence, the third focussing on the particular experience of time it expresses, and the fourth investigating the way it relates to a distinct historical period called 'contemporaneity.' All four approaches reveal key aspects of contemporary art and illuminate artworld practice. But though the first approach is dominant within philosophy, I argue it is limited by using contemporary art as a lens to study all art *as such*. To remedy to this, I claim that the latter two approaches provide more precise tools to respond to Foster's worries. I argue that contemporaneity is a distinct historical period marked by the intensification of the divergent interpretations of the present. Any account of what makes art contemporary needs to take seriously the role both absolute heterogeneity *and* contemporaneity play in philosophical, historical, and critical discourse.

In **chapter 2**, I further clarify my own account of contemporary art by characterising two key concepts. I first argue that contemporary art has a specific kind of target: 'crises.' These are points at which agents must grapple with the problems that bring them face to face with their historical condition. This concept helps us to further understand the nature of contemporaneity but also the kinds of responses it requires of those that become contemporaries. I argue that when agents attempt to respond to crises, they take on a particular kind of attitude: 'engagement.' This is an active, open-ended process of paying attention to, exploring, and intervening into a crisis. I apply this to art by developing an important distinction between two ways of understanding how engagement occurs – engagement *in* art, in which audiences attempt to grasp the *artist's* achievement of engagement, and engagement *through* art, which focuses on how the artwork facilitates *its audience's own* engagement. Finally, I turn to a residual worry for the view developed over the past two chapters: it makes it hard to see why some central exemplars of contemporary art are placed within the category. I will argue that my view is a *normative* account of contemporary art, saying what the category *should be* if it is to respond to problems it encounters. I claim that there are historical, philosophical, and critical boons that come from reassessing whether some works are best understood within this category.

Chapter 3 moves to investigate how engagement actually functions. I propose that a key way engagement takes place is via the improvement of an audience's cognitive standing on a crisis. To do so, I enter the debate surrounding aesthetic cognitivism in philosophy of art, which questions 1) whether artworks make a difference to our cognitive standing in the world, and 2) whether their cognitive value contributes to their value *as* art. In this chapter and the next, I take on the first question, investigating which epistemic concept best captures the particular goals of contemporary art and the particular means of inquiry it uses. A common way to do this is to argue that art leads us to knowledge, a position I call **K-cognitivism**. I analyse two versions of this view: narrow **K-cognitivism**, which attempts to show how art gives us propositional knowledge, and broad **K-cognitivism**, which claims that other kinds of non-propositional knowledge are characteristic of art's cognitive achievements. I will show how both positions illuminate some aspects of contemporary art, but that they are limited by their piecemeal approach to cognitive achievement. I argue that neither of these views can fully make sense of what it means to gain a cognitive standing on complex, broad, open-ended crises.

In **chapter 4**, I redress this limitation by urging that the cognitive achievements of contemporary art can best be articulated using the concept of *understanding*, moving from **K-cognitivism** to what I will call *U-cognitivism*. An agent who understands doesn't just know the facts but can show how they fit together to arrive at a more comprehensive cognitive standing on a domain and can wield this complex of commitments to advance to ever higher degrees of understanding. I claim that, in aiming at crises, contemporary art aims to facilitate its audience with a particular kind of understanding named 'objectual understanding' that aims to capture our holistic cognitive grasp of a subject matter or topic. But I also argue that contemporary art cannot give its audience such an understanding wholesale. Rather, it offers various kinds of open-ended considerations that audiences can incorporate with their prior commitments and employ in their own ongoing autonomous inquiry. The cognitive value of contemporary art thus arrives through co-production, rising and falling not only on the force of considerations offered by artworks, but also on the contributions of audiences. In pursuing this form of cognitive engagement, contemporary art attempts to help its audiences become participants in investigating the present.

Finally, in **chapter 5**, I turn to investigate how the preceding argument helps us to

understand what makes a work of contemporary art artistically valuable. I begin by endorsing a functionalist approach to artistic value, showing how it can account for the distinct features of contemporary art. I develop the claim that a work is good *as* contemporary art when, via its artistry, it manages to fulfil the distinct function of engaging its audience with a crisis of contemporaneity. I then turn to a set of problems that arise from my proposal that cognitive value arrives via co-production. When audiences are allowed leeway to make autonomous moves in inquiry, there is an increased risk that they may arrive at misunderstanding. When this happens, we have reason to ask who is responsible for this failure and how our answer to this question affects our appreciation of contemporary art. Pursuing these queries, I draw attention to important features of the norms surrounding the creation and evaluation of contemporary art. I first claim that our appreciation of contemporary art has to take into account the phenomenon of ‘artistic exceptionalism’ – the privilege that allows artists to exempt themselves from the norms that govern other domains of life, and the concurrent immunity from censure they enjoy. Rather than detracting from judgements of artistic value, I claim that artistic exceptionalism is often central to understanding what makes something valuable as *art*. However, I then observe that working out what normative exemptions and expectations are at play is often very difficult, leading to co-productions becoming highly demanding and risky. In experimental and innovative contemporary art, a high likelihood of audience misunderstanding is often coincident with the realisation of artistic value. I conclude by arguing that the negative effects of this can be mitigated by mediators like curators, conservators, critics, and gallery educators. Co-production involves not just artists and audiences, but a whole host of other practitioners who carefully attempt to reconcile contemporary art’s tendencies towards exceptionalism and co-production.

I conclude the thesis by giving an overview of where we have been, outlining and responding to some of the major objections that can be raised against the project as a whole, and pointing out some further directions of study for the philosophy of contemporary art.

Chapter 1: What Makes Art Contemporary?

1.1. Introduction

The main question of this thesis is ‘what makes art contemporary?’ In this chapter, I will advance several responses to this question. By looking at their successes and limitations, I will develop my own answer. I argue that contemporary art has two central features that, when grasped together, best illuminate the domain. First, contemporary art is art made within conditions in which artists are free to use any material, art form, genre, or style they please – what I will call conditions of ‘absolute heterogeneity.’ Second, contemporary art is art that reflects upon the wider historical period of contemporaneity. Philosophy has developed many tools to make sense of the first feature, but without a developed account of the second feature it is hard to fully say what makes any artwork contemporary. In this chapter and the next, I will develop such an account. In doing so, I aim to supplement the limitations of extant philosophical approaches by showing why understanding the relationship between art and contemporaneity is central to understanding and appreciating an artwork *as* contemporary art.

In §1.2., I begin by motivating my central question. Developing a provocation put forward by the art historian Hal Foster, I lay out the four aspects of contemporary art that pose the deepest puzzlement: its absolute heterogeneity, its uncertain historical determination, its uncertain conceptual definition, and its lack of clear criteria for critical judgement. I argue that any theory of contemporary art has to try and make sense of these features.

I then put forward four ways philosophers can respond to Foster’s challenge. In §1.3. I consider what I take to be the standard Anglo-American approach. The question of what makes art contemporary can be answered in piecemeal ways by showing how formally inventive works of recent art can be accommodated within our wider theories of art. I will show that this methodology leads philosophers to provide clear responses to the difficulties posed by contemporary art’s absolute heterogeneity, makes some progress on clarifying its historical determination, and outlines apt approaches for critical appreciation. However, I will argue that this approach can only produce limited responses to the main question. This is because these approaches aim to say what makes a contemporary artwork *art as such*, rather

than focus on what makes it contemporary. In §1.4. I look at an attempt to overcome this limitation provided by Arthur Danto and his philosophy of art history. Danto proposes that contemporary art is art made after ‘the end of art’, and provides a thorough account of when, how, and why art became contemporary. I argue that though Danto’s account is a serious advance on the standard Anglo-American approach, it is limited by its elision of contemporary art with the larger category of post-historical art.

To overcome the residual limitations of these two approaches, I argue that we need to better understand what purpose the term ‘contemporary’ is meant to serve. I provide an answer to this in two stages. First, in §1.5. I argue that, when applied to art, ‘contemporary’ names not an abstract temporal relation, but a particular kind of subjective interpretation of one’s present. Understanding the way contemporary art attempts to actively investigate the meaning of its own time helps us to build richer accounts of historical determination and to understand what separates contemporary and non-contemporary art. However, this view struggles to then explain why contemporary art is a recent phenomenon. In §1.6. I respond to this problem by distinguishing the condition of simply ‘being contemporary’ from the historical period of ‘contemporaneity.’ I put forward the historical hypothesis that recent art is made under distinct, historically emergent economic, political, cultural, technological, and ecological conditions that have emerged since the middle of the twentieth century. The interactions between these developments have created a marked intensification in the experience of ‘being contemporary.’ Contemporary art is the art that is affected by and responds to this period of intensification.

I conclude, in §1.7., by arguing that these different approaches help us to see that there are at least *two* key features that an artwork must exemplify in order to be understood, interpreted, and appreciated as contemporary art: its emergence within a context of absolute heterogeneity and its reflection upon its distinct historical condition. My conclusion is irenic, proposing that the insights of the different approaches I consider here must be brought together in order to produce the most illuminating understanding of the category.

1.2. The Puzzle of Contemporary Art

In 2009, the art historian Hal Foster sent out a questionnaire to academics, curators, and art practitioners. Its purpose was to sound out opinions on the term ‘contemporary art.’ By the

early 2000s, this had become the dominant, categorising term for recently produced art, especially in the gallery-based artworld.⁷ However, when scrutinised, Foster claims that the term raises many puzzles:

The category of ‘contemporary art’ is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgement. Such paradigms as ‘the neo-avant-garde’ and ‘postmodernism,’ which once oriented some art and theory, have run into the sand, and, arguably, no models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force have risen in their stead. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, ‘contemporary art’ has become an institutional object in its own right: in the academic world there are professorships and programs, and in the museum world departments and institutions, all devoted to the subject, and most tend to treat it as apart not only from prewar practice but from most postwar practice as well. (Foster, 2009: 3)

The main puzzle that emerges is that though institutions coordinate their activities of displaying, appreciating, and studying around the category of contemporary art, it is unclear exactly what the term is meant to pick out. Though Foster doesn’t provide an answer to the puzzle he raises, the way he frames the problem is instructive. He delimits the space of inquiry by identifying four key features of contemporary art that require explanation: its heterogeneity, its historical determination, its conceptual definition, and its criteria for critical judgement. I will call the task of providing such a complete explanation ‘Foster’s challenge.’

Contemporary art’s heterogeneity – or what I will call its *absolute* heterogeneity, insofar as it has no limits – can be understood in two senses. First, it can be understood to track the fact that art today can be made in any form, medium, genre, or style. Looking at the things that are called contemporary art, one cannot help but be struck by the fact that it appears that there are now no limits on what artists can use to make their work. Contemporary artists bring everyday objects into the gallery and call them art, experiment with the novel

⁷ The term ‘gallery-based’ is imperfect. Much of the art that goes under the label of contemporary art takes place entirely outside of the gallery (even if it often still financially supported by galleries). There is no need to place too much weight on this term. It is simply meant to separate the kind of art I will focus on from other fields of art making that are more focussed on one of the many media that contemporary art incorporates. One interesting question this produces is why the term ‘contemporary’ is more or less common in other domains of art. For instance, it is rare to speak of ‘contemporary cinema’ or ‘contemporary video games’, whilst it is common to speak of ‘contemporary dance’ or ‘contemporary music.’ I will not pursue this question here, though I think my views provide some ways to go about answering this.

possibilities brought by the latest technologies (for instance, at the time of writing, virtual reality or AI-produced art), and depart the gallery entirely to make artworks that form social networks or contribute to political causes. Yet contemporary artists also persist with using traditional materials in traditional styles, many artists still producing representational oil paintings, life-like marble sculptures, intricate tapestries, black-and-white analogue photography, and much more. Contemporary art is not a label that is just applied to the most formally inventive or experimental art. Moreover, it seems that contemporary artists can now address any topic they please, from universal concerns about death and love, to highly personal concerns related to the artist's own particular life circumstances and biography, to topical investigations of political events. It thus does not seem that contemporary art tracks the emergence of a single, unified new medium, art form, genre, or style.

Absolute heterogeneity can also be understood in terms of the diversity of participants in the contemporary artworld. One key development that many of Foster's respondents pick up on is that contemporary art appears to be not just a phenomenon local to specific parts of the world, but has become global.⁸ This has been crystallised in a form of exhibition often taken to be exclusive to contemporary art: the biennial.⁹ These large-scale biannual exhibitions held in major cities across the world feature global casts of artists and commentators, bringing together people with heterogenous cultural outlooks and value systems under the unifying umbrella of 'contemporary art'. Audiences in one part of the world have to grapple with art that brings with it unfamiliar local concerns or unfamiliar formal and stylistic approaches to art making from another part of the world.

Trying to keep such boundless variety under one conceptual umbrella seems doomed to failure. If contemporary art can be made from anything, about anything, by anyone from any cultural background then it seems natural that we wouldn't be able to say what makes it distinct. But this confusion is compounded by the second feature of contemporary art that must be explained: contemporary art appears to both mark something 'new' yet evades clear 'historical determination.' Here, historical determination could mean several things. First, it could simply mean that it is hard to say exactly when art began being contemporary. As Foster points out, even in 2009 the category was not actually so new. Though, by the 1990s,

⁸ For reflection upon this point, see also Demos (2009) and Enwezor's (2009) responses to Foster. For histories of the global expansion of contemporary art see Harris (2017), Philipsen (2010), and Stallabrass (2020: 26-62).

⁹ For a history of the emergence of the biennial as an exhibition form, see Vogel (2010).

‘contemporary art’ became a globally recognised name for recently produced gallery-based art, the term does not only pick out art produced since then. Rather, it has the force of retrospectively bringing work produced before this date into its remit. To tell the story of contemporary art, art historical studies reach back to different dates, for instance 1989 (Dumbadze and Hudson, 2013; Stallabrass, 2020), the 1980s (Kalb, 2013; Godfrey, 2020), 1964 (Danto, 1997), some indeterminate time in the sixties (Osborne, 2013; Tomii, 2016; Irvin, 2022), or even all the way back to 1945 (Hopkins, 2000; Jones, 2006; Smith, 2011; Siegel, 2011). Art historian Claire Bishop points out that this kind of historical determination is further complicated by contemporary art’s global nature:

In China, contemporary art tends to be dated from the late 1970s (the official end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the democracy movement); in India, from the 1990s onwards; in Latin America, there is no real division of the modern and the contemporary In Africa, contemporary art dates variously from the end of colonialism (the late 1950s/1960s in Anglophone and Francophone countries; the 1970s in the case of former Portuguese colonies), or as late as the 1990s. (Bishop, 2013)

To add even more complication, there are interesting cases of the term ‘contemporary’ being used in art discourse before the middle of the twentieth century (Meyer, 2016; Smith, 2019: 255-58). As with many other periodising terms in art history, there is no clear consensus on the start date, but instead a plurality of periodisations with a plurality of supporting justifications.¹⁰ In itself, this is not unusual in art history. But differing periodisations can quickly create disagreement and conflict over what exactly makes art contemporary. For instance, taking up one periodisation may allow one to claim that the emergence of minimalism marks an important first chapter in the history contemporary art, whilst taking up another may lead one to see minimalism as the last gasp of modernism in art.

But historical determination can be understood in another way. Note that Foster compares contemporary art to other categories like ‘the neo-avant garde’, ‘pre-war’, ‘post-war’, ‘post-modern’, and ‘modern.’ When used in art historical and art critical discourse, these terms do more than just date art. They serve to offer what I will call ‘rich’ historical determination.

¹⁰ One could compare this to the various periodisations of the 18th century used in the humanities, some preferring to look at the ‘short 18th century’, that usually ranges from c.1715-1789, others preferring to look at the ‘long 18th century’, ranging from c.1688-1815.

Sometimes these terms are used to place artworks within certain narratives internal to the development of art. For example, when characterising modernism in art, attention is drawn to the increased prevalence of formal experimentation, especially with reference to various avant-garde movements, or the sudden rise of concerted efforts to discover the true essence of particular media (Greenberg, 1982). But these terms are also used to coordinate our understanding of artworks with aspects of the wider context in which they were produced. In characterising modern art, for example, one can also draw attention to the way it attempts to respond to various aspects of the more general idea of modernity as a political, economic, philosophical, or wider cultural phenomenon. One may understand the modernity of a work of art by drawing attention to the way it responds to changes in technology (e.g. the advent of new forms of transport, new technologies like photography and cinema, world-spanning communication networks, mechanised warfare), politics (e.g. the arrival of novel political ideologies like Communism and Fascism, the spread and decline of colonial power, expanded suffrage), or other aspects of culture (e.g. the rise of popular culture, changes to gender roles, the expansion of capitalist schemes of value into everyday life).

To speak of an artwork as modern or postmodern or even post-war is thus to try to grasp art's place within certain artistic and world-historical developments, and see how these bear on our interpretation and appreciation of the related artworks.¹¹ In many cases, understanding these wider events and processes will be necessary to understanding why an artist has chosen to use certain forms, genres, or styles, and attending to these choices will help to understand the exact way they are responding to the world around them. Assuming that these terms have some stable usage in art discourse, and assuming that principled distinctions can be made between terms like modernity and postmodernity, Foster's claim appears to be that much art today cannot be understood using these existing rich historical determinations. It responds to genuinely different world-historical concerns and has distinct conceptions of art, but no stable, rich historical determination of contemporary art has come to prominence to provide a full explanation of these differences.

The third puzzling feature of contemporary art Foster identifies is its apparent lack of conceptual definition. The concept of contemporary art seems to be used to pick out a distinct category of artworks and related artworld practices, but it is hard to make out exactly what

¹¹ For a similar, canonical approaches postmodernity, see Lyotard (1984) and Jameson (1991).

the concept's intension or extension might be. As Foster observes, there just don't seem to be very many attempts to analyse the concept. Given contemporary art's absolute heterogeneity and lack of clear historical determination it seems likely that it will be hard to clearly define what can and can't be included in the category.

Moreover, many commentators – especially those in philosophy – have found that many works of contemporary art also pose difficulties for our stable understanding of other art concepts. For instance, if contemporary artists can make anything art, then how do we separate artworks from mere things? If artworks increasingly involve audiences as active participants in their work – sometimes allowing them to interact with it, other times allowing them to have a share in actually creating it – how does this affect our understanding of artistic intention, meaning making, or the nature of aesthetic experience? If contemporary artworks often overlap with political activity or scientific research, how are we supposed to appreciate their distinct artistic value? Contemporary art raises these questions, but clear answers are not always forthcoming. The domain is not just hard to define in and of itself, but also resists easy application of other concepts that might help to illuminate it.

The fourth and final puzzle is that contemporary art appears to lack no clear criteria for critical judgement. When artworks use completely different materials, aim at completely different subject matter, and come from completely different cultural backgrounds it can be hard to work out what critical framework might be able to comparatively evaluate works across this variety. Whilst we might well be able to evaluate these works on a case-by-case basis, it is hard to say what makes them distinctly good or bad *as contemporary art*. For this reason, many detractors feel art has slipped into a phase not only of conceptual relativism, but also relativism about artistic value.

But the difficulties surrounding the critical function of the term 'contemporary art' goes further than this. Even though any art recently produced can become contemporary art, one additional puzzle is that not all art produced recently is contemporary art. In fact, it would seem that only a tiny fraction of the art produced globally since the middle of the twentieth century is rightly put within the category. This suggests that there are some critical criteria that guides this clear practice of selection and rejection. Works are often understood within larger categories in order to draw attention to, compare, and evaluate their critically

significant features.¹² However, for the detractor, when it comes to the category of contemporary art it is unclear what the underlying reasoning behind these choices might be. Absent any clear criteria that guides these selections and contemporary art risks looking to be an arbitrarily exclusive category.

Foster's statement is intended as a provocation and calls for response. Given the persistent puzzlement contemporary art causes, one could simply hold that the challenge Foster raises can't really be met. Contemporary art is really just a placeholder term, loosely pointing to heterogeneous art recently produced, but nothing more. It is a genuinely vague concept, and this is all it should be. We shouldn't try to load it with the historical, conceptual, and critical weight that Foster thinks it is meant to carry, since it doesn't need this to serve its function of pointing us in an imprecise, general direction of inquiry. I take it that this 'placeholder view' is the general position within much of the contemporary artworld and wider culture. But I think that we cannot be so blithe. Without answers to Foster's challenge, contemporary art looks to be a wholly mysterious practice, as full of hot air as its detractors think. We risk misunderstanding much interesting, challenging recent art if we subject it to such historical, conceptual, and critical laxity. My goal is to pursue a vindictory response that can show that the puzzles, paradoxes, and confusions can be overcome.¹³ In fact, Foster is correct to say that contemporary art only "seems" to float free. I will attempt to show that it is a much more down-to-earth concept than it first appears. To do so, I will attempt to show how philosophy can help to explicate contemporary art's absolute heterogeneity, historical determination, conceptual definition, and criteria for critical judgement.

1.3. Contemporary Art and Art as Such

Philosophy, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, has provided one clear strategy to study contemporary art. Experimental, formally innovative works of recent art have long been held up as problem-cases for various philosophical theories of art.¹⁴ By working out how

¹² For a defence of this view of art criticism see Carroll (2009).

¹³ This is not the only route one could take. There are several thinkers who see contemporary art as a conceptually and politically bankrupt category that is to be overcome by producing *better* concepts to understand recent and near-future art. See Stallabrass (2020: 6-25); Malik (2013); Gillick (2016).

¹⁴ Consideration of provocative works of contemporary art have led to novel theories of the definition of art (Danto, 1964, 1981; Lopes, 2014) and the ontology of artworks (Davies, 2004; Irvin, 2005, 2022; Thomasson, 2010; Dodd, 2012; Mag Uidhir, 2013). Other recent work in this tradition has taken on further issues in the way contemporary art interacts with philosophical theories of art interpretation (Maes, 2010; Gover, 2012; Lorenzini, 2019), the legal status of artworks (Gover, 2018; Cantalamessa, 2020), and art education (Newall,

to incorporate these problem-cases into new or revised theories, philosophers have shown that many of the supposed problems and incoherencies of contemporary art can be diffused. Indeed, philosophers Sherri Irvin and Julian Dodd enthusiastically propose that, in doing so, “contemporary art has expanded the philosophical horizons of [Anglo-American] philosophers of art, enabling them to see that hitherto uncharted theoretical moves are possible.” (Irvin and Dodd, 2017: 375)

However, though these approaches have had many successes, I claim that they also face serious limitations. The reason for this is that these approaches are primarily interested in showing how contemporary art provides a wealth of problem cases for our theories of art *as such*. The question of what makes art *contemporary* is not a central concern. This is not to say that the approaches considered here do not provide some useful insights into how we might answer this question. But these insights tend to be incidental to their main philosophical projects. As we will see, this means that these approaches tend to produce limited and uneven responses to Foster’s challenge.

To see the successes and limitations of this approach, take the example of Sherri Irvin, who develops a novel approach to the ontology of art through close analysis of works of contemporary art (Irvin, 2005; 2021). Irvin observes that, as a result of increasing heterogeneity, contemporary art now teems with artworks that do not seem to just be unique, physical objects. Compare two pieces: Rembrandt’s *Half-length Figure of Saskia in a Red Hat* (1642) (Fig. 6.) and Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ “*Untitled*” (*For Ross in L.A.*) (1991) (Fig. 7.). Both works have thematic affinities, acting as memorials for lost lovers. Rembrandt’s work depicts his first wife and regular model Saskia van Uylenburgh in the last year of her life. The title of Gonzalez-Torres’s work refers to his lover, Ross Laycock, who died from complications due to AIDS. Yet in appearance they could not be more different. Rembrandt’s work is an oil painting displayed following all the usual display conventions for paintings, hung on a wall at eye-height with its painted surface facing the viewer. Gonzalez-Torres’s work is constituted by a pile of candies in colourful wrappers placed in the corner of the gallery. The audience are free to take individual candies home with them, and the candies are periodically replenished

2019). Novel inquiries are also mounted into specific genres that are often taken to be distinct to contemporary art, such as conceptual art (Goldie and Schellekens, 2010), installation and site-specific art (Caldarola, 2021), digital art (Lopes, 2010), and socially engaged art (Gaiger, 2009; Simoniti, 2018; Caldarola, 2019). Finally, there are many more studies devoted to the philosophical issues raised by works of specific contemporary artists (Costello, 2018; 2020).

back to a weight of 175 pounds – Laycock’s ideal body weight – at intervals at the discretion of the exhibiting institution.

Irvin argues that the material and expressive differences between these works – as well as the different ways art institutions present, conserve and display them – can be explained by understanding the differing conditions for the artworks to come into being, persist through time, and be subjected to destruction. For Gonzalez-Torres’s work, each institution procures its own candies to display the work. This means that though the candies are integral to the piece, there is no one set of candies that constitutes the artwork. If all the candies used in a particular display were destroyed, the artwork would not also be destroyed. By contrast, there is only one unique set of marks on a canvas that constitutes *Saskia*. To display that work, only the original, unique material object will suffice. When encountering Gonzalez-Torres’s work the audience can interact with the piece and can even remove parts of it. To display the work correctly, the exhibiting institution has to ensure that this is possible, whilst also ensuring that the pile of candies is not completely depleted. The artwork can thus admit changes to the physical objects that are displayed without the work being destroyed. By contrast, Rembrandt’s work cannot admit such interactions. If an audience were to remove a section of the canvas or make their own additions in black marker, we would be alarmed and see this as destroying the artwork, sending it off for urgent restoration work.

It seems relatively clear what *Saskia* is, ontologically speaking. It is a unique, mid-sized material thing. But what then is *Untitled* and the many similar contemporary works in which there is a loosening of the relationship between the materials that constitute a display of the work and the emergence, persistence, and destruction conditions of the work?¹⁵ Irvin proposes that the ontology of works of contemporary art like this is determined by what she calls the ‘artist’s sanctions’: the sets of rules that the artist sets down for how the work must be presented, how the audience can interact with it, and how an institution is to conserve it. It is the creation of a set of publicly available custom sanctions produced by the artist that governs how the work can come into being, how it can persist through time, and how the work can be destroyed or otherwise mishandled.

¹⁵ For further examples, see Buskirk (2003).

To show this, Irvin asks the reader to imagine three different hypothetical artworks. The first she calls ‘static pile’, in which an artist delivers a single 175-pound pile of candies to a museum, instructing that the pile is not to be touched by the audience or altered by the staff whilst it is on display. In this case, the artwork would be somewhat similar to *Saskia* insofar as it would be constituted by a specific set of material things. The second Irvin calls ‘vanishing pile’, in which an artist delivers an identical pile of candies but allows the audience to interact with it. However, the artist also stipulates that the pile must *not* be replenished once all the candies are taken. Finally, Irvin gives us a third case called ‘stingy curator’ in which the rules for display of the artwork are exactly as Gonzalez-Torres actually intended, but a curator decides to not allow the audience to interact with the work. Irvin argues that though the three imaginary displays may be constituted from the same materials and, at some points, may be perceptually indistinguishable from the real *Untitled*, none of these imagined cases are identical to it and, as such, none count as displays of the real work. The reason for this is that the first two cases have completely different rules for display, conservation, and audience participation from the real work. The last case has the same rules, but they have not been followed correctly, leading to a different work being displayed. It is only by attending to the differences in artist’s sanctions that we can appreciate the distinctions between these imagined cases and their difference from the actual artwork.

Irvin’s innovative, sanction-based ontology of art has important repercussions. She argues that incorrectly following an artists’ sanctions also has serious costs for our interpretive and appreciative responses to contemporary art. When correctly displayed, *Untitled* is a memorial that continually decays as audiences interact with it, yet also reappears as the gallery replaces lost candies. By being allowed to interact with the work, audiences can take pleasure in both the visual and gustatory properties of the work. This serves to subvert the social distance that many people would take from those suffering with AIDS in the United States in the late eighties and early nineties. However, if the pile cannot be touched, as is the case in ‘static pile’, the work would still act as a playful memorial, but one that coldly places Laycock at a distance from the viewer. If the pile can be depleted, as is the case in ‘vanishing pile’, the work becomes about the finiteness of things, rather than inexhaustible generosity. If a curator chooses to not follow the artist’s instructions, as in the case of ‘stingy curator’, they risk not being a good custodian of the work’s meaning and significance, misleading the audience in their appreciation of the work. In contemporary art, grasping the artist’s sanctions is thus crucial to correctly forming critical responses to the work.

Let us step back and appreciate the general shape of Irvin's approach to the philosophical study of contemporary art. Her theory is directly responsive to puzzles posed by contemporary art's absolute heterogeneity. Attending to the increasing diversification of medium and form in recent art gives way to a novel philosophical theory – a sanction-based ontology of art.¹⁶ Contemporary art helps us to appreciate the metaphysics of art in a clearer light. In turn, Irvin's ontological theory helps to give a stable framework for approaching works made in all manner of materials, forms, genres, and styles. It helps us to grasp just what it is that constitutes the work, what our attention should and should not be drawn to, and why it is that contemporary art institutions engage in certain practices of exhibition-making and conservation. Moreover, her ontological argument also responds to worries about the critical judgement of contemporary art. Irvin shows how paying attention to artist's sanctions helps audiences to find apt ways to interpret and appreciate heterogenous artworks. It is not just the manipulation of materials but also the construction of rules that expresses the artist's thematic or emotive intent.

However, it not clear that Irvin's project can then make further steps towards gathering these observations together into a theory of contemporary art that fully answers Foster's challenge. Though she has focussed on recently produced metaphysically provocative artworks, Irvin explicitly states that she is happy to simply allow 'contemporary art' to be a placeholder term for formally challenging art produced since the sixties (Irvin, 2022: 7). Irvin intentionally directs the scope of her project away from any concerted attempt to say what makes art contemporary. Indeed, she argues that a sanction-based ontology can actually be applied to art of many other historical periods. *Saskia* is also bound by rules – display the painting with the painted surface facing the viewer, appreciate only what is within the bounds of the canvas, do not allow audiences to add their own marks to the canvas, etc. Following these rules affects how we interpret and appreciate the work and explains why art institutions engage in specific practices of display and conservation. A major outcome of Irvin's approach is that she has not just developed an ontology of contemporary art, but an approach to the ontology of art *as such*. On Irvin's account, contemporary art can help to better explain the metaphysics of art made at any time.

¹⁶ For comparison of this view to other leading ontologies of art, see Irvin (2008).

Irvin's account does not strive to give any conceptual definition of contemporary art. Nor does it provide any full account of its historical determination. This is not to say that Irvin smooths out any sense of what might distinguish contemporary art from art of the past. The difference between contemporary art and prior art traditions turns on a shift from rules being relatively stable conventions that could be tacitly understood by artworld participants with little effort to a situation in which artists are more likely to mint new, custom rules rather than accept conventions. Moreover, the contemporary artworld has developed novel institutional structures and critical outlooks that have become necessary to accommodate the absolute heterogeneity that arises from the diversity of sanctions artists now produce. Irvin's account can thus explain something about contemporary art's historical determination – it is the art that is produced at whatever point in history custom sanctions overtook conventional sanctions. But Irvin is also very clear that she will make no attempt to say when this happened or why it happened. As such, rich historical determination is intentionally placed outside the scope of the project. A change is marked, but not explained.

Irvin's account certainly helps to illuminate part of Foster challenge. And since Irvin is explicit about the scope of her project, her lack of interest in pursuing a full theory of contemporary art is no mark against her. She provides a sample of the standard Anglo-American approach to contemporary art, showing how reflection upon challenging works associated with the category can contribute to our philosophical accounts of art *as such*.¹⁷ But ultimately, such accounts demur on the question of what makes art contemporary. To fully answer Foster's challenge, we need a different approach.

1.4. Post-historical Art

Arthur Danto was one of (if not *the*) first philosophers to seriously scrutinise contemporary art as a distinctly philosophically interesting phenomenon. His 1964 article 'The Artworld' inaugurates the project of using the provocations of contemporary art to arrive at a philosophical theory of art *as such*. However, unlike many Anglo-American philosophers, Danto also developed a parallel philosophy of art history. In doing so, he directly takes on the question of what makes art contemporary. I will focus here on this part of Danto's philosophical project and show how he uses this to provide a route for the philosopher to link

¹⁷ To further appreciate, see Irvin and Dodd's (2017) survey article of recent approaches to philosophy of contemporary art, in which every theory considered follows a similar methodology.

theories of art *as such* to theories of contemporary art by incorporating them into richer accounts of art's historical determination. However, I will argue that though his account illuminating, it is limited by Danto's elision of contemporary art and what he calls post-historical art. I claim that these are really two different categories of recent art. Seeing the ways this elision limits Danto's ability to fully answer Foster's challenge helps to ramify my own path forward.

Danto's project of developing a philosophical definition of art arises directly out of his encounters with Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964), a work constituted by a series of plywood boxes, silk-screened to look like boxes of Brillo Pads (Fig. 8.). This artwork poses a difficult question: how does Warhol's artwork differ from the mere thing with which it is perceptually indistinguishable? Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) answers this by developing an essentialist philosophical theory of art that names the conditions for arthood for all cases in the present, the past, and even the future. The theory provided in this work helps to understand further aspects of absolute heterogeneity, especially when it expands so far as to admit objects indiscernible from non-art objects. Danto (2002) even deployed this theory to develop an account of the practice of art criticism. In this way, Danto's theory of art *as such* can be turned to answer parts of Foster's challenge. However, we saw above that such a methodology risks leaving other parts of the challenge unanswered. It is Danto's accompanying philosophy of art history that directly responds to this deficit by grappling with the question of when and why it became apt to call art contemporary.

Though Danto is an essentialist about the intension of the concept art, he is also a historicist about its extension. He proposes that only when it was possible to question what separated an artwork from a perceptually indiscernible mere thing could the question 'what is art?' finally be posed in the proper philosophical form.¹⁸ However, Danto holds that this question could only arise in this form in 1964. Prior to *Brillo Boxes* it could not be posed. As part of his definition of art, Danto holds that every work of art requires a set of background art theories in order to exist. It was only in 1964 that the artworld had developed a discourse of reasons that allowed it to appreciate that there was a distinction between art and indiscernibles to be investigated: "it came as a shock to see it [*Brillo Boxes*] in an art gallery, while at the same time

¹⁸ For development of Danto's metaphilosophical view that all philosophical problems find their proper form in questions about indiscernibles – or as he states it in his more general philosophy 'appearances taken for reality' – see Danto (1989).

it was clear that [by 1964] there was nothing in the prevailing conception of art to rule it out.” (Danto, 1998: 40) Prior to this date, various theories of art that were developed could not countenance this question, and *Brillo Boxes* could be more easily ruled out.

But Danto argues that the history of art is not just a series of different art theories posed at different times, but rather a series of developmental narratives.¹⁹ The mimetic theory of art, a mainstay of Western art theory from the Greeks until well into the early twentieth century, determined the goal of art to be verisimilitude. The history of art was understood as a series of moves towards this goal. However, the appearance of photography and film which could create exact mimetic reproductions of reality put a sudden end to this narrative. At this point, Danto proposes that modernist artists (or at least the kind of modernist studied by Clement Greenberg) took up a different goal. Rather than attempt to represent the world, they turned towards attempting to use art to arrive at an understanding of art itself. For example, abstract expressionist modernist painters turned to trying to use non-figurative painting to expose the essential nature of the flat surface.

This developmental view leads Danto to claim that the arrival of *Brillo Boxes* marked the end of art. This claim has to be carefully unpacked. What Danto is *not* saying is that no more art can be made after 1964. Nor is he saying that artists won't experiment with new technologies, invent new styles, or deal with new themes that Danto himself couldn't even imagine. Rather, the claim is that after this point art can no longer serve as vehicle to theorise about art. This task transfers to philosophers, who can finally ask the question 'what is art' in its proper, final form. The essentialist philosophical definition of art that Danto develops in response to the question of indiscernibles is a theory to which he thinks no future nor past counterexamples can be produced.²⁰ With the arrival of *Brillo Boxes* it is finally possible to give a theory of art *as such*.

It is this account of art history that leads Danto directly to contemporary art. In his 1995 Mellon lectures, Danto declares that the term 'contemporary art' has come to name the art that is made in this new, post-historical condition. The emergence of indiscernibles opens the

¹⁹ For a similar approach, studying the narrative of art history in terms of the life cycles of specific styles, see Gilmore (2000). For the most part, this study refrains from taking a stance on the history of art *as such*, leading to more fine-grained analyses of the many overlapping narratives of individuals and groups active within a single artworld.

²⁰ For several lines of objection to this conclusion, see Carroll (2021: 57-60).

gates to the absolute heterogeneity of art produced since 1964. Contemporary artists are the artists who are finally allowed to work with a pluralistic freedom that their forebears could not have imagined: “As Marx might say, you can be an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, a minimal minimalist in the evening. Or you can cut out paper dolls or do what you damned please.” (Danto, 1997: 114) Indeed, Danto’s essentialist art theory and historicist theory of the art history help to explain the puzzling emergence not only of wildly new experiments with form, medium, genre, and style, but also the re-emergence of all manner of historical styles in contemporary art. Resting assured in the embrace of a final theory of art, artists can take up any style they like from the history of art without fear of repercussions of making something that is ‘not art.’ Absolute heterogeneity is not a state of anxiety and confusion, but a state of peace and conceptual clarity.

To further understand this optimism, Danto draws another contrast between contemporary and modern art. He argues that modernism – understood in its avant-garde varieties, but also in the senses developed by Greenberg – is the frenzied, penultimate chapter in the narrative of theorising art. Modernism is filled with wild innovations that tested art theories, and a matching wild production of theories of art that attempted to keep up with these innovations (Danto dubs modernism the ‘Age of Manifestos’). However, Danto holds that these theories of art were not pluralist, but rather increasingly exclusive. They attempted to assert that *only* a small set of innovative works truly fulfilled the project of realising the nature of art. These theories ended up being unsustainably narrow, faltering as soon as a new artistic experiment emerged. The shift to contemporary art is the shift from this anxious, competitive, increasingly exclusive style of theorising art towards a peaceful pluralism that properly grasps the absolutely heterogeneous nature of art *as such*.

If Danto’s theory of art provides an explanation of art’s absolute heterogeneity and the critical approach that is apt deal with such variety, then his philosophy of art history provides the rich historical determination and a clear conceptual definition of contemporary art that is missing in most standard Anglo-American approaches. From Danto, we get a clear account of why contemporary art emerged, and a principled distinction between contemporary art and modern art.²¹ He even goes so far as to assert a specific time and place that marks the advent

²¹ Danto also has a distinct, if only briefly articulated, account of the difference between contemporary and postmodern art – the latter being only a specific style, whilst the former is the sum of all possible styles – Danto (1997: 11-12).

of the contemporary period – April 1964, East 74th Street, New York. Foster’s challenge looks to be fully answered by the realisation that contemporary art is post-historical art.

Even several decades after Danto first forwarded his account of the end of art, there seems to be something correct about the particularly relaxed attitude to absolute heterogeneity found within the contemporary artworld. There is now little controversy in artists making art that looks exactly like everyday things, or even that looks like nothing at all. Artists are encouraged to bring in new materials, styles, and concerns, but are also allowed to reach back into art history. Even though there are still philosophical attempts to produce theories of art that are distinct from Danto’s, it seems that making principled limitations to the pluralism of absolute heterogeneity is extremely low on the agenda.

However, even if this is so there are many objections that can be raised against Danto’s philosophy of art history. Here, I wish to raise only a very specific line of critique. Granting Danto his main thesis concerning the end of art, my worry is that contemporary art is not identical to what Danto calls post-historical art. Eliding these two terms limits Danto’s ability to respond to one difficult part of Foster’s challenge: it makes it hard to understand why only a *small selection* of art made since 1964 seems to be called contemporary art. For Danto, it would appear that anything that is produced today within artworlds that can pose the question of indiscernibles should fall within the category of contemporary art and should have a right to be displayed under this label. On Danto’s view, amateur Sunday painters doing chocolate-box landscape paintings could be held to be making contemporary art, provided that the contemporary artworld supplies reasons to think the work is art. But, looking at the contemporary artworld, it doesn’t seem the category is quite as accommodating as this. It appears that only *some* works are selected from the mass of post-historical art to participate in the more limited category of contemporary art.

One response Danto could offer is that his theory actually serves as a critique of the exclusivity of mainstream contemporary art. The institutions of contemporary art work in bad faith, not fully taking on board the true pluralism that is required to understand art *as such* after 1964. However, I think this criticism incorrectly identifies the criteria the contemporary artworld use for selection. Looking at the works that are called contemporary art, there is no evidence that absolute heterogeneity is being curtailed. Works made by Sunday painters could well become contemporary art and happily stand alongside the most experimental

works. But these works do not become contemporary art simply because the artworld now accepts the right, post-historical theory of how these works are all art *as such*. Whatever the criteria might be for including works in the limited category of contemporary art, it seems to have little to do with the theory of art *as such* the contemporary artworld endorses. We can thus allow Danto the claim that all recent art can plausibly be post-historical art, but also hold that only a small subsection of post-historical art is also contemporary art. Explaining what distinguishes the latter category is a task that escapes Danto's project.

Whilst it is a great triumph of Danto's view that he integrates deep reflection upon the nature of history into his philosophy of art, I think his particular way of understanding the historical determination of contemporary art contributes to the limitations of his approach. Danto's story of the emergence of contemporary art is tied only to changes in the theory of art. But there are many other ways of understanding the development of contemporary art that can appeal to other explanations. A leading alternative is to chart how art responds to shifts in the wider world. Danto makes little reference to the fact that many of the modernist projects of the historical avant-garde were also political projects. Changing the form of art optimistically went hand-in-hand with actually changing society in the direction of the artists' chosen ideology. Looking beyond developments in art theory provides an alternative route to explaining what makes something contemporary art, and to explaining shifts in art making since 1964. For instance, philosopher Juliane Rebentisch agrees with Danto that some of the shifts from modernism to contemporary art are explained by reference to internal changes to the notion of art *as such*. But she then argues that many of these shifts must also be explained by some art's critical relation with its political, economic, and wider cultural context. For instance, she claims that innovations in art of the mid-twentieth century were often intended to be continuous with broader conceptions of social and political progress (Rebentisch, 2015: 230-35). Likewise, she recommends that changes in art after 1989 can be understood in light of crises of globalisation and the maturation of various postcolonial political and cultural projects, artists attempting to shape their work to adequately respond to their wider geopolitical circumstances (235-36). I will return to further elaboration of these ideas in §1.6.. However, we can see that by providing this alternative approach to rich historical determination, Rebentisch opens the possibility that even if we might accept we have reached some end in theorising art *as such*, it does not appear that we have reached the end of world

history.²² Therefore, at best Danto has only told us part of the story of contemporary art's historical determination. Whilst his view could tell us why artists feel a lack of anxiety about experimenting with any medium, form, genre, or style they like, there still seems to be much anxiety about how art is implicated within and responds to the political, social, economic, and ecological turmoil that has arisen since 1964.

Like Irvin, Danto helps to illuminate many aspects of contemporary art. However, his project cannot fully answer Foster's challenge. Danto's concept of post-historical art sets the scope of his theory too wide to explain contemporary art's more local limits. The standard Anglo-American approach, inaugurated by Danto and elaborated upon by philosophers like Irvin, thus helps primarily to explain puzzles of absolute heterogeneity and show how our wider philosophical theories can be brought to bear on formally inventive art. I take it that these approaches help to adequately answer these aspects of Foster's challenge. But we still have some way to go to fully understand contemporary art's historical determination, conceptual definition, and criteria for critical judgement. To further explore these aspects of Foster's challenge, a different approach is still required.

1.5. Being Contemporary

The deficits of the philosophical approaches considered in the last two sections primarily arose from focussing on the question of what makes a contemporary artwork art *as such*. But we have not yet actually inquired into what the word 'contemporary' means. I propose that getting clear on how this term can be understood in isolation can provide new routes to answer the remaining parts of Foster's challenge.

One way to do this is to look to the everyday meaning of the word. In standard usage, when we say that something is contemporary, we mean that it exists at the same time as some other thing. However, on its own, this tells us very little about what the term means when applied to art. All art, past, present, and future, is experientially contemporary to the person that is experiencing it, regardless of the historical distance between the creation of the artwork and

²² Danto's work is contemporaneous with Francis Fukuyama's (1992) claims that, with the end of the Cold War history has ended, with the liberal state being the only viable mode of governance. Unfortunately, it seems Fukuyama's claims have become more unsustainable than Danto's as liberal states have fallen into crises of their own.

the point at which it is experienced. Were one to instead hold that art is only truly contemporary to those that experience it when it first appears in the world, we still run into the problem that this means that all art is contemporary art, since all art has a first audience. In both cases, simply applying the standard meaning makes the category far too broad.

What I propose is that, at first pass, ‘contemporary’ is better understood not simply as a term that marks a temporal relation between two or more things, but rather as a term that expresses a particular way that humans interpret the present. Contemporary art is the art that expresses such attempts to understand the current moment. However, this term doesn’t just attempt to capture mere first-person temporal experience. Rather, when applied to art, it captures an agent’s exploration of what I will call the ‘historical meaning of the present.’ Contemporary art is interested in exploring the ways conceptions of the present are continuous or discontinuous with our conceptions of the past and our visions for the future. I claim that focussing on this sense of the term ‘contemporary’ gives us the first step towards an alternative account of what makes art contemporary.

I develop my proposal from an observation made by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In his short essay ‘What is the Contemporary?’, Agamben attempts to unfold the implications of Roland Barthes’ gloss on Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*: “The contemporary is untimely.” (quoted in Agamben, 2009: 40) Barthes and Nietzsche use the term ‘contemporary’ to describe a certain kind of subject position that a person can occupy. However, it is the idea that this requires one to be ‘untimely’ that interests Agamben. He elaborates this in the following way:

Those who are contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. ... But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (40)

‘The contemporary’ is thus a particular kind of person who experiences time in a way that others who live at the same time as them do not. Contemporaries are marked by their discomfort in their own time, feeling out of step with the comfortable way others find their place in the present. Yet because of this they are at an epistemological advantage to non-contemporaries. For the contemporary, the nature of their own time is felt to be in some sense

puzzling, making it both worthy of attention and making it a topic for inquiry. For the non-contemporary, the nature of the present is simply taken for granted.

Central to this proposal is the idea that one can feel as if one does or does not “belong” to one’s “own time.” Working out what it means to ‘belong’ to a time that is one’s ‘own’ is a distinct project from understanding the impersonal, metaphysical nature of time itself. It is also distinct from simply understanding how people experience the present or the passing of time in general phenomenological or psychological terms.²³ Both of these philosophical approaches can say much about the nature of the present without saying anything about why one might feel in or out of step with the way others experience time.

Agamben’s own attempt to flesh out what he means is only stated in brief and elliptical terms, intended simply as a preface to his main task of pursuing his bespoke brand of messianic historiography. I will put this to one side, and instead pursue my own explication of what distinguishes simply experiencing time and *belonging* to time. I propose that contemporaries are people who attempt to interpret the meaning of the present. However, rather than find a coherent interpretation that is shared both by them and others in their society, the contemporary struggles to find an interpretation that supplies the right level of coherence and comfort. This leads to both the feeling that they don’t ‘belong’ to their own time and to the realisation that they are different to others who feel not such discomfort. One becomes contemporary when one feels the need to continue to subject one’s time to hermeneutical inquiry, rather than passively accept given interpretations.

But what exactly does it mean to interpret the meaning of the present? Here I think it is useful to turn to terms developed by the historian and philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck. Koselleck proposed that historians work with two conceptions of time. On the one hand, historians understand historical phenomena by locating them by using various different chronometers (calendars, clocks, etc) to objectively determine when they happened in time. Historians use these measures of what Koselleck calls ‘chronological time’ to understand how events and other historical phenomena are located along chronologies, making objectively verifiable statements about when in the past things happened, how long things took, and developing hypotheses about the temporal relations between things that explain historical

²³ For an overview of these approaches to the philosophy of time see Dainton (2010: 13-121).

occurrences. On the other hand, Koselleck proposes that historians also have reason to study what he calls ‘historical time.’²⁴ This is a conception of time that tracks how persons and the groups and societies they form subjectively understand “the relationship between past and future, which always constitutes an elusive present.” (Koselleck, 2002: 111) To do this, the historian has to understand what particular conceptions of the “space of experience” and the “horizon or expectation” shaped their grasp of the present (Koselleck, 2004: 255-277). To study the space of experience, the historian studies exactly how an individual or social group’s conception of their present moment was shaped by their previous experiences, paying attention to how they bring personal and public memory to bear on their understanding of the current moment. To study the horizon of expectation is to study how an agent conceives of the future at their present moment, looking at what hopes and fears are possible for them, or the extent to which they think the future can or cannot be predicted. An agent’s conception of the present as a category of historical time – or what I will call ‘the historical present’ – emerges from seeing how their experience and expectation interrelate, grasping how they take the past to shape how the future can be conceived, how their conception of the future shapes the way they view the past, and how both of these bear on what an agent takes to matter in the present. Depending on one’s sense of historical time, the present will have a certain meaning, with different projects, events, persons, and other things picked out as being significant or insignificant, stable or unstable, urgent and worthy of concern or simply ossified and outdated.

Koselleck illustrates this by comparing pre- and post-Enlightenment Western European conceptions of the relation between past, present, and future. Generalising radically, he proposes that for pre-modern Christian cultures, human nature was understood to be fixed by God and thus to be broadly unchanging. From such a perspective, the space of experience and the horizon of expectation were not radically differentiated. The meaning of the present was relatively stable because humans and their societies would essentially remain the same. By contrast, for many Enlightenment thinkers the future and the past became radically differentiated, plunging the present into a state of insecurity and tension. Various thinkers gradually became interested in the idea of social, political, and moral progress, separating out

²⁴ Koselleck’s claim is, in fact, stronger than this. He proposes that the study of historical time is what makes the field of history distinct. For an overview of Koselleck’s motivations for developing a philosophy of history in this way, see White’s introduction to Koselleck (2002). I will not attempt to unfold this idea here, since my project is not to go so far as to offer an account of what the study of history is.

a hoped-for future of moral perfection from a current state of confusion and backwardness inherited from an out-of-date past. The present became an anxious state in which action should be taken to press forward towards this new moral horizon.

I claim that, on this view, Enlightenment thinkers became contemporaries. In a world of revolutions, regime change, exploration, and scientific advancement, they were suddenly puzzled by the way others around them conceived of the ways the past and future bore on the present and sought to try and formulate new conceptions of historical time. They began to feel out of step with the comfortable interpretations of the present that they began to see as being woefully benighted. For them, the exact meaning of the present could no longer simply be taken for granted but had to be subjected to hermeneutical inquiry. The contemporary is thus a subject or group of subjects who are suddenly confronted by the need to figure out why the meaning of the present suddenly seems to have fallen into confusion. Contemporaries are those who find themselves in a position in which they need to subject conceptions of historical meaning to inquiry.

One further point to emphasise is that Koselleck's view of historical time allows for the idea that at any one point in chronological time multiple different historical times can be active. This helps us to make further sense of the idea that contemporaries and non-contemporaries can exist at the one and the same point in chronological time. Persons with pre-Enlightenment conceptions of historical time continued to exist within the period historians call the Enlightenment. Moreover, multiple practitioners of the Enlightenment arrived at diverse novel conceptions of the historical present with very different explanations of past moral failures and the nature of progress. As such, it is wholly possible for contemporaries to exist at the same time as non-contemporaries, and for different contemporaries to have different, distinct reasons for feeling discomfort.

This helps to clarify what is at work in Agamben's basic proposal that, when we assess whether someone is or is not contemporary, we are interested in assessing whether or not they are subjecting the historical meaning of present to inquiry. It is this idea of being contemporary that I will take as providing a novel route to understanding what makes art contemporary. Applying the views developed above, art becomes contemporary when it reflects upon and expresses the feeling of being out of step with various interpretations of the present and attempts to subject the present to further interpretation. Non-contemporary art is

the art that feels no such discomfort and so does not need to subject its own conception of historical time to reflective inquiry and critique. Non-contemporary artists may be working at the same point in chronological time as contemporaries and may even use means that are indiscernible from the means used by contemporaries, but they will not produce any comment on the meaning of the present in their work.

Marking this distinction helps us to arrive at a different approach to Foster's challenges. First, it outlines a clear route to distinguish contemporary and non-contemporary art and explains how both can be made at exactly the same time. Second, it helps to begin to build a different approach to providing a rich historical account of contemporary art – rather than look at the way contemporary art is simply the art that is produced at a certain point in the development of the concept of art *as such*, we can look at how an artwork inquires into the historical present. Contemporary art is art that expresses a particularly reflective interpretive stance on its own time. Third, it also helps to direct critical attention. For audiences to appreciate a work *as* contemporary art, they should pay attention to the ways in which it expresses its attempts to enact inquiry into the historical present, investigating its own discomfort with extant combinations of experience and expectation. Non-contemporary art is art that will not be illuminated by such attention.

However, on its own, the notion of 'being contemporary' does not take us far enough. The problem is that, in principle, anyone at any point in chronological time could suddenly have to question the meaning of the present. Regime change, religious upheavals, technological advances, pandemics, war, or personal traumas are regular parts of human history, and could all force people to reflect upon the instability of their conceptions of historical time. One could thus plausibly become a contemporary at any time in human history and could choose to try to make art that responds to these changing circumstances. We again end up with the unintuitive idea that art made at any time can be contemporary art, insofar as it is made by someone who has become a contemporary. The view developed thus far cannot fulfil one of final things that needs to be explained: why is contemporary art a relatively *recent* phenomenon? I will now show how the conception of 'being contemporary' can be turned to answer this question.

1.6. Intensification and Contemporaneity

In §1.2. I proposed that one way to give a rich historical determination of a category like modern art was to show how it responded to a wider set of contingent political, economic, social, technological, and cultural conditions. When studying modern art, we often use the term ‘modernity’ as a summative term to bring together these varied conditions. In doing so, we mark a distinct historical period, attempting to capture all manner of events and projects that, over a certain span of time, collectively characterise some marked changes in human life. On this understanding, we can say that modern art is the art that reflects the changes of the period of modernity.

My proposal is that we can better understand contemporary art by understanding it not just as art made by contemporaries, but as the art that responds to the period of contemporaneity. To make this claim, a broad historical hypothesis has to be advanced: there have been a set of significant political, economic, social, technological, and cultural changes over a certain span of time that are interconnected enough to be usefully illuminated by a single periodising term.²⁵ If such a broad hypothesis can begin to be substantiated, it gives us a route to understand why it is that contemporary art is a fairly recent phenomenon: it is the art that responds to a large set of *recent* changes in the wider world that mark a new historical period of human life.

So what changes might we refer to and what brings them together such that they mark the period of contemporaneity? It is here that we can mobilise the concept of ‘being contemporary’ in a particular way. We saw that one could become contemporary at any point in history. However, several theorists of contemporary art have advanced the claim that the period of contemporaneity can be broadly characterised by its marked *intensification* of the need for people around the world to engage in the task of interpreting the present. To do so, they point to several factors that are used, in various different disciplines, to explain

²⁵ To clarify, I am using the term ‘period’ in a somewhat non-standard sense. Usually, when historians or art historians talk about periods, they tend place them end-to-end, one beginning as soon as the former ends. I am not making this assumption. I am conceiving of periods simply as particular broad terms that try to gather together a large set of changes that produce distinct conceptions of historical time. Given this conception of the term, following Koselleck we should expect ‘periods’ to overlap. There are many alive today beholden to a modernist conception of historical time (as well as many others who are attempting to revive various pre-modernist interpretations of the present). Contemporaneity and modernity are thus in a complex, overlapping relation with each other. The views considered here are an attempt to distinguish these overlapping historical times. For more on this relationship between contemporaneity and modernity, see Roberts (2021).

widespread shifts in human life since 1945, such as the increased scale of globalisation, the maturation of various postcolonial projects, the emergence of a variety of transnational organisations such as the UN and the IMF, the advent of technologies like the internet, or the increased awareness of irreversible catastrophic anthropogenic climate change.²⁶ The historical hypothesis is substantiated by studying these particular phenomena. But the proposal is that these various factors are reasonably brought under one periodising term because they have *all* intensified ‘being contemporary’ in two ways. First, under these conditions the feeling of being contemporary has become more intense as people across the world have become more aware of the sheer *scale* of possible interpretations of the present that are active at one’s particular point in chronological time. Second, the feeling of contemporaneity has become more intense as people across the world have become more aware of the number of *disagreements* between these different interpretations. It is these sudden changes in scale and disagreement that distinguish contemporaneity from other historical periods.

For those that study contemporary art, the claim is thus that contemporary artists are those artists who reflect upon what it is like to interpret the historical present under such intensified conditions. It is not just the art of contemporaries, nor just the latest, formally inventive art. It is the art made by those attempting to directly grapple with contemporaneity. To see this view at work, consider the thought of the leading art historian of contemporary art Terry Smith. Setting 1945 as his rough start date, Smith proposes that “it is definitive of contemporaneity ... that [from this date on] we have become *more intensely aware* of this presence of difference all around us (and in us? [*sic*]), and that this quality of contemporary experience has come to override all other factors as the most central thing to be explained when we wish to characterise what it is to be alive today.” (Smith, 2011: 9, emphasis added)²⁷

²⁶ Factors like globalisation and awareness of climate change could be dated to earlier dates than 1945, whereas some events, like the emergence of the internet should be dated much later. This is not something I contest. In fact, I think this helps to explain why we see so many different periodisations given for contemporary art. Depending on which factors one focuses in and which part of the world one focusses on, it possible to see the intensification emerging in all manner of different ways. In order to properly study a concept as broad as contemporaneity, we should expect such diverse, overlapping attempts at chronological periodisation.

²⁷ Naturally, those living in conditions of modernity were aware of the fact that they lived at the same time as many other people, and that these people had different claims on the present, revealed pointedly through world wars, colonial projects, and burgeoning international travel and communication networks. The difference that Smith draws out is that, within conditions of modernity, the full scope and divisiveness of this diversity was not felt with the same intensity. For instance, many periodisations of artistic modernism coincide with periods where Western hegemony was still relatively secure, along with its attendant repressive views of racial, class, and gender difference, meaning the full experience of diversity was severely limited for many people.

Smith's methodology for substantiating this claim is to look closely at developments in art and to show how they relate to the intensification of difference in the wider world. He proposes three 'currents' of contemporary art, named 'Continuing Modernities', 'Transitional Transnationality', and 'Contemporaneous Difference.' (Smith, 2011) Smith uses these currents to perform two tasks. First, they track sets of general stylistic changes in art making and the institutional trends surrounding the presentation and discussion of art. But this is only a minor task they fulfil. The second, more important task they serve is to track the ways art and its institutions have responded to specific political, economic, cultural, or ecological changes that have taken place since around 1945. Focussing on a similar list of factors to the one given above, Smith proposes that there has been a marked increase in different people's awareness that they share the same chronological time with many people who have very different and competing senses of historical time. The absolute heterogeneity of recent art is an aspect of contemporary art that any historian has to focus on. But we can most clearly see what makes art contemporary when we understand how the heterogenous means artists use are turned towards the task of *engaging with contemporaneity*.

To see this method at work, consider the current named 'Transitional Transnationalism'. Artists working in this current come from non-Western nations that have experienced or are still experiencing processes of decolonisation.²⁸ These artists explore the expressive liberties afforded by the emergence of absolute heterogeneity, but pure formal experimentation is not the emphasis of their work. Rather, Smith proposes that this art is "content-driven art, aware of the influence of ideologies, and concerned above all with issues of nationality, identity, and rights. All of these are conceived as being in volatile states of transition and requiring translation in order to be negotiated." (Smith, 2011: 11) As he conceives it, the art made in this current is chiefly characterised by its interest in exploring the possibilities of postcolonial life, and its antagonistic relationships with the forces of globalisation, attempting to ward off the new ways these limit the self-determination of previously colonised nations.

But this art also reflects anxieties concerning the emergence of the phenomenon of 'transnationalism.' Smith uses this term in two ways. First, he uses it to name the process by which decolonisation leads to the emergence of new nations, vying for recognition on an international political, economic, and cultural stage. But, second, it is also meant to capture

²⁸ This includes artists who are part of diasporic and migrant communities in Western countries who use their art to reflect on their place within former colonial powers.

the way that the formation of new, decolonised nations has coincided with the emergence of non-state transnational organisations with which nation states now need to negotiate – e.g., the UN, the EU, NATO, the IMF, terrorist organisations, or corporations whose influence extends over national boundaries like Google, Facebook, and Apple.

In responding to these larger changes, the art in this current reflects an intensified contemporaneity insofar as the processes of decolonisation and the emergence of transnational entities have further increased not just the number, but also the fractious diversity of claims that are made on the present. In the wake of decolonisation, interpretations of a people's place in historical time that were suppressed by colonial powers re-emerge and vie for recognition, negotiating with other dominant interpretations of the present. Artists working in this current attempt to contribute to the project of forming diverse postcolonial interpretations of the present.

This gives us a sample of the general form of explication of what makes art contemporary that Smith pursues: show that there have been changes in the wider world of politics, economics, culture, or ecology which have brought more and more claims on the present into contact with others and show that these changes help to illuminate the new ways art is made, disseminated, bought, and sold. Artists across the world become contemporary by attempting to both contribute their own interpretations of the present, and to reflect upon the plurality of other interpretations they encounter under the conditions of contemporaneity.

But Smith is not alone in pursuing such an approach.²⁹ The philosopher Peter Osborne advances a similar central thesis to Smith but sets out to explain why exactly contemporaneity leads to such widespread divisiveness and conflict rather than egalitarian acceptance of the different claims made on the present. Echoing Smith, he proposes that contemporaneity should be conceived of as the “time of the globally transnational”, and that contemporary art is the “construction and expression of contemporaneity” under these conditions (Osborne, 2013: 15). Osborne unpacks this claim by mobilising the idea of ‘being contemporary’:

what seems distinctive and important about the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through the distinctive

²⁹ See also Alberro (2013: 68-69) and Bois, et al. (2016: 843-854).

conceptual grammar of con-temporaneity, a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together ‘in time’ with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterised by a coming together of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities or ‘times’, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*. (17, emphasis original)

What Osborne emphasises is that the ‘con-’ part of ‘contemporary’ involves not just a coexistence of different historical times at the same point in chronological time, but their collision. These different historical times do not form a conjunction or easy agreement. Rather, they often end up in disjunction, diverging and competing over the meaning of the present.

This much has always been true when peoples with different conceptions of historical time meet. But like Smith, Osborne’s claim is that, since around the middle of the twentieth century the experience of disjunction has increased, due primarily the emergence of globalised and transnational forms of governance.³⁰ These economic and political projects have brought together more people in more places with more diverse claims on the present than ever before. But what Osborne emphasises is that the disjunctive nature of temporal experience emerges *in spite* of the unifying aim of these projects. Globalisation and transnationalism attempt to produce a truly global conjunction of all possible historical times into one conception of historical time. But Osborne argues that this is a project of homogenisation, attempting to smooth over or forcibly suppress the genuine diversity of interpretations of the present it encounters.³¹ When the “plurality of interconnecting ‘worlds’, each of which speaks as though on behalf of all” meet, “‘globalisation’ manifests itself socially as tension and antagonism” (Osborne, 2018: 14) His contention is that contemporaneity is defined by the emergence of this deep and divisive contradiction within globalisation.³²

³⁰ Osborne (2018: 24-41), taking a broadly post-Marxist outlook, identifies these two projects directly with modernist capitalism. This leads Osborne to the intriguing claim that contemporaneity is in fact nested within continuing modernist ideologies. Modernity persists at the same time as contemporaneity, and the conflict between these views of historical time contributes to the divisiveness of the present.

³¹ It is for this reason that Osborne (2013: 22-23) identifies ‘contemporaneity’ as a fiction, insofar as it proposes a global unity that does not actually exist. But at another point, Osborne also characterises it as more like a Kantian ‘idea’ – something we strive towards and that regulates our activity, even if we can never actually experience it.

³² One may feel this is an unduly dour picture of recent history that arbitrarily screens out everything positive that has been achieved by bringing more people across the world into contact. Osborne’s outlook emerges, I think, from his emphasis on *contradiction* as key way to explain history and social change. This disposes Osborne

For Osborne, contemporary art is best understood as the art that responds to these particular changes:

With the historical expansion, geopolitical differentiation and temporal intensification of contemporaneity, it has become critically incumbent upon any art with a claim on the present to situate itself, reflexively, within this expanded field. The *coming together of different times* that constitutes the contemporary, and the *relations between the social spaces* in which these times are embedded and articulated, are thus the two main axes along which the historical meaning of art is to be plotted. (Osborne, 2013: 27, emphasis original)

Contemporary art cannot be understood by just focussing on its absolute heterogeneity. Rather contemporary art has a particular ‘historical meaning’ which must be grasped as well. This can be appreciated by looking at how artworks reflect upon their place within the emergent tensions of globalism and transnationalism that have intensified the number conflicting historical times that any one agent might be aware of.

The claims I have surveyed here have been stated at a high level of generality, and clearly there is much empirical work drawn from many domains that is needed for them to be substantiated. However, by identifying connections between art and specific, well-studied phenomena like globalisation and postcolonial politics this at least makes it plausible that such empirical substantiation can be forthcoming. It is not my project to try and pursue such substantiation, though in the next chapter I will attempt to provide some more ways in which philosophical thinking can help to direct empirical attention. Moreover, I make no attempt here to rule on which possible start date may best capture the emergence of contemporaneity. Rather, I suspect that, given the multiple ways the emergence of contemporaneity can be charted, we should expect many periodisations to be offered. We at least have a way to make sense of the kinds of factors that may supply the rationale for these periodisations.

to look for conflict rather than resolution. Whilst I don't share the same meta-historical view as Osborne, as I will show in the next chapter – particularly §2.2. – I think there is something correct about looking at problems rather than resolutions in order to get contemporaneity into view.

Understanding contemporaneity as a period defined not just by a set of concurrent events and projects, but also by a distinct consciousness of the distribution of historical time, helps to supply us with ways to understand why historians might attempt to say contemporary art is a fairly recent phenomenon. In doing so, it allows us to deal with the remaining puzzles of Foster's challenge. But the view put forward here helps to direct our attention to features of the human life that can be used to further enrich the historical determination of contemporary art. It also helps me to revise the critical stance forwarded in the last section. When assessing an artwork *as* contemporary art, we should focus on how it has turned its heterogenous means towards reckoning with the various ways the project interpreting the present has become intensified. These are points that require more elaboration, which is the task of the next chapter. But bringing out the distinction between simply being contemporary and living under conditions of contemporaneity helps to advance our understanding of contemporary art on from only scrutinising its absolute heterogeneity.

1.7. Conclusion

Bringing together the different arguments considered in this chapter, my proposal is that the category of contemporary art has two key features. First, no theory of contemporary art can ignore the fact that contemporary art is made under conditions of absolutely heterogeneity. As we saw in §1.3. and §1.4., philosophers can provide us with many apt conceptual tools to make sense of this and demonstrate the ways it bears on our historical and critical understanding of art. However, I have attempted to emphasise that focussing on this feature is not enough to understand what makes art contemporary. My proposal is that contemporary art has a second key feature: it is the art that reflects upon the contemporaneity. To make sense of this, I have in §1.5. provided both an account of what it means to be a contemporary, and, in §1.6., an account of how we can use this conception to study contemporaneity and to see how art reflects upon it. It is only by bringing this feature of contemporary art into view that we can decisively answer the question of what makes art contemporary.

By characterising these *two* key features of contemporary art, I believe we can provide answers to all the different parts of Foster's challenge. Holding both of these features in view is thus crucial to developing a distinct philosophy of contemporary art, insofar as they direct our attention to what makes art in this category distinct from other kinds of art. I believe that the approaches considered here are not in conflict, but are complementary, providing insights

whilst also filling in each other's limitations. However, it is still the case that absolute heterogeneity has been given far more philosophical scrutiny than contemporaneity. This is perhaps the reason that the question 'what makes art contemporary' has so rarely been asked within philosophy. I believe that this leads to a genuine theoretical deficit that must be redressed. My intent is thus to reflect further upon how exactly it is that art expresses its relation to contemporaneity and to unfold the further philosophical problems that this brings into view. By putting emphasis on better understanding the second feature of contemporary art, I hope that my approach can add greater balance and clarity to the project of pursuing a distinct philosophy of contemporary art.

Chapter 2: Crisis and Engagement

2.1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I surveyed different attempts to say what makes art contemporary. I concluded that contemporary art has two key features: it is made in conditions of absolute heterogeneity, *and* it reflects upon contemporaneity. In this chapter, I will develop the second part of this view. I introduce two concepts that help to further specify the particular way contemporary artists respond to their historical conditions. Rather than merely reflect on their own time, I claim that contemporary artists take an *engaged* attitude to the *crises* of contemporaneity. As the title of this thesis suggests, I think that these two concepts – crisis and engagement – should be central to our practices of understanding and evaluating artworks *as* contemporary art.

In §2.2. I will lay out different aspects of the concept of crisis. I argue that, by focussing on how artworks reckon with specific crises, historians, critics, and philosophers can make an artwork's interactions with the general historical condition of contemporaneity more tractable and precise for analysis. I also show how declaring a certain part of our world to be in crisis helps to bring out novel aspects of the way contemporary art relates to its own time – it aims to detect points of deep concern and contention and attempts to encourage others to pay attention to them and help them see that things can be otherwise. In §2.3. I develop this view by arguing that crises demand that artists and audiences take a particular attitude to their own time. I call this attitude 'engagement', characterising it as an active process of exploratory investigation and intervention into a topic. I then distinguish two ways to frame the phenomenon of engagement in artistic contexts: engagement *in* art, which emphasises an audience's ability to grasp the way an *artist* has engaged with a crisis, and engagement *through* art, which emphasises *the audience's own* autonomous engagement with a crisis in light of considerations offered by an artwork.

With these two concepts in hand, I propose that to critically evaluate an artwork *as* contemporary art is to assess the ways in which it improves or blocks its audience's engagement with a crisis. However, in §2.4. I will move to deal with a key problem that arises from this approach. Looking at the example of work by Anish Kapoor, it appears there are

works that are widely regarded as central examples of contemporary art, but which don't obviously engage with crises. My view appears to move out of step with artworld practice. In response, I will argue that my approach provides a normative rather than descriptive account of contemporary art. However, I will show that my normative account is not distanced from actual reflective critical and appreciative practice, and that it may help us to see that many non-engaged artworks are not well served by being regarded as contemporary art.

2.2. Crisis

In a summary statement on recent visual art, the art historian Daniel Herwitz proposes that:

Visual art has a nearly ubiquitous political cast today. If one reads daily art blogs like *Hyperallergic*, they are almost entirely dedicated to installations, video productions, paintings, work in new media, curated exhibitions, and the like, addressing humanitarian issues of broad global concern: refugees, global inequality, virulent nationalism, repressed or marginalised identities, environmental degradation and climate change, violence, decolonisation, race. And when not on the job addressing these global conundrums, art is busy chipping away at the artworld, its institutions, branding, marketing, economy for the one percent, its auction houses, and curatorial practices. And when not on that second job, there is a third – the critique of aesthetic legacies: the nude, the voyeur, the consumerist nature of visual culture, the way the beautiful serves as a veil of power, the sublime as a conduit for ideology. (Herwitz, 2021: 1)

For Herwitz, contemporary art can't be surveyed by just listing its expansion of art's materials, forms, genres, and styles. Rather, contemporary art is understood in terms of the specific, live issues it tries to take on. As such, contemporary art does not look upon its own society, political and economic context, or its own received concepts of art and aesthetic life in neutral, detached ways. It focuses on urgent problems and attempts to turn itself and its audiences towards addressing them.

Herwitz is not alone in this assessment. Providing lists of issues to characterise contemporary art has become a common trope when attempting to give an overview of the domain. For instance, in a recent summary statement of his position Terry Smith states that

The notion of contemporaneity ... pinpoints the dynamic at work *between* the many factors usually adduced as the predominant explanations of what shapes the contemporary world: modernity, globalisation, neoliberalism, decolonisation, fundamentalism, terrorism, network culture, and global warming, among many other less prominent but just as profound, such as indigenisation. ... [T]heir contention creates the divisive differentiation that defines our contemporaneity – precisely those qualities of multiteity, adventitiousness, and inequity that I list in the description just quoted – but it also generates counterresponses, the most important of which are the insistence on the value of place, the search for constructive world pictures, and the reach of coeval connectivity in all dimensions of our relationships with one another. (Smith, 2019: 4)

This may sound like a restatement of claims we have already seen Smith make. But note here that Smith asserts that art's interaction with contemporaneity is picked out not just by attempting to offer neutral accounts of any of the items on this list. Rather, hewing closer to Osborne, he claims that it is defined by the conflicts that arise from the interactions between these factors. As with Herwitz, Smith suggests that contemporary artists do not look upon their own time in an impartial, detached way. Contemporaneity comes most clearly into view when investigated through its points of conflict, tension, and concern.

We already have a basic explanation of why art historians might want to focus on these kinds of issues: they exemplify the divisive tensions that emerge when people become aware of the diversity of claims currently made on the present. But I propose that we can provide a more precise characterisation of the items on these lists. They are better understood as *crises* of contemporaneity. By better understanding what a crisis is and what demands it puts upon those who identify them and those caught within them, we can represent an artist's interaction with their own historical time with greater specificity and tractability. But understanding the concept of crisis brings into view new aspects of the way art articulates the historical meaning of the present. By focussing on crises, contemporary art views its historical condition not as something that it must passively accept as given and immutable. Rather, crises provide entry points for artists and audiences to participate in shaping the present.

To understand the basic nature of crises, it is useful to look at the term's origins. In ancient Greek thought, particularly *Hippocratic* medical practice, the term *krisis* was coined to mark the

critical turning point in the course of a disease. When the body reached the point of *krisis* the symptoms would either worsen and the patient would die, or natural processes would take their course against the illness and the patient would recover. The contemporary sense of crisis retains much of this original sense, though it has steadily come to be more broadly applied to economics, politics, science, and other more specific events, projects, institutions, and other non-human systems.³³ A crisis occurs when some system ceases to function in its normal, expected way. At this point, the lives of those who depend on the system are put at risk, sometimes literally, as is the case with climate crises or public health crises, sometimes metaphorically, as is the case with some spiritual, cultural, or political crises. They can often be distinguished from mere problems by the degree of malfunction or abnormality they elicit and the depth of concern they create.

Many historians and political theorists have observed that to describe a situation as being in crisis – to produce a ‘crisis-claim’ – has become one of the key ways within modernity to publicly express one’s anxiety over historical meaning. Janet Roitman (2014) argues that, in attempting to articulate the nature of a crisis, the crisis-claimant is pushed to place malfunction within a narrative order. In doing so, they say how the past bears on the present, determining what has gone wrong, why it has gone wrong, and why a system’s current state of decline differs from its past state of stability. They are also pushed to question exactly what the future will look like and to feel the urgency to push towards this future by diminishing the threats of the crisis. Crises thus rupture the stability of an agent or society’s conception of historical time. Crisis claimants attempt to turn the interpretation and reshaping of the meaning of the present into an urgent task.

Crisis-claims often aim to have certain effects on those that receive them. Miguel de Beistegui (2022: 167-8) brings into view the rhetorical force that crisis-claims carry with them. He argues that to claim that something has fallen into crisis is to say to others that a particular instance of uncertainty and abnormality is a matter that must be of deep concern to them. Crisis-claims issue affective demands to others to become worried about the abnormal situation. Indeed, De Beistegui goes so far as to claim that if one cannot feel the affective force of a crisis-claim, one is unlikely to believe that there really is any crisis afoot. Moreover, he

³³ For a survey of the move from Greek usages of the term to the contemporary sense of the term, see Koselleck (2006). For close study of the development and popularisation of the concept in the late 18th century, see Koselleck (1988).

argues that crisis-claims are often, either implicitly or explicitly, calls to action. To identify a crisis is not just to say that people should be affected by it, but that they should feel they need to do something about it. Crisis-claims propose that our conception of the present is something that can and needs to be acted upon and altered.³⁴

Framed in the terms developed in §1.5, crisis-claimants are exemplary contemporaries. Indeed, producing crisis-claims could even be understood as an attempt to shift others into also becoming contemporary. As such, identifying the particular ways an agent picks out and responds to a crisis provides a clear entry point to analyse the specific ways in which they express their becoming contemporary. However, as a tool for analysing the world around us and for understanding a particular person's sense of the historical present, it is important to note that crisis-claims are at once descriptive and normative. In one sense, claiming that a certain system is running into problems is often something that can be objectively assessed. For instance, we can empirically verify that, due to the ongoing fallout from the Libyan civil war and the Syrian civil war, in 2015 there was a marked increase in the movement of refugees towards Europe. Around 1.3 million refugees attempted to seek asylum in European countries, travelling by highly risky overseas routes on overcrowded, makeshift vessels. Huge numbers died attempting to reach safety, and those that did manage to reach Europe had great difficulty in seeking asylum, with many countries simply overwhelmed by the numbers, or unwilling to lend much serious support. Many declared the situation to be a crisis and cited similar facts to substantiate their claims. However, the interpretations of the situation that crisis-claimants produced to substantiate their judgements often vary wildly in their normative commitments and the demands they tried to place on others. For some, the Syrian migrant crisis was a crisis because it brought into view the laxity of European border control measures and called for a tightening of security and protection of so-called native populations. Accepting migrants supposedly threatened time-honoured conceptions of European state sovereignty.³⁵ For others, the exclusion of migrants showed up the deep moral failings of European states and the violence of their security and bureaucracy. The tragic losses of life and difficult living conditions faced by asylum seekers were interpreted as partly the result of

³⁴ We can further loosely distinguish not just problems and crises, but also crises and disasters. The latter impact agents in ways that they can rarely do anything about, whereas the former have damaging impacts but some possibility of response.

³⁵ Though the concept of crisis has most thoroughly been analysed in literature associated with the Marxist political tradition, I make no claim that crisis-claimants need subscribe to any particular ideology. Conservatives are just as likely to appeal to crises as progressives.

latent and overt xenophobia against non-Europeans. In both cases, crisis-claimants demand different solutions to the same objective aspects of the situation – strengthen or loosen boarder control, engage in more or less foreign intervention, etc.

We should thus expect crises to be understood in both descriptive and normative terms, charting the not just the facts that show systems to be functioning abnormally, but also charting the different and often oppositional affective demands and calls to action they elicit.³⁶ Understanding how an agent responds to a crisis in these different ways adds further clarity to our understanding of how they experience being contemporary. However, framed in this way a system could fall into crisis at any point in history. Why think that crises are also an apt tool to pinpoint the more specific historical condition of contemporaneity? Why should the period from at least 1945 to the present be so filled with crises, as some seem to think it is? I claim that this can be answered by making use of the conception of crisis offered by Rahel Jaeggi. In turn this helps to further understand the specific ways contemporary art attempts to engage with the historical present.

Jaeggi's discussion of crises is couched within a larger philosophical project, the aim of which is to try to understand how it is that aspects of human culture – for instance a certain group's ideas about what constitutes a family or the way their urban spaces are organised – can be subjected to criticism. She calls these aspects of human culture 'forms of life', which she characterises broadly as ensembles of complex human social activities, and the attendant interpretive frameworks that help agents understand what those activities are and what they are for. A form of life helps agents to coordinate their action to achieve the different purposes that social groups have to pursue to live a collective life. It also helps them to coordinate their activities by allowing them to make themselves coherent to each other. For example, here is Jaeggi's characterisation of one of her key examples of a form of life – the classical bourgeois family:

To this [form of life] belongs conventionally the 'sharing of table and bed,' living together under one roof, and concomitant practices such as the shared evening meal and its preparation, celebrating birthdays and other festivities, and caring for each other in various forms appropriate to each case, such as childcare and care of the elderly. Families involve shared projects and emotional connectedness but also mutual

³⁶ For further analysis of this dual nature of crisis-claims, see Milstein (2015) and Jaeggi (2018: 133-173).

dependency and possibly even relationships of domination. These practices manifest themselves at the level of consumption in so-called family cars (with a large trunk), family homes (close to playgrounds), and family hotels (with highchairs). (Jaeggi, 2018: 67-8)

A key feature of forms of life that Jaeggi thinks makes them open to criticism is that they have a normative nature: “Forms of life ... are normative ensembles insofar as participating in them involves the expectation that one should participate in the constituent practices in appropriate ways and share the interpretive framework laid down with this expectation.” (94) Jaeggi is clear that the normative standards of forms of life do not emerge from some external standard by which all social practices are to be judged, but from within the demands and structure of the practice itself.³⁷ As such, one can engage in the practices that make up a form of life in ways that are, by its own lights, right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, intelligible and unintelligible. A group of persons could attempt to participate in the form of life of a bourgeois family but violate its particular bundle of social practices and shared meanings. For instance, if both parents only pursue their work or their own hobbies and let their children be raised solely by child minders, or if the parents demand on keeping a pristine, adult house with no provisions made for their children (no highchairs, no space for their children to play or to make a mess), then they suffer the judgement ‘that’s no longer a bourgeois family!’

Jaeggi also argues that forms of life themselves can be subject to criticism. Such criticism can be grounded upon the idea that the norms of forms of life develop to help agents solve the problems that face their particular social group. For instance, the form of life of democracy allows diverse agents to solve political coordination problems by coming together to make political decisions. In its different variants it has various norms that aim help diverse agents overcome the difficulties that arise when they try to coordinate their divergent opinions in ways that help their collective interests – voting on issues, electing representative with certain term limits, engaging in different formalised modes of debate, etc. As such, democracies are forms of life that have developed to try to take on external difficulties that confront social groups – for example, deciding on whether the people of one country should aid a war effort occurring in another distant country or how they should respond to rising sea levels – and

³⁷ It is for this reason that a key part of Jaeggi’s project is defending a conception of *immanent* critique of forms of life, rather than criticism from some external standpoint.

issues that arise within democracies – for example, sanctioning demagogic politicians or those who overstep the bounds of democratic participation through acts of civil disobedience.

Criticism of a form of life becomes apt when a form of life falls into ‘crisis.’ Jaeggi conceives of crises as deep problems that lead to an inability of any agents participating in a form of life to maintain social cohesion, guidance in action, and coherence in the meaning of those actions. Crises emerge when forms of life constitutively fail to solve problems they have arisen to deal with. Borrowing a term from Terry Pinkard (2012), Jaeggi claims that crises make forms of life ‘uninhabitable.’ To see this, consider further the case civil disobedience. Civil disobedients often face democratic governments with a tricky proposition. Unjust laws are intentionally broken in order to demonstrate the failures of a particular democratic polity. But they are broken in a principled way, disobedients attempting to improve democratic life by showing up the points where redress is required. For instance, suffragettes and civil rights protestors engaged in civil disobedience to show that democratic forms of life were not serving their intended purpose of representing the will of *all* their citizens. Their acts of civil disobedience intentionally threw particular instantiations of democratic life into crisis, showing that supposedly advanced democratic nations were fundamentally failing to achieve their purposes and making themselves uninhabitable for those that participate in them. Without enfranchising the whole population of adult citizens, democracy quickly looks like a normatively incoherent form of life.

This sketch of Jaeggi’s views provides some useful tools to further understand why focussing on crises might be apt for analysing recent art. As we have seen, one of the key features of the historical hypothesis advanced in §1.6. is that contemporaneity brings together many different social groups with different forms of life into new shared forms of life – globalised economies, international relations organisations like the UN or the EU, attempts to form liberal cosmopolitan states, globe-spanning online communities, etc. In doing so, the many diverse norms that structure the local forms of life of these different social groups are often thrown into question. Globalism, participation in transnational governance, or implementation of internet communication radically alters previous ways of life, forcing groups to adopt new and alien goals, social practices, and interpretations of life. Moreover, it requires those beholden to one form of life to attempt to interact with those with very different forms of life. Sometimes, the sharing of forms of life can be managed in entirely peaceful ways, different social groups learning from each other and using their different cultural practices to help each

other solve problems. But fully thriving cosmopolitanism, whilst a serious possibility that many contemporary artists wish to endorse (see §4.2.) seems to be an unfortunately rare occurrence in the actual contemporary world. More often, it seems various processes and events associated with contemporaneity force forms of life into conflict with each other, creating crises within these forms of life and crises within any novel, shared forms of life they try to create.³⁸ The intensified divisiveness of contemporaneity can be understood as emerging from rapidly forcing together different forms of life, creating many different crises within them.

However, focussing on crises in this way can have a more positive outlook. One final aspect of the notion of crisis that Jaeggi foregrounds (2018: 78-82; 190-214) is that they have the effect of showing that our forms of life are contingent and can, in principle, be altered.³⁹ Naturally, it is not easy to change large sets of deeply ingrained norms, especially when they lend coherence to the joint endeavours of large, complex social groups.⁴⁰ Determining the precise methods by which a form of life can be most effectively altered and the ways resistance can be managed is a difficult issue to solve.⁴¹ However, it is sufficient for my purposes to note that crises show us that our forms of life are not fixed. They can be altered and changed, both for ill and for good. What this opens up is a more constructive outlook on the crises of contemporaneity. They mark not just points where agents struggle to understand their place in historical time or the coherence of their own form of life. Crisis-claims can be mobilised to show that things can be otherwise, and to call others to join in the project of altering the present. I do not wish to necessarily then hold that seeing things could be otherwise

³⁸ One may worry that the conception of contemporaneity I am developing risks being overly pessimistic, leading to contemporary art tracking only what is bad in the world and never praising what is good. For instance, those that are moved by Steven Pinker's (2018) broadsides against negative responses to a present redolent with signs of genuine improvement and progress might even think that the view of contemporaneity I have forwarded actually misrepresents the ways in which our times are so much better than the past. As I will attempt to show in the next section, I endorse the crisis-oriented view with some caution. My view is not that every crisis-claim is correct. Nor is my claim that crises cannot be overcome. But I also find it hard to endorse the extremely rosy picture that Pinker puts forward.

³⁹ It is usually this observation that moves agents from simply struggling with crisis to engaging in critique – to question both what has gone wrong and how things can be otherwise. For a full elaboration of the history of connecting the concepts of crisis and critique, see Cordero (2017). As will become clear in the next section, I regard critique as a particularly strong form of engagement. But I see no reason to think that crisis should necessarily always lead to critique.

⁴⁰ Many different kinds of suggestions can be found across the Marxist and critical theory tradition – see Benhabib (1986) and Cordero (2017). For a different, more pragmatist inspired approach, that see crisis response as a matter of forms of life engaging in experimentation and learning see Jaeggi (2018: 272-315) and Kitcher (2021).

⁴¹ But it is not impossible. For one, empirically vitiated program for changing widespread complex social norms, see Bicchieri (2017).

automatically leads to them being better. But by engaging with crises, contemporary artists can deal not only with the problems that face them and their social worlds, but also the opportunities for intervening in the meaning of the present.

2.3. Engagement

Much art made today is made in the midst of crises of contemporaneity. But it is possible to make art in such contexts without paying any attention to them, quarantining oneself from their influence or simply ignoring them altogether. Both Smith and Osborne suggest that one way to separate contemporary art from art simply made in the present is to note how contemporary art takes a particular kind of attitude to crises. Osborne characterises this attitude as simply “reflective.” Smith goes further, assigning contemporary art a distinct kind of mission:

The *work* of contemporary art ... is not only to picture these divisive differences but also to counter their destructive effects by helping to build coeval connectivity.

Tracking how artists are taking on the paradoxical challenges of our shared but divided contemporaneity is the work of the historian of contemporary art. (Smith, 2019: 4-5, emphasis original)

On this view, contemporary art reflects on its own time by both attempting to picture it, but also to intervene and overcome crises. Non-contemporary art may be made in the same situations, but does not reflect, picture, or counter the crises that surround it.

The notions of reflecting, picturing, and countering admit of much variety. Can you make contemporary art if you simply paint a picture of a forest fire caused by global warming, without attempting to make any comment upon it? Can you make contemporary art if you simply make work that contemplatively reflects upon a crisis from afar rather than attempting to actually do anything to counter it? If the answer to the latter question is no, then making contemporary art is a highly specialised practice, tantamount to activism. If the answer to both questions is yes, then we may worry that there is no attitude in particular an artist needs to take to their own times, making it increasingly hard to separate out contemporary and non-contemporary art. My proposal in this section is that we can both capture and develop the basic sentiment in both Osborne and Smith’s work with the term ‘engagement.’ As I will

attempt to show, I prefer this term for its ability to distinguish passive and active attitudes to crises and capture a range of different kinds of responses artists might take.

I use the term engagement to identify a certain kind of attitude that is taken towards some object. Beginning with our everyday sense of the term, to say that one is engaged with something is simply to say that one is attending to it, screening out distractions. But we also usually use the term engagement to name a particularly high degree of attention. We can momentarily attend to things that we don't particularly care about, simply noticing basic features about that thing. One way to make sense of this difference in degree is to say that engagement tends to point to a particularly long-lasting kind of attention. When we are engaged with something, we don't tend to get easily swayed from our focus. This is part of the sense of engagement I will pursue here. But I intend to make sense of this difference in degree in another way. I turn instead to an account of engagement offered by C. Thi Nguyen in the field of aesthetics. He proposes that sophisticated aesthetic experience and evaluation involves not just paying attention to things, but rather involving oneself in 'aesthetic engagement':

'Aesthetic engagement' ... includes our higher-level cognition of aesthetic objects: searching for connections, rethinking interpretations, discovering affective resonances, and so on. It also includes low-level forms of engagement such as perceptual engagement: actively shifting one's attention from one perceptual detail to the next, and then assembling those details into a larger structure. And it includes the way these forms of engagement feed into one another, as my interpretation and affective responses influence where I direct my attention, and vice versa. Aesthetic engagement includes all the perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes we actively deploy on our way to generating an aesthetic judgment. (Nguyen, 2020: 1137)

Nguyen's framing of aesthetic engagement usefully brings into focus the complexity of engagement over mere attention. First, engagement involves employing a whole suite of low and high-level perceptual, cognitive, and practical abilities at once. Second, engagement involves an agent taking autonomous control over how they direct their attention. One can have one's attention drawn to something in ways that one can't control, such as when a bad smell enters a room, or a siren suddenly blares out in the middle of the night. Engagement involves an agent actively deciding how to apply their abilities to the object at hand. It is thus a more active and autonomous way to investigate the world. Finally, Nguyen distinguishes engagement from judgement. In aesthetics, judgements represent the ends that our aesthetic

experiences can reach, usually arriving in statements on the aesthetic properties we have identified that something has and the exact value we find in that aesthetic object. By contrast, engagement names only the open-ended process one participates in to arrive at such a judgement, finding aesthetic properties, unfolding what they mean for us, and exploring the space of value they open up.⁴² I will here put to one side Nguyen's particular reasons for preferring to talk of engagement rather than judgement in the realm of aesthetics.⁴³ The point I want to emphasise is simply that engagement is a particularly focussed yet also distinctly open-ended and exploratory way of attending to the world around us.

As I see it, aesthetic engagement is simply one particular form of the more general phenomenon of engagement. For instance, civic engagement is often understood as an attentive, active, extended process rather than just a goal to achieve. It involves taking charge of one's own political understanding by participating in activities of voting, grasping political candidates' positions, and trying to serve the needs of our community by helping them also engage in civic life. In the next two chapters, I will argue it can also be applied to our cognition of the world around us.

However, I think engagement also is a particularly apt way to explain the kind of attitude difficult, live crises often require. Crises are often hard to understand and interpret. When one has to make sense of many competing crisis-claims, the difficulty level ratchets up. As such, trying to get some standing on a crisis requires one to apply a whole suite of complex mental and practical capacities. Given the fact that crises are rarely a closed matter, and that crisis-claims call out for our participation, we must often direct our attention to them in autonomous ways, trying to take charge of grasping the details, assessing claims, and

⁴² A similar view is forwarded by Arnold Berleant (1991). He claims that 'aesthetic engagement' represents a departure from traditional 18th century theories of appreciation, in which aesthetic objects are separated from the appreciator and must be regarded with a disinterested attitude at a distance from the object. What Berleant helps to emphasise is that aesthetic engagement involves not passive attention to things, rather but active participation with an aesthetic object through bodily movement or conscious, autonomous adjustments of vision or imagination. Of particular interest for our purposes is that Berleant sees his position as being necessitated by the formal developments in the art of the 20th century, particularly contemporary art. He claims that the variety of media and forms open to artists, including those which actively implicate the audience in creating the work through action – participatory performance, installation, expanded cinema – and those which blur the distinction between art and life – readymades – necessitate such a shift in aesthetics. These works call upon viewers to become active participants in the works, either by using their body to interact and experience the works fully, or using their cognitive faculties in particularly active ways, working out interpretations and implications of works for themselves.

⁴³ In short, Nguyen applies this view to debates surrounding aesthetic testimony, arguing that understanding the value of engagement explains why we should expect to show more autonomy in our aesthetic lives, and refuse simply deferring to the judgements of others.

formulating responses. We often encourage other agents to become involved with these tasks, even if it looks like it will sometimes be very difficult to easily find an outright correct judgement of the crisis or find the right solution. As such, crises often demand that we take an open-ended, exploratory attitude in order to begin to make some progress on dealing with them.

To say that contemporary art engages with a crisis is to say that it strives towards this open-ended, active process of autonomously attending to and exploring aspects of the crisis. Contemporary art does not therefore aspire to encourage a passive acceptance of the conditions it is made within, or to only encourage cursory, momentary attention to a crisis. However, at this juncture, it is useful to distinguish two different ways to understand the interaction between artist, artwork, and audience in processes of engagement. I will distinguish between two different ways we can understand the phenomenon of engagement as it appears in the arts: engagement *in* art and engagement *through* art. Both of these track different ways in which audiences attempt to engage with crises via their encounters with art. In engagement *in* art, audiences attempt to achieve engagement by grasping the way the artist has intentionally engaged with the crisis through the process of making an artwork. On this view, the artwork acts as a record of the artist's engagement. The audience directs their appreciative and interpretive attention towards trying to work out what exact stance the artist has managed to take. By accurately capturing this, the audience can, in turn, try to also take up the same stance on the crisis. In engagement *through* art, by contrast, the audience uses the artwork to enhance *their own* engagement with crises in the world around them in ways that go beyond the particular kind of engagement found *in* the work. Their appreciative focus is not placed so much on figuring out what the artwork has achieved. Rather it is placed on their own evolving engagement with crises. Audiences who have participated in engagement *through* art report not only what aspects of the artwork have prompted their exploratory thinking or action, but also how they have then autonomously engaged with crises in ways that sometimes go far beyond the record of engagement the artwork has offered them.

To see this in action, consider an example. Wilhelm Sasnal's series of oil paintings entitled *Gaddafi* (2011) (Fig 9., Fig. 10., and Fig. 11.). These works engage with the events surrounding the death of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Through his paintings, Sasnal explores the way violent images enter into the public sphere through digital media, and the way human death and geopolitical catastrophe becomes spectacle. The works engage not only

with the crisis of the Libyan civil war, but also with crises in the way death and politics are understood and interpreted within a digitally networked world.

The work clearly aims to have some kind of impact on its audience, getting them to shift their standing on the crises at hand. One way to try and say how this happens is to show how the audience searches for the engagement *in* the artwork. For example, an audience might note that, in the paintings, the artist has attempted to closely attend to various aspects of the events he is focussing on, making choices about which images to turn into paintings, what to abstract (Gaddafi's corpse in *Gaddafi 1*, the faces of the crowds taking photos in *Gaddafi 2* and *3*), and how to emphasise bruised pinks and blood reds in the images. The artwork stands as a record of the artist's engagement, and when the audience has grasped this, they come to understand the artist's own engagement with the crisis.

But Sasnal's paintings could also lead their audience to take their thinking in many novel directions concerning the crisis at hand or other crises it is connected to. They may, for instance, investigate what impact images of Gaddafi's death had on the political and military actions taken by the West. Or they may go further, reflecting more widely upon the problems of the way painting as a medium can represent mediated acts of violence, or reflect on how significant public displays of death are in global politics, or how they experience and understand other violent images that appear in the digital news media. In this instance, the audience is making a step from the particular record of the artist's engagement to more autonomous exploration of contemporaneity. Though the artwork may facilitate these steps, prompting the audience in a certain direction, the eventual stance an audience reaches on a crisis may be very different from the one the artist themselves reached. In doing so, they have realised engagement *through* art.

It can be easy to miss this distinction between engagement *in* and engagement *through*. I think it is important to bring it into the foreground, as it shapes how we understand the ways in which contemporary art uses its often strange and open-ended means of communication to affect its audience's engagement, and brings to light some further puzzles about the way contemporary art can be evaluated. As I will show in the next two chapters, there are cases in which focussing on one form of engagement may be more appropriate than another.

To conclude this section, I will note one final aspect of engagement that I will incorporate into my account. Engagement involves one actively striving to *improve* one's standing on the object one is attending to. When saying that contemporary artworks attempt to get their audiences to engage with crises, I thus also hold that contemporary artworks strive to get their audiences to improve their standing on that crisis. One can improve one's standing on a crisis in one of two ways. The first is the attempt to better characterise and understand the various dynamics, problems, and conflicts that are leading to a given situation falling into crisis. This descriptive kind of crisis response tries to ascertain the facts crisis claimants are responding to, and what exactly their claims amount to, and how they correspond or conflict with those made by other crisis claimants. The second is being concerned about the crisis to the extent that one tries to redress its harms. This is the 'countering' kind of crisis response described by Smith.

I also see both these aspects of crisis response as being equally important. To improve your understanding of a crisis can help make significant steps toward redressing the harms of the issue. But contemporary artists can reasonably be said to engage with a crisis just by trying to clarify to an audience exactly what conditions have gone into contributing to a particular situation being understood as a crisis, without then having a clear idea of what to do to redress the situation. Likewise, I allow that there can then be engaged artworks that then try to actually introduce some solution to the crisis, but which are not accompanied by significant analysis of the crisis within the artwork. However, to be clear, it is obviously difficult to move a wholly uninformed and uncaring public to action on an issue. As such, art that aims only at 'countering' usually appeals to an audience who already have some descriptive grasp on a crisis, aiming to catalyse what they already know and feel into action.

To be clear, to just call an artwork 'engaged' is not yet to rule on whether the work has succeeded in managing to improve an audience's standing on a crisis. As I conceive it here, calling art engaged is to say that it is committed to pursuing some project of improvement, rather than saying it has yet succeeded in that project. But to simply say that an artwork or audience is engaging with a crisis is then not yet to rule on whether or not their engagement is any good or not.

With the notion of engagement in hand, we can now make better sense of the idea that contemporary art can variously reflect, picture, and counter crises. I hold that contemporary

art is centrally interested in responding to the demands of crises by attempting to engage with them, and to foster engagement in their audiences. In doing so, contemporary art attempts to improve its audiences standing on the crisis at hand. They attempt to make their audiences active participants in contemporaneity. As such, we should be suspicious of attempts to claim that an artwork is contemporary art when the work in question only contains reflections or picturing of crises that do not aspire to anyway seriously engage with the crisis or do not try to seriously improve their audience's engagement. If it is hard to detect any serious attempt to engage with the project of grappling with the difficulties of one's historical time, then it seems hard to say clearly why the work in question should be understood *as* contemporary art.

However, separating out descriptive and countering responses to crises helps to include many different kinds of responses within the scope of engagement that go beyond simply attempting to fix crises. I allow that that there can also plausibly be engaged artists who respond to a crisis in a wholly pessimistic way, proposing that, once properly understood, we can see that the crisis really can't be overcome. Though they might not improve their audience's ability to counter the crisis, they might take themselves to be offering an improved point of view insofar as they view the situation as being bleak and hopeless in an accurate way. Moreover, on my view, an artist could plausibly also engage with crisis in order to debunk it, showing that other crisis claimants are misreading a situation and underlining the damages that claiming something to be a crisis brings with it. Such sceptical forms of crisis engagement improve our standing on a particular crisis-claim by showing up its errors and diverting audiences to better views of the world around them.⁴⁴ As I conceive it, the scope of engaged responses to crises is quite broad.⁴⁵ The notion of engagement is thus highly flexible, allowing us to allow into the sphere of contemporary art a range of different responses to the problems of the present.

2.4. Engaged and Non-Engaged Art

The ideas of crisis and engagement help to further elaborate exactly what kind of reflection upon one's own historical condition is required for an artwork to be properly assessed *as* contemporary art. This thus helps us to go further in responding to Foster's challenge

⁴⁴ Janet Roitman (2014) proposes that, in many cases, crisis narratives may not be the most helpful tool to understand the workings of certain events.

⁴⁵ It is this point that separates my view from views that see crises as only yielding responses of critique – of working out what has gone wrong and how things could be otherwise. I allow that this is only one possible way to engage with a crisis, but that pessimistic or sceptical responses do not fit this mould.

advanced in §1.2.. By studying the way an artwork engages with a crisis, we can further focus on the exact social, political, economic, technological, or ecological aspects of contemporaneity an artwork is trying to grapple with. In doing so, we move from the general category of contemporaneity down to even more precise articulations of a particular artwork's rich historical determination. Moreover, it is now a short step to an even more precise proposal on the distinct form of critical assessment appropriate for contemporary art. To critically assess a work *as* contemporary art is to assess its engagement with crises. A successful contemporary artwork will be one that manages to improve its audience's engagement with a crisis, and an unsuccessful contemporary artwork will strive yet fail to bring about any improvement. Finally, we can make more precise statements on the conceptual boundaries of contemporary art. Art that does not attempt to engage with crises of contemporaneity in any way is not apt to be understood or appreciated *as* contemporary art.

However, I must now turn to a worry that can be raised against the whole approach undertaken in these first two chapters. It can be claimed that, given the account of contemporary art I have offered, there are now many works that are regarded as being central examples of contemporary art that suddenly appear to not have a good claim to being placed within this category. By making engagement with crises central to the understanding of contemporary art, my view looks to be highly revisionary, moving out of step with artworld practice.

Consider, for instance, the work of Anish Kapoor who is internationally recognised as one of the world's leading contemporary artists. His work is regularly shown in contemporary art galleries, and he has been awarded many significant public commissions and awards. His artworks are regularly praised for their formal inventiveness, testing the boundaries between sculpture, installation, and architecture, and for their introduction of novel materials and techniques into the vocabulary of art, from working with powdered pigments, to canons firing red wax, to wholly novel media and technologies, such as the material 'vantablack' invented by Surrey Nanosystems in 2016. Kapoor exemplifies the creative, artistically rich exploration of the possibility space of absolute heterogeneity that Danto, Irvin, and many others have taken to be central to recent advanced art production.

However, it may be a struggle to say that much of Kapoor's work is directly concerned with engaging with crises. Take, for example, his work *At the Edge of the World* (1998) (Fig. 12). This

work is constituted by a large fibreglass dome suspended above the audience, the interior of which is coated in deep, red pigment. When the audience walks under the dome, their sense of space is confounded, since the colouration of the dome's interior makes the curved space appear depthless. The dome also affects the viewer's experience of sound. Whispers on one side of the dome can be heard perfectly by audiences standing on the other side as if they were spoken into one's ear. In its current installation at the Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Wijnegem, the work is shown alongside a large wall text:

The idea is to make an object which is not an object, to make a hole in the space, to make something which actually does not exist. Even more, the extraordinary appearance, loved and feared, of a piece of void, at once finite and infinite, reactivates the symbolic contact between inside and outside, earth and heaven, male and female, active and passive, conceptual and physical, thus renewing the process of knowing.

Kapoor and the gallery choose to present the work as dealing with timeless metaphysical and spiritual themes. From this presentation of the work, it is hard to see exactly what might link it to the features of the wider historical condition of contemporaneity. Indeed, to deal with its universal, perennial themes it could be claimed that the work has to step away from referring simply to the particular concerns of its own historical context.

At the Edge of the World is just one example of the many major contemporary artworks that do not clearly try to thematise the conflicts of contemporaneity in their work in the way I have proposed. Other examples could include Amy Sillman's paintings that continue abstract expressionism's exploration of abstraction and the painted surface, Olafur Eliasson's installations that reflect on colour perception or the poetics of water, or Anthony Gormley's sculptures that explore embodiment and space.⁴⁶ These artists' works are no doubt highly inventive, pushing the outer edges of our current understanding of absolute heterogeneity. They are also widely shown within contemporary art institutions and awarded major contemporary art commissions, grants, and prizes. But it is not obvious that their work in any way intends to get its audience to engage with any specific crises of contemporaneity.

⁴⁶ Some of the specific works I am thinking of here are the works collected in Sillman's exhibition 'Twice Removed' at Gladstone Gallery, New York (2020), Eliasson's *Room for One Colour* (1997) and *Beauty* (1993), and Gormley's *Quantum Cloud* (1999) or *Event Horizon* (2007).

Since these artists only exemplify one feature of contemporary art – exploration of absolute heterogeneity – the conclusion that looms is that something is going wrong when putting these artists’ works in the category of contemporary art. This may seem like an unpalatable stance to take, and it may seem that the view of contemporary art I am pursuing is leading in the wrong direction. Nevertheless, I think this conclusion is broadly correct. The works I have just cited are not well served conceptually, historically, or critically by placing them in this category. They are better studied and appreciated by understanding them in the many other categories in which they appear.⁴⁷ Indeed, I believe this is a critical boon that comes from going beyond mere the placeholder accounts of contemporary art I have set my project against. However, some care must be taken in elaborating this stark, apparently revisionary conclusion.

The main worry I face is that it seems I am implying that learned, sensitive artworld practitioners have gone wrong in allowing these works to be presented under this label. Can it really be the case that much of the contemporary artworld is mischaracterising these works and calling them great contemporary art when they are really nothing of the sort? Why not think that I am getting something wrong? One way to more substantively frame this worry is to argue that my view does not respect the ‘pragmatic constraint’ that should be placed on philosophical theories of art. This methodological doctrine has been identified by David Davies, though he points out that it is accepted, either explicitly or tacitly, by many other philosophers of art. Focussing on accounts of the ontology of art, he articulates the constraint in the following way:

Artworks must be entities that can bear the sorts of properties rightly ascribed to what are termed ‘works’ in our reflective critical and appreciative practice; that are individuated in the way such ‘works’ are or would be individuated, and that have the modal properties that are reasonably ascribed to ‘works,’ in that practice. (Davies, 2004: 18)

⁴⁷ Here my view aligns closely with the latter parts of Walton’s arguments in ‘Categories of Art’ (1970: 343-363), in which he argues that seeing a work within a category make a difference to the aesthetic features we can perceive in a work, *and* that there are better and worse ways of categorising artworks. As Walton warns, placing a work in the wrong category can distort its aesthetic effects.

My view appears to fall short of this as it pulls away from critical and appreciative practice that happily sees Kapoor's works as contemporary art. However, I claim that my approach is actually in direct accordance with Davies proposal.

To see this, note that for Davies not just any critical or appreciative practice will be relevant to the follower of the pragmatic constraint. One should only attend to the accounts produced by *reflective* critics and appreciators. I have attempted to attend to the accounts of those who reflect upon their understanding of the term contemporary and who attempt to reckon with the difficulties the term raises. As such, my view pays attention to the kinds of critical and appreciative responses Davies thinks qualifies as the proper candidates for analysis.

Davies also notes that once the reflective reasoning behind the usage of a particular art concept has been made explicit, it can be subjected to rational assessment. We can question whether a given reflective account of artistic practice chimes with the critical goals of the practice, the values it tries to pursue, or the values that the works it tries to speak for actually take to be their objects. I have done this over these two chapters by looking at the historical, conceptual, and critical dilemmas that Foster thinks contemporary art has fallen into. I have taken this to set the pace for the goals of the practice and have used this as a yard stick for assessing various reflective accounts of what makes contemporary art distinct. In doing so, I have attempted to show where views fail to fully make sense of certain problems, or where their own answers require further elaboration. I have attempted to provide a reasoned account of what I take to be the most promising strategy for responding to Foster's challenge.

On Davies view, though the philosopher must attend closely to actual artworld practice, the pragmatic constraint does not require the philosopher to simply endorse everything they find there. There will be many unreflective uses of various concepts and categories, and there will be uses that appear reflective, but, on rational reflection, fail to perform any of the tasks they set themselves. The point of the pragmatic constraint is not to simply get us to attend to all artworld practice and to try to incorporate every aspect of it into our theories. Stating his view again in reference to the ontology of art, Davies holds that

The claim is ... that a theoretical account of our commerce with artworks stands in an essentially normative, and not merely descriptive, relationship to the norms that operate in actual critical practice and the judgements in accordance with those norms

that we actually make. A proposed ontology of art must cohere with a theoretical representation of the norms that *should* govern the judgements that critics make concerning works. (20)⁴⁸

I endorse this understanding of the account of I have offered here. I have arrived not simply at a description of the often confused and vague usage of the term ‘contemporary art.’ Rather, I have, through assessment of reflective accounts of contemporary art, arrived at a normative account of what view of contemporary art *should* govern our practices. When trying to assess an artwork *as* contemporary art, we should not only attend to its participation in absolute heterogeneity, but also its engagement with the crises of contemporaneity. As such, I recommend that there doesn’t seem to be much purpose in calling many of Kapoor, Sillman, Eliasson, and Gormley’s non-engaged artworks contemporary art. My hunch is that they have been placed within this category simply because the term is often unreflectively used as a placeholder term for ‘recent gallery-based art’ by many in the contemporary artworld, without any clear underlying reasons for its application.

However, it is important to clarify the extent of the view I am putting forward. I hold that it is best within critical practice to assess whether specific artworks are contemporary, rather than specific artists. The reason for this is that one and the same artist can make engaged, topical works one day, and works dealing with perennial themes the next. For instance, many of Eliasson’s major works like *Ice Watch* (2018) or the *Little Sun Project* (2012-ongoing) are explicitly engaged with climate crisis. It is appropriate to assess these works as contemporary art, but not to assess his other works in this way. Likewise, a major contemporary artist like Damien Hirst in fact only sometimes makes works that are apt to be considered contemporary art. His ongoing series of *Spot Paintings* or *Spin Paintings* would appear to be non-engaged formal exercises in colour relations, structure, and repetition. Likewise, the series of *Kaleidoscope Paintings*, in which butterflies are arranged to mimic mandalas or stained-glass windows, or his various animals suspended in formaldehyde could also be seen as non-engaged in the way they play on timeless themes of life, death and faith. But Hirst has other works, such as his series of *Medicine Cabinets* or his diamond skull *For the Love of God* (2007), that

⁴⁸ This normative approach to metaphysics has, of late, become highly popular under the label of ‘conceptual engineering’ – Cappelen (2020) – or ‘conceptual ethics’ – Burgess and Plunkett (2013a.; 2013b.; 2020). On both views, the idea, broadly, is that philosophers often engage in the project of proposing how agents should alter concepts or constructing new concepts that they should accept. For applications of this view to the metaphysics of art and to legal concerns about appropriation art, see Thomasson (2010) and Cantalamessa (2020).

seem to more directly engage with the contemporary issues of the proliferation of the market in prescription drugs or ironically reflects upon the amount of money and celebrity status lavished on works made by living artists in the contemporary artworld. However, Hirst's case is interesting because it is also possible that it will not always be clear, from a cursory glance and interpretation, whether or not some of his works are engaged or non-engaged: perhaps the industrial quantities of *Spot* and *Spin* paintings Hirst pumps out are really, as an extended performance of the very act of producing near identical paintings, a reflection upon the ways neoliberal modes of production invade art, making them not as non-engaged as they first appeared. Sometimes deciding whether a work is contemporary or not will be an instructive and illuminating critical task, pushing past appearances to uncover deeper aspects of engagement with live crises in apparently non-contemporary works.

Though my normative approach to understanding what makes art contemporary may sound drastically exclusive, I think it is actually a boon to critical practice. It helps us to see that some works may be better appreciated in the other categories in which they can be placed. *At the Edge of the World* is not only, putatively, a work of contemporary art, but also a work of monumental art, a minimalist work, an installation, and perhaps also work of spiritual art. If we place Kapoor's work in the category of contemporary art as I have formulated it and try to look for how it is engaged with crises of contemporaneity, we struggle to find any clear evidence of engagement. As such, we may be urged to issue negative judgements on the work – it's just not very compelling as a work of contemporary art. Indeed, it may come across as worryingly quietist, especially compared to urgent works like Sasnal's. But this is just not a fair way to judge Kapoor's work. It is clearly loading critical criteria upon the work that it is not in any way attempting meet. The warning is that works made in the present – *even* those that are highly innovative in their approaches to form, medium, genre, and style – can be done a critical disservice by placing them in the category of contemporary art. Appreciating Kapoor's work in the other categories to which it belongs may draw our attention more closely to features of the work that are rightly worthy of praise – its play with perception, its impressive scale, its contemplative, timeless nature. With the view of contemporary art, I have provided in hand, the artist, critic, curator, or art historian is in a better condition to ask whether contemporary art is an apt category for understanding a work or not, and whether it might not be better served by being framed in a more precise way.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have delineated the features of my own approach to contemporary art. I have argued that we can understand what it means to reflect upon the historical period of contemporaneity in a more precise way: contemporary art engages with the crises of contemporaneity. Contemporary art attempts to respond to live issues, and in doing so actively attempts to bring its audiences into the project of intervening in the negotiation of historical meaning. I have finished by stepping back and assessing how well my account tracks artworld practice. I have made explicit that the account of contemporary art I have offered is not simply a descriptive account, but a normative one that arises from assessment of the views of reflective participants in contemporary art. In assessing an artwork *as* contemporary art, I propose that we *should* attend to the ways in which it engages with crises.

Chapter 3: Cognitive Engagement and Knowledge

3.1. Introduction

With an understanding of the distinct features of contemporary art in hand, my project in the next three chapters is to lay out what I take to be one of the main ways contemporary art guides and improves engagement. I will place my focus on the way that much contemporary art aims to improve our *cognitive standing* on the crises that surround us.⁴⁹ This moves my argument into the broader research project within philosophy of art known as ‘aesthetic cognitivism.’ My proposal is that aesthetic cognitivism helps the philosopher of contemporary art to clarify the exact ways in which cognitive engagement take place, whilst also helping to make further sense of what it means to appreciate a work *as* contemporary art. However, I will show that offering a cognitivist account of contemporary art requires the philosopher to be precise about the exact epistemic states they take engaged, crisis-directed art to strive towards. As we will see, this is not a straightforward task.

I begin, in §3.2., with a justification of my focus on the cognitive dimension of engagement. Whilst this is not the only form engagement can take, I argue that there are several reasons to think that improving our cognitive standing must be a central to engaging with crises. I then outline three general ways in which our cognitive standing on a crisis might be improved – better grasping the facts that set a crisis in context, better grasping the nature of the problems at the heart of the crisis, and better grasping what viable lines of redress might be. In §3.3., I will turn to some artistic examples to illustrate the importance of cognitive engagement, focussing on the genre of institutional critique.

In §3.4. I will fit my project within the broader program of aesthetic cognitivism. I propose that one popular way to try to make sense of the cognitive value of art is to show how artworks provide audiences with knowledge, which results in a family of views I will call K-cognitivism. I will attempt to apply this view to works of institutional critique in two ways. In §3.5. I will consider what I call a ‘narrow’ variant of this view, which proposes that the cognitive value of art is found in the ways in which it gives us propositional knowledge. In

⁴⁹ Throughout this chapter, I will follow the convention within aesthetic cognitivism of using the terms ‘cognitive’ and ‘epistemic’ interchangeably.

§3.6. I will look at an alternative ‘broad’ variant, which proposes that the cognitive value of art is found in the ways in which it gives us non-propositional knowledge, looking specifically at proposals that art can provide us with experiential knowledge. In both cases, I will emphasise that the best case for K-cognitivism can be made by understanding how it leads to cognitive engagement *through* art, rather than cognitive engagement *in* art. However, in §3.7. I will argue that though these views provide many helpful insights, they are ultimately too narrow in their scope and piecemeal in their approach to deal with contemporary art. I argue that these limitations can be traced to the specific conceptual demands knowledge places on how we understand cognitive value.

3.2. Cognising Crises

The move to focussing exclusively on cognitive engagement may look somewhat arbitrary. In the last chapter I proposed that a key feature of contemporary art is that it attempts to engage its audience in crises of contemporaneity by getting them to actively employ their cognitive faculties and practical abilities in order to improve their standing on the crisis. As I hinted, this framing clearly admits of many different routes to actually achieving improvement, and this openness is intentional. One may improve one’s standing on a crisis by not simply thinking about it, but by actually acting to intervene and alter the course of crisis-inducing events. This may involve engaging in activism, running for political office, or working at a policy thinktank. But there are also more subtle ways engagement takes place. Yuriko Saito (2007: 58-103) has argued that reshaping our aesthetic experience of cultivated nature and the built environment might help us towards new, improved responses to climate crises. Likewise, others have argued that altering our aesthetic responses to different kinds of bodies may help to make progress on crises of stereotyping and marginalisation that arise in globalised, networked societies (Irvin, 2016; Widdows, 2018).

Practical and aesthetic engagement are both found in contemporary art and must be part of any complete account of engagement. I freely admit that, by focussing on improvements in cognitive standing, I am only providing a partial account of engagement.⁵⁰ However, I think there are good reasons to put significant focus on this specific dimension of engagement. One

⁵⁰ This is the key reason I take this thesis to only be *a* philosophy of contemporary art. *The* philosophy of contemporary art – understood as a more comprehensive approach to the field – would attempt to seriously explicate these other kinds of engagement.

reason for this is that practical and aesthetic engagement both require agents to deploy their cognitive stock of beliefs and concepts. For instance, the activities of deliberating, voting, and petitioning that constitute civic engagement are improved when citizens are well informed about the details of issues they are attempting to grapple with, and severely limited when they are not (Talisso, 2020). Likewise, many hold that accessing the aesthetic value of artworks (Walton, 1970) or even the natural world (Parsons, 2002) does not just arrive by simply experiencing them, but rather requires significant contextual knowledge which directs appreciators to properties that are most salient for understanding something's aesthetic value. Improving our cognitive engagement often directly helps to improve our practical and aesthetic engagement.

However, I have a more specific reason for focussing on cognitive engagement. Scholars of the concept of crisis often emphasise its distinctly epistemic dimension. For example, Janet Roitman argues that crisis-claims serve at least three distinctly epistemic purposes. First, in giving narrative order and significance to confusing events, crisis-claims help to ease comprehension: “crisis is mobilised in narrative constructions to mark out or designate ‘moments of truth’ ... defined as turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology.” (Roitman, 2014: 3) By picking out occurrences and decisions, and showing why they are significant and explanatorily central, a crisis-claim helps to give a set of events an intelligible narrative and makes them tractable for further inquiry.⁵¹ Second, crises have a revelatory nature, bringing obscure aspects of social life into bold relief: “crisis moments are defined as instances when normativity is laid bare, such as when the contingent or partial quality of knowledge claims – principles, suppositions, premises, criteria, and logical or causal relations – are disputed, critiqued, challenged, or disclosed.” (3) Crises thus help to bring into view the particular normative structure of a form of life, bring hidden assumptions into the light, and show up the limitations and conflicts that it currently faces.⁵² But more than this, by revealing the contingency of social norms crises also reveal that our forms of life could be otherwise, and are thus potentially subject to intervention, manipulation, and change. Third, focussing on the point of view of those caught within crises, Roitman proposes that “crisis is posited as an epistemological impasse and ... is

⁵¹ It is for this reason that Reinhart Koselleck proposed that the very discipline of history – as the field of studying historical time – could only emerge once the concept of crisis began to be applied to social and political affairs – see Koselleck (1988: 158-87).

⁵² For further analysis of the way in which crises illuminate the often hidden norms of social life, see Jaeggi (2018: 78-81).

claimed to found the possibility for other historical trajectories or even for a (new) future.” (Roitman, 2014: 3-4) Crisis-claims help agents to see new possibilities and to set plans into motion to pursue them. However, here Roitman briefly suggests that crises can be construed in a more negative way. Even though they may lead to some clarity, especially for those studying them from afar, for those caught within an increasingly uninhabitable form of life crises appear as an ‘epistemological impasse’, creating confusion, insecurity, and deep disagreement. Part of the urgency and affective weight of crisis-claims comes from their demand that we improve upon our dire epistemological situation, pushing ourselves to better understand how a crisis has come about and to get a grasp on what might be done.

Crises are thus distinct epistemological challenges *and* epistemological opportunities. But, given their complex, conflicted, and often unresolved nature, how might one go about actually improving one’s cognitive standing on a crisis?⁵³ I suggest that there are three main ways to do this. The first two match the ‘descriptive’ mode of engagement outlined in §2.3.. One way to do this is to find out exactly which factors have led to a form of life falling into crisis. This involves clarifying the nature of the different competing norms active within a form of life, formulating a coherent narrative of events that have led to tension and conflict, and working out how other external factors do or do not contribute to the crisis. A second way to do this, closely linked to the first, is by trying to precisely clarify and represent the particular problems that a form of life faces. This can involve identifying the exact nature of the normative conflicts that those within forms of life face, or specifying the pressing questions that confront them. Both of these descriptive forms of cognitive engagement can lead to a third kind of cognitive response, which more fits the profile of what I referred to as ‘countering’ a crisis. It involves formulating plans for response and analysing their outcomes, charting the possibility space that a particular crisis makes apparent, trying to find apt moves

⁵³ I will note that this question marks the point at which my approach to contemporary art’s epistemology breaks off from a parallel approach undertaken by the art theorist Tom Holert (2020). Holert is primarily interested in the ways in which contemporary art becomes embroiled within or attempts to resist the power of ‘knowledge economies’: the various ways in which power is exerted by measuring, quantifying, and computing. This leads to a situation in which certain forms of knowing – especially those that can be easily measured, quantified, and computed – are culturally valued, and other kinds of knowing – be it embodied forms of knowledge, knowledge produced by marginalised groups, knowledge produced by pre-colonial, indigenous epistemologies – is systematically disvalued. Holert’s approach is curious, insofar as it advances no positive epistemology of its own – it regularly uses the term knowledge without ever attempting to say what knowledge might be. Though I agree with many of the proposals Holert makes about the ways in which contemporary art becomes embroiled within crises of knowledge production, my project attempts to fill in what positive epistemological grounding could be given to understand how it is that art (or any other domain that targets crises) actually improves or diminishes our cognitive standing.

within this possibility space that might redress the problems identified, and trying to pursue and reflect upon such responses. We could call this ‘experimenting’ upon a crisis.

In engaging in these three kinds of activity, I hold that one makes all manner of cognitive and epistemic gains: one acquires apt beliefs about the exact nature of the crisis, one screens out misconceptions, one grasps how various factors contribute to each other, one attempts to understand different viewpoints on the crisis, one formulates questions, problems, and experiments that drive inquiry forwards. In doing so, one both responds to the epistemic problems that face those involved in crises and capitalises on the epistemic opportunities a crisis offers. Indeed, it is often the case that cognitive engagement with an issue leads to these three kinds of cognitive engagement all being active at once and becoming closely entangled. For instance, clarifying a problem or formulating a solution will bring into view new contextual features that contribute to a crisis. Likewise, it is a truism to say that a well formulated problem often contains within it apt directions towards a solution.⁵⁴ We should thus expect cognitive engagement with a crisis to be a complex affair, requiring agents to try and grasp how many different aspects of crises bear upon each other, and to engage in many different kinds of cognitive activity at different levels of detail and broadness.

3.3. Institutional Critique

To show how cognitive engagement actually occurs within contemporary art and bring forth its philosophical puzzles I will focus on the genre of institutional critique. This genre exemplifies the key features of contemporary art identified in chapters 1 and 2. Works fall within this genre not for the specific media, art form, or styles they employ. Rather, works in this genre commit to a shared project of revealing and, sometimes, attempting to redress normative conflicts within institutions. Canonical examples of institutional critique have focussed their attention on crises within the institutions of the artworld, such as museums, galleries, and the art market. Artists like Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher, Martha Rosler, Guerrilla Girls, Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson, Maria Eichhorn, and Cameron Rowland have attempted, in various ways, to show that these apparently neutral cultural institutions wield power and shape the way we think about what art is and the kinds of values it should and shouldn’t attempt to realise. In particular, many of these artists have attempted to show that

⁵⁴ On the interaction between different stages of inquiry, see Dewey (1938: 101-120).

crises internal to artworlds reflect larger local and global crises beyond the walls of the gallery, such as crises of persistent xenophobia and prejudice, financial crises, and crises of inequality, war, or political polarisation. But what is often a target of critique is the way art institutions adopt ideologies that obscure art's participation in these crises, cultivating an ignorance of the connection between art and the world beyond the gallery.

A striking feature of works of institutional critique is that they make great use of the artistic potential afforded by exploring the outer reaches of absolute heterogeneity. For instance, artists like Broodthaers and Wilson have created exhibitions made only of found objects or other people's art; Asher has made works that are constituted simply by the act of removing walls in galleries to expose their offices and storage spaces; Eichhorn has made works that consist in closing the gallery for a period of time; Rowland has worked with legal agreements forged by the artist, gallery owner, and their legal representatives; Fraser has mounted fake gallery tours or sold a night of sex with the artist to the highest bidder; Guerrilla Girls make public billboard campaigns.⁵⁵ Importantly, this formal and stylistic experimentation is not some additional anarchic flourish added to the pursuit of engagement. Rather, taking up novel, experimental approaches to the use of medium, form, genre, and style directly contributes to sharpening their critical projects. To look more closely at this intertwining of engagement and experimentation, I will focus on three specific projects: Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social system, as of May 1, 1971*, and *Sol Goldman and Alex DiLorenzo Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social system, as of May 1, 1971* (both 1971, henceforth referred to as *Shapolsky* and *Goldman*), and Santiago Sierra's *Space Closed Space by Corrugated Steel* (2002).

Shapolsky and *Goldman* take as their subject the distribution of property in New York city. The work consists of hundreds of photographs, taken by Haacke, of the facades of buildings owned by the titular real estate moguls (Fig. 13. and Fig. 14.). These pictures are produced as silver gelatin prints and are displayed alongside typewritten information stating the property's address, block and lot number, size, building type, the holder of the mortgage, assessed land value, and total assessed value. In addition, Haacke presented two kinds of charts, which list

⁵⁵ The works I am referring to here are Broodthaers *Département des Aigles* (1968), Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992), Asher's exhibition at Claire Copley Gallery (1974), Eichhorn's *5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 Hours* (2016), Rowland's *91020000* (2016), Fraser's *Museum Highlights* (1989) and *Untitled* (2003), and Guerilla Girls' *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get Into the Met* (1989).

the corporations that hold parcels of this real-estate with linking lines used to show exchanges of mortgages and properties between them, or list the various corporations' presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, and corporate addresses (Fig. 15.). Finally, Haacke presented maps with the properties in question circled. All the information Haacke assembled was drawn from the public records of the office of New York's County Clerk, or through investigations conducted by newspapers and other public sources of information. Following gallery conventions, Haacke chose to present this information in frames, displayed clearly at eye-height on the gallery walls.

Haacke's work is striking for the ways in which eschews fictionalisation or aesthetic embellishment.⁵⁶ Rather than distance his audience from the world around them, *Shapolsky* and *Goldman* confront them with facts. The information Haacke assembles methodically yields a detailed picture of the way in which the titular real-estate moguls, better known as 'slumlords', held large swathes of tenement buildings, mostly gathered in the Lower East Side and Harlem. It shows how this portfolio, which seems to be owned by all manner of small parties, has actually remained within the possession of just the Shapolsky family or the partnership of Goldman and DiLorenzo, with the multitude of smaller companies listed acting as shell corporations or financial baronies given to various family members or close friends. The photos show the buildings to be in poor states of upkeep, and local New York audiences would perhaps know that the neighbourhoods targeted were predominantly populated by non-white, working-class households. As the audience surveys the work, the view of the city that emerges is one in which small coterie concentrate wealth into their coffers via intentionally obscured channels whilst civic duties of care for their tenants (living only a few blocks away from the Guggenheim museum, where the work was originally

⁵⁶ The work was so striking in fact that it contributed directly to the cancellation of Haacke's 1971 Guggenheim exhibition. The Museum Director Thomas Messer objected to the works being included since he feared that Haacke's work would risk a libel suit from the targeted parties, but also because "the trustees have established policies that exclude active engagement toward social and political ends. ... [A]rt may have social and political consequences but these, we believe, are furthered by indirection and by the generalised, exemplary force that works of art may exert upon the environment, not, as you propose, by using political means to achieve political ends, no matter how desirable these may appear to be in themselves." (Messer quoted in Glueck, 1971) Haacke was consequently asked to remove the two works from the exhibition, but the artist refused. Haacke sought his own legal counsel, and it was confirmed that there could be no possibility of libel and thus no grounds of cancellation. Haacke even offered to change the names of companies referred to in order to accede to the museum's understanding of 'indirection'. But the gallery rejected these amendments. The exhibition was cancelled, and its curator was fired. As a final gesture, Haacke responded by making the cancellation as public as possible, stirring up attention in the popular press by sending them copies of Messer's letter, publishing his own statements against the decision and mobilising 130 sympathetic artists who organised an exhibition boycott of the Guggenheim. The work swiftly gained canonical status and has been widely exhibited ever since.

intended to be shown) are overlooked in favour of acquiring attractive investment portfolios. Haacke painstakingly brought into view what many contemporary commentators called a deep civic crisis.⁵⁷ Rather than attempt to use art to distance his audiences from the world, he used it move them towards engagement.

Santiago Sierra's *Space Closed Space by Corrugated Steel* (2002) consists of a corrugated steel barrier erected across the front of the Lisson Gallery, London, blocking audiences from entering the gallery throughout the run of the exhibition (Fig. 16.). This gesture was carefully timed to coincide with the reopening of the gallery after months of redevelopment. Artworld audiences who arrived at its *vernissage*, expecting champagne and networking, were left to awkwardly congregate on the pavement or head home frustrated. But Sierra's gesture was not simply a flippant prank. In the press materials released alongside the exhibition, the artist made clear that the work was produced in response to the financial crisis that had struck Argentina. Sierra sought to confront the privileged audiences that usually attend events at commercial galleries in cities in the Global North with the frustration caused by "events in Argentina, where, following the collapse of the peso, banks pulled corrugated sheets across their buildings to stop people from withdrawing their savings." (Sierra, quoted by Goldie, 2007: 162)

Rather than confront its audience with abundant representations of the details of the crisis, as Haacke did, the strategy of Sierra's work was one of confrontation and negation. The artist here attempted to intentionally get their audience to have certain reactions of frustration and anger in order to reveal to them their own expectations of comfort, accessibility, and safety that the artworld usually catered to. In taking this in and grasping the artist's further concerns, the intent appears to be that audiences in one part of the world would come to reflect upon how their own situation might compare to those in other parts of the world. Perhaps more so than Haacke's work, this piece pushes its audience to feel their contemporaneity with other people in other parts of the world with very different senses of what matters and how society needs to change.

Both of these works exemplify the engaged and artistically experimental nature of contemporary art. I claim that both works also aspire to lead their audience to serious

⁵⁷ See Holtzman (2021), for an inquiry into the history behind the crisis and analysis of contemporary views upon it.

cognitive engagement with specific crises, informing them on the nature of injustices within or beyond the artworld, confronting them with their own implication in them, and motivating them towards attempting to act on this information. But now we confront a substantive philosophical issue: what exactly does this all amount to, epistemically speaking? How do these works actually move us to cognitively engage with crises, and what exactly does such an improvement in cognitive standing look like?

3.4. Cognitivism and Knowledge

In philosophy of art, questions about cognitive engagement fall comfortably within the research project known as ‘aesthetic cognitivism.’ Philosophers working within this domain attempt to answer two central questions: 1) How exactly does art improve our cognitive standing? 2) If an artwork is cognitively valuable, how does this bear on its value *qua* art? Call the first the ‘epistemic question’ and the second the ‘value question.’ Clearly, answering the second question is impossible without answering the first – we need to know that art actually does improve our cognitive standing before we can assess whether this contributes to its artistic value or not. But answering the second question is often taken to be just as crucial as the first. Answering it helps us to understand why insight has any role to play in our evaluation of something as an artwork that is distinct from the role it might play in our evaluation of something as a piece of scientific research, investigative journalism, or everyday inquiry. It is also worth noting that cognitivists can face two kinds of anti-cognitivist challenge. Some anti-cognitivists attempt to target the epistemic question, arguing that art cannot improve our cognitive standing, necessarily leading to negative answers to the value question. But there are also more moderate anti-cognitivists who are willing to allow that the epistemic question can be answered, whilst denying that cognitive value has any connection to artistic value.

In the remainder of this thesis, I will attempt to answer both questions. As proposed at the start of this chapter, providing answers is of direct benefit to the philosopher of contemporary art. Finding a positive answer to the epistemic question helps to substantiate the nature of engagement with the epistemological impasses and opportunities presented by crises. Finding an answer to the value question helps to understand why feeling the force of an artwork’s cognitive engagement with a crisis is crucial to critically understanding and evaluating it as contemporary art. The claim I want to defend is not simply that contemporary art just

happens to lead to an audience improving their cognitive standing, but that it does so in some way that makes it correct to praise or criticise the artwork *as* art. In this chapter and the next I focus on the epistemic question, and in chapter 5 I turn to put my full attention on the value question.

Before proceeding, two observations. First, I am not attempting to try to defend the claim that every work of contemporary art will successfully lead us to insight. Rather, I am trying to argue that this is something that engaged contemporary artworks strive towards as a goal. Grasping whether or not they lead their audiences to insight into a crisis is important to understand how the work succeeds *or fails as* contemporary art. My claim is simply that, when appreciating an artwork *as* contemporary art, we often have reason to inquire as to whether it does or does not improve our cognitive standing on a crisis. The version of cognitivism I will pursue is thus one that attempts to provide a framework for appreciation and evaluation, rather than one that makes a constitutive evaluative claim about all contemporary art.

Second, though I think cognitivism directly aids my project, research in this area has mostly focussed upon literary fiction. Whilst there are many works of contemporary art that can unproblematically be described as ‘literature’ and ‘fiction’ and are thus amenable to standard lines of cognitivist argument, there also many works that cannot be easily assimilated within these categories. In focussing on Haacke and Sierra’s works (and on the examples I focus on in the next two chapters) I am attempting to expand cognitivist attention towards artworks that downplay many of distinct things that literary cognitivists have focussed on. The works I look at are not best conceived of as fictions, they are either not or only partly linguistic, they do not provide detailed depictions of the lives of human characters, and they do not contain clear narratives. As such, I will attempt to keep literary cognitivism at some distance, since many of the complex and advanced cognitivist arguments developed within this strand of cognitivist research can’t easily be applied wholesale to the works of contemporary art that I will focus on. It remains for future study to bring the form of cognitivism I pursue into closer union with literary cognitivism.

I choose to start by attempting to frame cognitive engagement as a form of what I will call ‘K-cognitivism.’ The basic claim of K-cognitivism is that it is best to articulate the exact nature of cognitive improvement in terms of the *knowledge* acquired via art. K-cognitivism has enjoyed much popularity, especially through the late twentieth century. It has seemed an obvious way

to understand cognitivism since knowledge is taken to be the central focus of epistemology. It is the concept that captures our best epistemic standing on the world, it is often thought to be an achievement for the agent that realises it (Sosa, 2007; Greco, 2010), and it is even thought to have final epistemic value (Kvanvig, 2003). If the cognitivist is attempting to make sense of the idea that art achieves genuinely valuable insights into the world, finding knowledge in art has seemed a clear, epistemically reputable way to secure this project.

The K-cognitivist philosopher of contemporary art attempts to argue that contemporary art helps its audience to engage with crises by giving them knowledge. If this argument can be substantiated, it promises to provide a clear route to explaining not only how art helps its audience engage with crises, but also a straightforward account of how audiences improve their standing on a crisis: they move from ignorance to knowledge. To assess this argument, we need to specify exactly what might be meant by knowledge and how this might further shape approaches to K-cognitivism. This can be done in two main ways, one of which I call a 'narrow' approach, the second of which I call a 'broad' approach.

3.5. Narrow K-Cognitivism

The first way in which a philosopher might interpret K-cognitivism is as an attempt to claim that art gives us propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge, or 'knowledge *that p*', is often taken to be the central object of study in epistemology. What I will call narrow K-cognitivism follows this emphasis and attempts to account for cognitive engagement in terms of the propositional knowledge that art can supply. Understanding exactly what conditions one has to meet to actually have propositional knowledge is a notoriously contested question, but for my purposes I will stipulate the following, moderately uncontroversial conditions. First, knowledge is factive: if one knows that *p* it follows that *p*. Second, to have knowledge, an agent must not only grasp the facts, but also have the belief that *p*. Additionally, third, it is often assumed that knowledge should be arrived at non-fortuitously, and that it should be attended by some form of support, whether that be evidence, good reasons, direct experience, reliable belief-forming processes, or the display of epistemic virtue. Rather than attempt to choose a single support condition, I simply will allow that knowledge requires true belief supported by a reasonable amount of confidence, leaving it open as to exactly what the appropriate amount is and how such a level of confidence is reached.

The task for the narrow K-cognitivist is to show that a contemporary artwork can lead audiences to gain a cognitive standing that fulfils these conditions. However, from the way I have just framed narrow K-cognitivism there is an ambiguity about what exactly it demands from art and from audiences. Here the distinction between engagement *in* art and engagement *through* art made in §2.3. is useful. One way in which the narrow K-cognitivist project could be understood is that it is attempting to defend the idea that audiences can find and appreciate knowledge *in* art. On this view, the artwork is taken to contain some proposition that it then conveys to its audience. The audience improves their knowledge of the crisis much in the same manner as they do via other sources of testimony. When gaining knowledge via testimony an agent comes to know something simply by being told some true, well-supported belief by another agent. But a second way in which the narrow K-cognitivist project could be understood is as an attempt to capture the idea that an agent gains propositional knowledge *through* art. By thinking through the prompts offered by an artwork, an audience can arrive at propositional knowledge relevant to a crisis. The audience doesn't just acquire a proposition from an artwork, but rather uses an artwork to guide themselves towards true beliefs held with reasonable confidence. In the first case, the audience simply credits the artwork for the propositional knowledge they have acquired. In the second case, the audience has had to engage in more autonomous cognitive labour in order to move from the prompts offered by the artwork to propositional knowledge.⁵⁸ The narrow K-cognitivist can attempt to defend both views. However, I think it is often far harder to defend the former than the latter, especially when confronted with demanding contemporary artworks. Seeing why will help us to see that philosophers of contemporary art need to be judicious in how they understand the role artists and audiences play in engagement.

To investigate the ways narrow K-cognitivism makes sense of cognitive engagement, I will focus on *Shapolsky* and *Goldman*. There is no question that Haacke's works are filled with information. By presenting data about property ownership in New York in language, through captioned and aesthetically unembellished photographs, and through diagrammatic communication like maps or lines that mark connections between two pieces of information,

⁵⁸ One may object here that gaining knowledge via testimony is not simply something an agent can do by being passive. When listening to another, we have to employ all kinds of interpretive skills in order to grasp what an agent is saying. As such the distance between knowledge *in* art and knowledge *through* art may not be so great. I accept this observation, but I think it is still important to retain a distinction between knowledge *in* and knowledge *through*. In the latter case, a higher degree of autonomous cognitive labour is demonstrated, the audience having to take far more charge of making further moves in inquiry. In the former only basic interpretive abilities may be necessary and the exercise of intellectual autonomy is very slight.

Shapolsky and *Goldman* can lead their audience to truly believe that in May 1971 a particular building was at a particular location, that it looked a certain way, and that it was owned by a particular person or corporation that was part of the business holdings of the Shapolskys or Goldman and Di Lorenzo. When grasped *en masse* – and Haacke seems to intend this by presenting the data as lists and presenting the different parts of this work together on one wall of the gallery – the various facts conveyed licence inferences to further propositions, such as ‘two corporations own large swathes of Manhattan real estate’ and ‘they manage their holdings through various shell corporations.’ When the audience appreciates that Haacke took much of his data from a trustworthy, impartial source – the County Clerk’s office – or went out and took photographs of each building himself, then one could further say that not only does Haacke get us to acquire true beliefs, but these beliefs are well-supported by Haacke’s own epistemically reliable and responsible methods of inquiry. So well supported is the work that audiences who wish to try and deny this or simply ignore it will have a hard task ahead of them. The critical force of the work comes from the way it calmly and firmly gets the audience to see the incontrovertible facts of a crisis taking place on their very doorstep. The narrow K-cognitivist could conclude that they can find much knowledge *in* Haacke’s artworks. This appears to be a clear way to understand their exemplary cognitive value.

But the narrow K-cognitivist may wish to also defend further, more demanding claims about the propositional knowledge Haacke’s work hands over to its audience. An example of such a proposal can be found in art critic Rosalyn Deutsche’s response to *Shapolsky* and *Goldman*. She proposes that the work reveals that:

The investment activities [of the slumlords] do not serve the interests of poor tenants, nor does the provision of services to those tenants seem to provide high rate of return on investment. Once the drive for profit through capital accumulation and appropriation of rents is seen as the principal factor governing the provision and condition of housing, serious doubts arise as to whether the needs of low-income residents can ever be met. (Deutsche, 1996: 180)

Interpreted in the terms of propositional knowledge, the narrow K-cognitivist could frame Deutsche’s response to the work as follows: from *Shapolsky* and *Goldman*, she learns that property is distributed in New York city such that poor, socially marginalised tenants are exploited by small groups of landlords, who favour profit over correcting their negligence of their tenants. In this instance it is not just the case that Haacke’s work conveys basic

knowledge about the details of properties in New York but brings these together to make a more normatively rich proposition that divulges the nature of the crisis at large. Deutsche sees not only the facts, but also the live problems in the property system, and the reasons to think these problems should be of serious concern. As such, she sees the work as getting its audience to also see a social and economic system that is broken, filled with injustices, and dangerously in decline.

When attempting to grapple with contemporary art, it is the latter responses that the K-cognitivist may most wish to defend, for it clearly expresses an improvement of cognitive standing on a crisis. However, there are two main worries that can be raised against the idea that this is knowledge that can be said to be *in* Haacke's artwork. The first is that Haacke's work does not actually convey this broader proposition. The second is that the work cannot adequately support the proposition. If these worries are substantiated, we cannot say that Haacke has simply handed over complex propositional knowledge of a crisis to his audience.

One way to motivate the first worry is to observe that only the basic facts about property location and ownership are explicitly asserted within the work's content. A reason to think this is that only some of Haacke's work is actually made from symbol systems that can convey propositions in syntactically transparent ways. Depending on how strict one's view is, it may only be the case that the linguistic aspects of Haacke's work do this, since sentences in natural languages are usually taken to be the prime bearers of propositional content. For some philosophers, key elements of Haacke's work – the pictures or the maps (Camp, 2018a; Kulvicki, 2020: 146-48) – don't convey propositions because these forms of representation do not have the same semantic clarity and consistency as a natural language does, or do not attempt to say specific things about the world. This list could be extended to other less obvious aspects of Haacke's work that seem to be crucial to conveying attitudes about the role of art in civic life. It may be unclear what proposition his choice to frame his evidence or place it on a gallery wall are meant to convey, since these gestures simply don't seem to be the kind of things that clearly state a proposition. If this is right, then both some of the basic propositions we might want to assign to Haacke's work – that such and such a building has a spatial relation to another building, as represented by a map – and the more grand claims about the injustices suffered by tenants, which have no clear statement anywhere in the content of the work, quickly seem to be propositions that the work cannot actually clearly convey. As we begin to move our frame of analysis from Haacke's work to the dizzying array

of means contemporary artists use – say abstract paint marks, subtly changing intensities of light, rumbling noise – the worries over whether these have syntaxes that are clear enough to express propositions increase by magnitudes.

This line of critique shouldn't phase the narrow K-cognitivist, nor should it stall the project of asserting that there is knowledge *in* art. One direct way to meet the challenge is to make use of many arguments that exist supporting the idea that things like maps and pictures can make assertions and convey propositions (Korsmeyer, 1995; Grzankowski, 2015). However, I will put these individual defences of different representational means to one side, since they take me into philosophical issues far from my main topic. A more capacious line of defence is for the K-cognitivist to simply hold that many of the propositions we take artworks to convey are not explicitly expressed in the work. Rather, they emerge through the audience's interpretive exploration of the work.⁵⁹

One way to substantiate this claim is to argue that Deutsche has grasped the *theme* of *Shapolsky* and *Goldman*. The themes of artworks are usually characterised as the broad, summative views on some aspect of the world that an artwork attempts to express to its audience. Importantly, thematic statements are not simply reducible to the specific things an artwork explicitly communicates to its audience.⁶⁰ They are aspects of a work that emerge through the interpretive labour of audiences, but which audiences still tend to see as something that an artist has intentionally attempted to express and should be credited for. Bringing together the specific facts that Haacke has conveyed, Deutsche, through her interpretive labour, has arrived at a broader, more normatively rich statement on the crisis unfolding in New York in 1974. In doing so, it could be claimed she has arrived at an interpretation of the theme of Haacke's work.

The defender of knowledge *in* art can use this distinction between implied thematic statements and explicit subject-level statements to show that even if an artwork doesn't outright tell us something, it is an uncontroversial part of art criticism that we regularly attempt to detect and appreciate the broad thematic statements that we take the artwork to be

⁵⁹ Indeed, one may hold that interpretive engagement extends to all of our propositional knowledge. We have to pass incoming data, be it sensations or the propositions stated by other humans, through interpretive filters in order to make sense of them, fill in further details that are being left out, consider whether the source is trustworthy or not, etc. It is often not the case that propositional knowledge simply imprints itself upon us.

⁶⁰ There are clearly some edge cases, such as a work like *Paradise Lost* which begins by stating its 'argument.'

making. If our thematic interpretations of works happen to have propositional form and turn out to track truths in the world, then the K-cognitivist has a clear route to arguing that there can be much propositional knowledge that an artwork can convey to us, even if cannot be clearly reduced to any single part of the work's explicit content.

Defenders of the thematic analysis are not always then defenders of the idea that a theme will always be truth-apt (Beardsley, 1981: 404), nor that it will always be something that we can reduce down to a simple propositional unit (John, 2016: 206, 212-14). On these views, a theme is taken to be more like an open-ended perspective we can take on the world, rather than a simple statement. However, I do not take this as decisive prohibition against the idea that some artworks could attempt to express more specific thematic statements, and that audiences could attempt to arrange their responses into propositions. The worry I want to pursue is that, in the case of Haacke's work, such a response seems to run counter to the intentions of the artist.⁶¹ By the artist's own admission, his work has no specific, broad statement on the injustices of the property system that he is trying to convey. One reason to think this comes from Haacke's statements on this particular work. In the run-up to his 1974 Guggenheim exhibition, the museum raised the worry that the works would be seen as libellous by the Shapolskys and Goldman and DiLorenzo and that these parties would pursue legal action. Haacke and his own legal counsel claimed that this fear was misguided because "The works contained no evaluative content and were legally unassailable. ... In the judgement of several lawyers intimately familiar with the material in question ... there were no grounds for a libel suit because the information I planned to display is true, it is on public record, the manner of presentation was not defamatory" (Haacke, 2016: 57-8). Whilst the works could lead an audience to a critical view on the situation Haacke presents, he did not see the work as attempting to convey any such evaluative claims.

⁶¹ Here my argument hits upon a point of some controversy. There is an ongoing debate as to exactly how far we should regard an artist's intentions as governing our response to art. I am assuming that Haacke's actual stated intentions *are* important to grasp what the work is meant to do, and that we should take them seriously. In doing so, I am following a line of 'actual intentionalist' thought popularised by Carroll (2001: 197-215). This line of thought has become particularly popular with various Anglo-American philosophers studying contemporary art – see Maes (2010: 134-138), Lorenzini (2019: 195-204), and Irvin (2021). However, I do not wish to try to press upon this assumption too hard. Even if my assumptions about intentionalism are misguided, the basic point I am making still stands. If there is nothing that the work intends to convey, then there is no knowledge that can be said to be *in* the work. It seems to me that anti-intentionalist approaches to K-cognitivism will default to accounts of knowledge *through* art.

A further reason to think such attempts to find broad knowledge *in* Haacke's work are misguided is that they misunderstand the medium of the artwork. Haacke did intend for his work to produce reactions but did not specify what kinds of reactions it was meant to produce. This openness was integral to the work. *Goldman* and *Shapolsky* are both referred to as 'real-time systems.' Haacke had used this term to name the medium of his work since the early sixties. The idea behind real-time systems art was that the artist would put certain material or conceptual conditions in place, and that the artwork would arise from the systemic interactions generated between these conditions and their environment. For instance, Haacke's early real-time system, *Condensation Cube* (1963), consisted of the artist displaying a clear Perspex cube filled with a small amount of distilled water. As the internal temperature of the cube rose above the temperature of the room it was placed in, condensation appeared on the inner walls of the box. It was not the object itself, but the interaction between water and gallery environment that Haacke saw as the core of the artwork. *Goldman* and *Shapolsky* represent Haacke's attempt to move from simply looking at natural systems to looking at social systems, implicating audiences and their opinions more firmly into the scope of the dynamic systems he hoped to bring into view. The intention behind the work is to convey certain pieces of information to an audience, and then to see what reactions these create when combined with their prior commitments. Haacke leaves it entirely open as to what judgements audiences should then form. To try to get audiences to a specific conclusion would push against the artist's intention to simply allow systemic interactions to emerge, whatever those reactions might be. As such, *Deutsche's* statements of the injustice may be entirely correct, but they are not statements Haacke intended his work to make, even implicitly. However, if *Deutsche* attempted to fully credit Haacke for simply conveying the insights she has arrived at, she would be fundamentally misunderstanding the way the artist has conceived of their work.

Whatever complex, propositional thematic claims we might seem to derive from Haacke's work, there are reasons to think that they are not necessarily pieces of propositional knowledge that Haacke has realised and has simply attempted to record *in* the work. This may seem like a decisive statement against the possibility of finding substantial knowledge of crises *in* Haacke's work. But there are a further set of problems that can be raised against this view that are important to highlight. *Jerome Stolnitz* (1992) points out that assertions about the world we take to find in art rarely amount to knowledge because they are not sufficiently supported by the artwork. For instance, if we took Haacke's work to be making a statement

on injustices faced by tenants, since the work provides no information about the lives of tenants, how the actions of landlords affect them, or any reason to think they struggle to fight against those that are threatening their lives through neglectful property management it is hard to see how the artwork itself could be said to realise and hand over to audiences a complex piece of propositional knowledge about injustice. It provides no justification for such a claim. Moreover, the anti-cognitivist could also worry that, on the basis of the data actually provided by the artwork, the artwork could just as well support an audience who, oblivious to the demographics of Manhattan and predisposed towards coldly capitalist values, thinks the work brings them to correctly see the intelligence of the slumlords in consolidating as much wealth as possible through such subtle means. Without any evidence provided by the artwork to decisively shift viewers in either direction, it looks like the artwork could support either proposition.

The lack of support found within artworks leads Stolnitz to a further worry: perhaps the only propositional knowledge artworks can actually convey to audiences is either basic, trivial information, or knowledge from other sources that the artwork is reporting rather than discovering for itself. Stolnitz puts forward two examples to demonstrate this: from *Bleak House* we gain knowledge about how estate litigation in the Court of Chancery functioned in Victorian England, and from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* we learn about the exact details of how slaves were treated in pre-emancipation America. As with Haacke, the beliefs the reader gains are justified: Dickens was keen to say in his preface that, even though the novel was broadly fictional, he had tried as hard as possible to make sure that everything he said about this was true, and Beecher Stowe wrote an entire book to accompany *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which conveyed all the facts that the novel's depictions of slavery drew upon. But Stolnitz claims that such truths are trivial because "the truth was knowable and known before the fictions appeared." (Stolnitz, 1992: 197) In a similar way, it could be claimed that Haacke's artwork has not come to any major realisation about the world on its own grounds but has simply placed information that was already publicly accessible in a different venue. Haacke's work can certainly convey the propositional knowledge that a certain building is on a certain street owned by a certain person. But this may be too trivial and unoriginal an insight to count as something as grand as cognitively engaging with a crisis.

Together, these worries make knowledge *in art* a poor framework for grasping the cognitive engagement that Haacke's work can elicit. This is not to say that there may be works of

contemporary art that do convey knowledge in this way. An interesting example here would be the works made by the Turner-prize nominated collective of artists and lawyers Forensic Architecture. They produce lengthy videos and information rich installations that tell the audience exactly how they have used artistic ways of thinking to help investigate cases of human rights violations.⁶² They attempt to develop new forms of forensic investigation in order to find new evidence and use this to sway judges to bring cases to trial and even to issue charges. The group's gallery presentations then inform the viewers what new evidence the collective has discovered and how they have discovered it. In doing so, their works explicitly try to convey well-supported true beliefs. But this level of assertive confidence and clarity is extremely rare in contemporary art. The more formally inventive, semantically opaque, or open-ended artworks get, the harder it is to mount a clear case for finding knowledge *in* art. In looking at Haacke's work, which appears at first glance to be a prime candidate for such a form of K-cognitivist analysis, my intention has been to draw out the various challenges that are faced by those K-cognitivists who wish to try and identify cognitive engagement with crises with knowledge *in* art.

However, here making a distinction between engagement *in* art and engagement *through* art pays dividends. There is far more promise in the project of articulating what propositional knowledge can be gained *through* art. First, this better tracks Haacke's intentions. By making real-time systems, he intends to offer his audience data, arranged and displayed in particular ways, that the audience can then use in their own autonomous further inquiry into property distribution in New York. In doing so, the artwork can be used by audiences to licence certain inferences to new propositions, helping them arrive at knowledge for themselves that would not have been possible prior to their encounters with the prompts offered by the artwork. This is a more accurate response to the work as a piece of real-time systems art.

Second, focussing on knowledge *through* art better tracks how Deutsche talks about the way she has arrived at insights about the crisis of property distribution in New York:

knowledge [of property ownership in New York provided by Haacke's work]
underscores a fundamental contradiction in a larger real-estate system framing the

⁶² See, for instance, the group's investigation *Torture in Saydnaya Prison* (2018) in which they worked with the sound artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan to develop new ways for former prisoners to develop their testimonies through their memories of sounds: <https://youtu.be/KZFMwA7M1wk>.

Shapolsky operation: that between market requirements and the social needs of city residents. This contradiction ... [emerges] in the basic organisation of housing as a private investment in capitalist society. Indifference to human needs ... [is] structurally determined. Alluding to this contradiction – and Haacke always encourages viewers to explore his works' full implications – Haacke's piece, too, exceeds the limits of its investigation of Shapolsky family relations and becomes a critique of social relations of property. (Deutsche, 1985: 178)

If Deutsche gains knowledge of the way market requirements clash with the needs of citizens, it is not because Haacke's work contains this knowledge within it and Deutsche, as a perceptive critic, has uncovered it. Rather, the work gets Deutsche to this insight because it 'underscores', alludes, 'encourages viewers to explore' and 'exceeds the limits of its [the artwork's] investigations'. All of these modes of communication fall well short of assertion, but they clearly affect the course of Deutsche's own inquiry. In order to feel these effects, she has brought her own commitments to bear on the work and has found that the way Haacke has emphasised certain facts or has led her to certain open paths of inquiry have helped her move towards a better cognitive standing on a crisis. Haacke's work has provided useful prompts, but Deutsche has had to put in some autonomous cognitive labour to arrive at insight. Though the work may seem trivial on its own, its cognitive value emerges from the inferences and other further moves in inquiry it licences.

Finally, moving to talk of knowledge *through* art helps us to sidestep Stolnitz's worries about justification. Some have argued that many artworks may be best understood as offering hypotheses about the world, which audiences must test for themselves (Novitz, 1987; Kivy, 1998). In doing so, artworks welcome audiences into the process of inquiry, asking them to see whether or not a certain view of the world is justified. Going in a different direction, Noël Carroll argues that, in the case of gaining moral knowledge from art, we should expect the kind of moral theorising that art pushes its audience towards to be like that of any other moral theory: "Neither a typical [literary] narrative with respect to moral issues nor a comparable moral argument is self-certifying. We need to evaluate both in terms of broader experience." (Carroll, 2010: 381) Audiences may arrive at some moral beliefs from their interaction with art. But for moral learning to take place, they will need to go out for themselves and test these beliefs. If these beliefs turn out to be true and well supported, then they have reason to claim that they have learned from art, even though they have had to put

some cognitive work in on their own time. In a similar vein, Dieter Declerq argues that the strongest form of cognitivism will be a ‘cautious cognitivism’, which holds that art “can have significant cognitive value, as long as the knowledge it provides is complemented and tested by further inquiry.” (Declerq, 2018: 58) It thus seems that Stolnitz’s demands that artworks be, in some sense, self-certifying is overly demanding. Knowledge arises through audiences finding for themselves that the claims about the world artworks suggest are justified. As such, for knowledge to arise, the audience has to become an active and autonomous contributor to inquiry.

Focussing on knowledge *through* art is the most straightforward way to defend narrow K-cognitivism, and has the broadest application across art. I do not wish to then completely rule out the idea that there may sometimes be propositional knowledge *in* art. But as the various critiques I have presented make clear, the defender of this view faces many challenges. Moving from an emphasis on knowledge *in* art to knowledge *through* art gives us clear grounds to think that there is no immediate reason to think that the cognitive engagement contemporary art strives towards cannot sometimes be understood in narrow K-cognitivist terms. However, narrow K-cognitivism is only one route that K-cognitivists have explored. A more developed picture of the ways in which contemporary art might spur cognitive engagement emerges by extending and diversifying the view.

3.6. Broad K-Cognitivism

Broad K-cognitivists attempt to expand the scope of the ways in which art can realise knowledge. They do this by arguing that much art provides us with *non-propositional* knowledge. Following all manner of recent developments in epistemology which have brought different kinds of knowledge into better view, broad K-cognitivists have found that this provides many novel routes to understand the way art gets us to truth.

For instance, Dominic Lopes has argued that many pictorial artworks might best be understood to improve our cognitive standing by facilitating us with practical knowledge, or know-how. Paintings tell us not how things are, but rather teach us the skills necessary for ‘fine observation’ of the world around us. By attempting to grasp the way a painter has rendered the world around them by appreciating, for example, the way they have discriminated between forms, colours, or qualities of light the audience can “gain or cement a

capacity [to also discriminate perceptual features of the world in similar ways] that is exportable beyond its site of acquisition, either to seeing other pictures or seeing outside pictures.” (Lopes, 2004: 149) According to some accounts of know-how, the cognitive abilities we develop in this process needn’t be paraphrased in propositional form in order for an agent to demonstrate that they genuinely know how to do something (Hetherington, 2011).⁶³ Clearly this is the case with a painting. It does not provide us with a set of instructions to follow, but rather performs a certain highly attentive and accurate act of looking, which the audience can attempt to emulate in the wider world.

Haacke’s work could be subjected to a similar form of analysis. It shows the audience an example of a form of careful, non-judgemental empirical investigation, which they too could try to conduct for themselves. This kind of learning is evidenced by the architectural historian James Nevius (2014) who attempted to subject the same parts of New York Haacke investigated to similar analysis forty years later. In finding the same lots, attempting to record the same information, and comparing his results with Haacke, Nevius arrived a clearer picture of the way property crises in New York had shifted and changed, morphing from a crisis of neglect to a crisis of gentrification. From the artwork, Nevius gained a disposition to look at the city in a certain way, which led him to further insights.

This is one route a broad K-cognitivist could pursue. However, I am not sure the approaches canvassed thus far help to make sense of Sierra’s work. This work appears to be trying to convey no particular statement about the world to the viewer. Nor does it seem to be trying to display some know-how that the audience might also be able to take up. In simply presenting us with a shuttered building, the work seems to be the antithesis of cognitively engaged art. It seems to block us from inquiry into crises, rather than encouraging it.

However, the cognitivist Peter Goldie has used broad K-cognitivist ways of thinking to argue against such a conclusion. He points out that, in a similar way to Haacke’s work, the artwork

⁶³ A worry that an anti-cognitivist could raise here is that it is not a settled matter that certain forms of non-propositional knowledge are actually as wholly non-propositional as they appear. It has been argued that cases of knowledge how can be reduced down to the set of propositions an agent knows about their activities at any particular time (Stanley and Williamson, 2001). Unresolved controversy does not yet count against the broad K-cognitivist cause, but it does indicate that there is still more argument needed to secure the distinction between narrow and broad K-cognitivism and that securing these arguments goes far beyond the bounds of philosophy of art. I will not try to resolve the issues concerning know-how here, and simply raise it as a burden that broad K-cognitivists that pursue this route have to bear.

consists not just in the materials it is made from, but in the interactions and responses the situation engineered by the artist produces in its audiences. Goldie argues that the work intentionally tried to create “anger and frustration at being locked out and excluded from a place where one considers one has a right to be.” (2007: 162) For the privileged London artworld audience attending the opening night, experiencing these emotions may be a rare occurrence. Goldie holds that if an artwork can bring this emotional experience to the fore and cause its audience to reflect upon it, then we have reason to say that they have gained knowledge of what it is like to experience a certain set of emotions.⁶⁴ But rather than just gain this knowledge by experiencing a representation of those emotions and imagining yourself into another person’s shoes, as one might by reading about the emotional struggles of a character in a novel, Sierra’s work pushes audiences to undergo these emotions for themselves. We gain knowledge of what it is like for us, with our specific predispositions and life histories, to feel the force of an emotional reaction. Had the audience not encountered this work, they might not have come to so directly experience their own anger and frustration.

But Goldie thinks the experience goes further than simply bringing emotions to the surface. For those unaccustomed to being excluded, Goldie argues that the work enacts a process of clearing up deception about our own responses to issues: where the privileged audience initially feels anger, upon reflection they will see that this reaction was misplaced and they will see their reaction as “rather pompous and self-regarding, and thereby come to know something about their own character that might not have previously been available to them.” (163) An audience that reflects upon their own initial emotional reactions in this way also gain a deeper self-knowledge, becoming aware of how certain beliefs we hold might be erroneous or block ethical demands for empathy.

I suggest that broad K-cognitivist approaches provide further reasons for K-cognitivists to prefer emphasising discussion of knowledge *through* art rather than knowledge *in* art. The knowledge that Goldie proposes audiences gain depends heavily upon audiences working out for themselves how various aspects of the work’s provocations bear on their own knowledge of

⁶⁴ For similar broad K-cognitivist arguments directly related to tricky cases of conceptual art and institutional critique, see Schellekens (2007) and Caldarola (2021b). For further exploration of emotional learning in art, see Robinson (2005). The proposal that knowledge of ‘what it is like’ experiences cannot simply be reducible to the information one can glean about such experiences has its canonical formulations in Nagel (1974) and Jackson (1982), with defences of the non-propositional nature of such knowledge found in Lewis (1983: 130-132) and Conee (1994).

themselves, their emotions, and their social world. Sierra's work is clearly not trying to tell an audience what they should feel, for how could he know the intimate details of each audience member's emotional life? It is knowledge that only emerges from audiences' first-person perspectives. As such, in this particular case this is not simply non-propositional emotional, experiential knowledge that is best said to be *in* the artwork.

These are just samples of two possible lines of broad K-cognitivist argument. But they show that pursuing the general methodology of broad K-cognitivism – showing that there are more kinds of non-propositional knowledge to be gained through art – provides multiple routes to develop diverse accounts of K-cognitivist engagement. For instance, a further benefit of broad cognitivist views that Goldie develops is that they expand our sense of what serious cognitive engagement with a crisis might require. Simply holding a set of propositions related to a crisis might seem a rather detached way of grasping something that, as we have seen, is characterised as a having a deeply affective nature. Correctly grasping our own emotional responses, our personal experience of what something is like, or a set of new skills can all help to improve our cognitive engagement with aspects of crises that might be missed if all we look only to arrive at impersonal statements of fact. Knowing something in a more personal or active way can better help us to grasp the exact nature and urgency of the problems at the heart of a crisis and provide compelling motivation to act in certain ways. Simply arriving at judgements on the facts of the matter may not be able to get us to this more personal engagement with the crisis.

3.7. The Scope of Crises and the Limitations of Knowing

I have presented an optimistic picture of K-cognitivism. Provided we place our focus on how knowledge is gained *through* art, we can illuminate many features of cognitive engagement with crises. The formal experimentation in Haacke and Sierra's work provides no serious barrier to this. However, K-cognitivism is ultimately not the approach to cognitivism that I think philosophers of contemporary art should endorse. Knowing things about a crisis is no doubt important, and K-cognitivism helps us to capture the variety of ways this comes about. But simply charting gains and losses of knowledge is not the most apt way to understand the distinct goals of contemporary art.

Contemporary art aims to cognitively engage with crises of contemporaneity. As I have claimed several times, these are best conceived as complex objects of cognition. Grasping a crisis requires one to be able to hold all manner of pieces of information together, see how they are connected, see how different people's normative commitments affect their take on a situation, see the agreements and differences between different perspectives, and to see the possibilities for redressing the crisis. For instance, seeing the crisis of property distribution in New York in 1974 requires knowledge of the details of property ownership in certain areas of the city, seeing how this connects up with one's knowledge of the demographics, living conditions, and hardships of those living in those neighbourhoods, and how one's political and moral views shape the affective force and urgency that these facts may or may not elicit. We can thus distinguish between improving our cognitive standing on one part of a crisis and improving our cognitive standing on the crisis in a broader sense. To pursue this latter task is to take a *holistic* cognitive stance, trying to correctly grasp not only the details, but to also try to correctly see the larger picture they form. It is this holistic stance that seems to me to more correctly align with what it means to take a crisis as the object of one's cognition.

My claim is that, for all its successes, K-cognitivism is not up to this task. The problem is not that either of the approaches to K-cognitivism I have outlined are internally inconsistent. We may well gain knowledge through contemporary art. Rather, the problem lies with the very nature of the concept of knowledge. The epistemologist Catherine Elgin points out that epistemologists tend to see knowledge as a "granular" phenomenon, each "bit of knowledge keyed to a particular fact." (Elgin, 2017: 34) To understand the cognitive value of art, the K-cognitivist thus needs to only assert that an agent has arrived at a cognitive grasp of some atomic fact. Or, if they wish to be more ambitious, they may claim that an audience has arrived at a conjunction of these granular truths. Though grasping individual details is important to improving our cognitive standing on a crisis, the granular deliverances that K-cognitivism holds up as evidence of improvement do not seem to match the complex and multifaceted nature of crises. The K-cognitivist can show that audiences learn something about an *aspect* of a crisis, but we still want to know more about how this affects the audience's view of the complex. How did this knowledge shift the rest of the commitments the audience held? What did they do with this knowledge to further explore the crisis? How did grasping the part contribute to grasping the whole?

These are questions that the K-cognitivist doesn't need to answer. For them, the cognitive value of art is secured if knowledge is achieved. If an artwork leads us to know something very particular about a crisis, then the K-cognitivist can say that the artwork has improved our cognitive standing on the crisis. We can now begin to see that this seems too little. The questions asked above are left unanswered. But these are the questions that need responses in order to really begin to see how an audience's view on the crisis at large has shifted. As such, this looks to be a broader task than the K-cognitivist has the necessity or the resources to take on.

The K-cognitivist might object that they can make sense of the more holistic cognitive goal I am alluding towards. An artwork might help its audience to realise a conjunction of atomic claims, joining together many specific truths pertaining to a crisis and thus arriving a more complex statement of fact. But here we run into another problem. I am not just concerned about the quantity of truths that an agent knows. My additional concern is that the K-cognitivist cannot account for the cognitive shifts effected by the *way* we hold these facts together. Seeing this is crucial to understanding how one's more holistic account of crisis actually works. For instance, agents often hold some parts of their cognitive stock to be central to having insight into a crisis, and other parts to be less significant. A change in cognitive standing can come not from gaining some new knowledge, but from seeing that a formerly insignificant piece of data should be central to the way one understands a complex phenomenon. In a similar vein, agents often also expand their account of a crisis not by gaining more knowledge, but by being able to clearly formulate an apt question, seeing how the things they already know produce this question, having an idea of how they might go about answering it, and seeing how the answers bear on what they already know. A question is clearly not knowledge. But posing one can be an important, cognitively valuable tool to move us forward in our inquiry into a crisis. Good questions, even if unanswered, shift our cognitive standing on what we already know.

Art can shift what we see as being significant and insignificant. As Deutsche reports, this is what Haacke's work has done for her. It can also push us to formulate questions. As Goldie proposes, Sierra's work doesn't just get us to feel angry, but gets us to question why we feel angry. In both cases, changes in cognitive standing occur. But they needn't come from adding to our conjunction of facts pertaining to a topic. Whatever the positive cognitive changes taking up emphases and questions amount to, they are not simply changes in knowledge. In

the midst of a live, fractious, divisive crisis, where the significance of facts simply isn't clear or where we can't see how grasping more facts will improve our standing, we need alternative ways to understand the shifts in cognitive standing agents seem to make.

What these observations tell us is that K-cognitivism is only *part* of the story of cognitive engagement. I have attempted to give what I take to be the most convincing telling of it by emphasising the idea of knowledge *through* art. But ultimately changes to our cognitive grasp on a complex crisis seem to require more than just knowing things. There is thus ample room for the cognitivist to say more about how art helps us to see how our knowledge is connected, how it can be mobilised, and how our cognitive standing is advanced in ways that contribute no truths at all. I propose that we can better grasp the scope of contemporary art's cognitive engagement with crises by turning to a different epistemic concept: understanding.

3.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that much engagement with crises occurs through attempting to improve our cognitive standing on the crisis. I proposed that this can happen in three ways – better grasping the base facts of the crisis, better grasping the nature of the problems forms of life face, and better grasping what viable lines of redress might be. Using works of institutional critique as test cases, I then attempted to account for the cognitive engagement taking place in these artworks using the arguments of K-cognitivism, a philosophical position that attempts to account for art's cognitive value in terms of knowledge. I have attempted to show that both narrow K-cognitivism and broad K-cognitivism can help to illuminate exactly what it means to improve our cognitive standing on aspects of a crisis. Against some canonical lines of critique, I have attempted to show that they can be fitted with a flexibility to take on many formally inventive works of contemporary art. However, I have concluded by raising the worry that this is not yet enough to make sense of cognitive engagement with crises. This is because simply gaining knowledge does not seem to make sense of the more holistic cognitive standing that live, contested, complex crises require. In order to deal with this issue, and to best capitalise on the successes of K-cognitivism, I propose that we move away from focussing on knowledge and put our attention on understanding.

Chapter 4: Understanding

4.1. Introduction

An aesthetic cognitivism appropriate for contemporary art needs to account for engagement, the cognitive value of the heterogeneous means used within contemporary artworks, and the specific epistemic demands that arise from taking crises as a target for cognition. In the last chapter I argued that though K-cognitivism can illuminate some of these aspects of contemporary art, it is ultimately unsatisfactory for its inability to make sense of the more holistic and open-ended cognitive standing crises demand. In this chapter, I propose that cognitive engagement can be better captured by seeing how contemporary art improves or diminishes our *understanding* of crises. My view is broadly consistent with a particular family of views I will call U-cognitivism, but, as I will show, in responding to the demands of contemporary art my own approach becomes distinct in two ways.⁶⁵ First, I claim that contemporary art aims at a very particular kind of understanding named ‘objectual understanding’ – an understanding of a subject matter or topic.⁶⁶ Second, I propose that the cognitive value of contemporary art lies not in its capacity to hand over such an understanding, but rather in the production of considerations that, when taken up by an audience, shift their degree of objectual understanding. To grasp the ways in which cognition of the crises of contemporaneity is improved, we must study how art spurs audiences to become co-producers of understanding.

In §4.2. I will bring forward a new set of contemporary artworks for analysis. I will focus on works that attempt to pursue cosmopolitanism as a response to the divisive differences of contemporaneity. In particular, I will focus on a set of artworks by the art collective Slavs and Tatars that reflect upon the unexpected possibilities of cosmopolitan relationships between post-revolutionary Iran and post-Communist Poland. In §4.3. I will turn to elaborate upon the basic features of understanding and its relationship to knowledge. I draw attention to three key features of understanding that make it appropriate for articulating cognitive

⁶⁵ Understanding has been proposed as a central concept in analysing the cognitive value of art by Goodman (1976); Elgin (1993; 1996: 170-205; 2002; 2010; 2017); Gaut (2007: 138); Baumberger (2013); Gibson (2014); Noë (2015); Mikkonen (2021); Phelan (2021); Page (2022a); Kuplen (forthcoming).

⁶⁶ Thus far, only Elgin (2017), Page (2022a), and Kuplen (forthcoming) have attempted to frame U-cognitivism using this specific form of understanding.

engagement with crises: i) its holistic nature, ii) its requirement that agents demonstrate their cognitive standing by actively wielding their commitments, and iii) the fact that it comes in degrees. I will differentiate objectual understanding from other kinds of understanding, and I will show how it best fits the aims and methods of contemporary art.

In §4.4. I propose that, unlike K-cognitivism, U-cognitivism pushes us to focus exclusively on engagement *through* art. U-cognitivism thus puts a high degree of focus on the way changes in cognitive standing arise through co-production between an artwork and its audience. In §4.5. I will show that this focus on co-production helps us to provide a more precise description of how art can lead an audience to improve or diminish their understanding. I argue that contemporary artworks aim to make alterations to the tenability of audiences' accounts of crises, moving them towards or away from the goal of reflective equilibrium rather than truth. Finally, in §4.6. I will show how this view can make sense of various different ways artworks can improve our understanding not only through offering us access to the facts, but also through offering us non-factive emphases and provocations.

4.2. Friendship of Nations

If contemporaneity seems to naturally bring with it crises that create divisiveness between different social groups, then, as Terry Smith proposes, concerned artists can respond to this by taking up “the challenge of contemporary world-being, which I see as a matter of pursuing these goals, urgently: picture all of the worlds in which we live in their real relation to each other; work together to create and sustain a viable sense of place for each of us; establish and maintain coeval connectivity between worlds and places.” (Smith, 2016: 12) We have seen that institutional critique pursues these goals by pushing institutions to expand the diversity of the kinds of people they serve and the scope of values they can help bring into the world. But another key project running through contemporary art, especially in the wake of globalisation and its attendant crises, is the attempt to use art to investigate novel possibilities for cosmopolitanism.⁶⁷ In order to overcome the crises that occur when one form of life ignores or suppresses the other forms of life it interacts with, the advocate of cosmopolitanism attempts to find ways to form community within the diversity that contemporaneity intensifies.

⁶⁷ For elaboration on the link between globalisation, the expansion of the contemporary artworld, and the rise of cosmopolitanism in aesthetics, see Herwitz (2019).

Contemporary artists have attempted to investigate cosmopolitanism in many different ways. Art historian Marsha Meskimmon (2011) argues that cosmopolitanism in contemporary art is often explored by focussing on our sharing aesthetic experiences of the personal and the domestic. Consider Do-Ho Suh's *The Perfect Home. Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home* (1999-ongoing), a life-sized replica of the artist's childhood home in Seoul constructed from hand-sewn green silk, sometimes shown at ground level, sometimes suspended above its audience (Fig. 17.). Each time the artist shows the work in a new place, he adds the name of that location to the title of the piece, the work carrying with it a record of all the different places it has travelled to. Meskimmon argues that Suh's work encourages audiences to expand their cosmopolitan imagination by attempting to understand what home means to someone from another place. By using translucent, gauze-like textiles, and sometimes placing the home out of reach of the audience, the installation appears like a ghost or a floating computer model. This draws attention to the way home can become a distant memory or an unreachable ideal rather than actual place for those displaced by the demands of a globalised world.

Other artists have explored cosmopolitanism by using art to put different groups in direct contact, leaving the gallery and taking art to audiences who are rarely part of the artworld. For instance, Thomas Hirschhorn's *Musée Precaire Albinet* (2004) is a collaboration between the artist and residents of the Cité Housing project in the Aubervilliers neighbourhood of Paris, a development primarily populated by working class migrants. The work consisted of a series of simple structures built by the artist and residents – a gallery showing exhibitions of artworks loaned from the Pompidou centre, spaces for discussion and communal meals, and outdoor play areas for children (Fig. 18.). Hirschhorn and the residents cared for these structures and used them to stage various events such as exhibitions, weekly public debates on topics like 'Europe/United States' and 'Communism/Capitalism', workshops on making art, and regular parties. All these events brought the community that lived in the housing block into closer conversation, but also brought them into contact with the Paris artworld elite, who travelled far from their usual environs and social milieu to engage with the work.

Hirschhorn's cosmopolitan ideal for the work was to act against the crises in French social life that separated different groups into separate social worlds. As he stated, the project "wanted to touch what you can't touch, the other." (Hirschhorn, 2013: 262)

In this chapter, I will focus on a set of works by a collective of artists who explore the possibilities of cosmopolitanism, and see this as a distinctly epistemological, crisis-directed project. *Friendship of Nations* (2009-ongoing) is a cycle of works by the art collective Slavs and Tartars. Exemplifying the freedoms of absolute heterogeneity, the project ranges across various media, art forms, genres, and styles from sculptural objects, to handicrafts, to performance lectures, to architecture, to furniture design, to academic publications. The project takes as its thematic anchor points two key political events of the twentieth century. The first is the Iranian Revolution of 1979, in which Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was deposed and an Islamic Republic founded under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The second is the Polish *Solidarność* strike movement, active throughout the 1980s, who used peaceful protests and negotiation to mount a hugely popular resistance against Communist rule. Both are regime changes ushering in new shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the contemporary world, the former inaugurating a novel form of political Islam, the latter acting as one of key markers of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the end of one of the most concerted projects to realise global Communism. These regime changes pushed not only those within Iran and Poland, but also many across the world to question where exactly they were positioned within historical time. What did long suppressed religious and national pasts mean when brought to bear on the issues of the present? What of the old regimes should be continued and rejected? What might one hope for the future within a new political regime? How should a new nation interact with other nations and non-state actors in an increasingly complex geopolitical situation?

Events like these are key flashpoints in many narratives of the intensification of contemporaneity. But rather than picture the divisiveness that has emerged in the wake of these regime changes, Slavs and Tartars approach these parallel, seemingly unconnected events as opportunities for ‘syncretism’, which they define as the practice of reconciling differences. Their main artistic intervention is to try to develop points of affinity between the Iranians and Poles caught up in the continuing wake of these events. This would seem a strained, if not outright perverse task. Iran resisted Western incursion, whereas Poland welcomed Western-style liberal democracy; Iran centred its politics on the tenants of Islam, whereas Poland used the cause of Solidarity to embrace its Catholicism; Iran feels the tense pull between the culture of its Persian past and the influences of Islam and its Middle Eastern neighbour states, whereas Poland would appear to be far more entrenched within the cultural influence of the Balkans and Western Europe. To find affinity, Slavs and Tartars’ response is

to push their audience look in two directions. Going in one direction, they look to history to find evidence of actual instances of overlap or shared cultural outlook (Slavs and Tatars, 2011; 2017). For example, through their research the group uncovered the Polish fascination with Samaritanism – the idea common amongst Polish nobility that their heritage lay in a long-lost Iranian tribe. They studied the parallel development of practices of religious theatre, Christian mystery plays in Poland, Islamic *Taziyeh* in Iran. They also uncovered the stories of Polish refugees sent south to the city of Estafan in Iran in 1942 (becoming known as ‘The City of Polish Children’), and the story of a Syrian brown bear bought in the same year by the Polish army stationed in the Iranian city of Hamadan, who was eventually enlisted as a private in the Polish army and served at the battle of Monte Cassino. Though highly esoteric, specific, and scattered, Slavs and Tatars take these historical points of affinity seriously, collecting and displaying evidence of this overlap in the texts and artefacts produced by both cultures.

Going in another direction, their work also looks forward to speculate on future ways of plotting friendships between contemporary Poles and Iranians. The works do not simply present historical data, but instead collage materials drawn from their research, or repurpose political ideas in order to point forwards to novel, cosmopolitan cultural formations. To see this at work, I will focus on one set of pieces from this project. According to the group, the crux of *Friendship of Nations* is a series of ten banners produced in 2011, all uniform in size, each measuring two meters in length and one hundred and twenty centimetres in width. In form, the works are reminiscent of the banners and flags used in political demonstrations and national celebrations. Each banner is constructed from a variety of textile techniques both traditional and modern, from embroidery to beading to fabric printing. Though the group produced the plans for the banners, the actual craft work was commissioned to Anna Staniszevska, a seamstress from the town Łowicz in Poland, and Agha Derakhshan, a tailor from Tehran’s Nasser Khosrow street. Both craftspeople hail from locations renowned as centres of their respective national textile traditions. On their various showings, the works have been displayed in different ways, from conventional hangings on walls or suspended in the main gallery space (Fig. 19.), to acting as architectural elements, used as roof panels on a makeshift pavilion the group constructed for the 10th Sharjah Biennale (Fig. 20.).

It is in the banner's content that the group's syncretism is most clearly on display.⁶⁸ In *Simorgh Solidarność* (Fig. 21.) a *Simorgh*, a mythical bird famous throughout Persian folklore and regal iconography, intertwines with the *Kotwica*, the anchor-shaped symbol used by advocates of the struggle for Polish national independence. In *Beware the Anti-Imperialist Imperialist* (Fig. 22.) the titular phrase is rendered in black fabric, dripping like liquid, and outlined in yellow string crochet and beads, sitting atop a heavily patterned floral background of Polish fabric. In *Men of Iran* (Fig. 23.) the poster of Andrei Wadja's pro-Solidarity film *Man of Iron* (1981) is reimagined in an Iranian context, the Berlin Wall that covered the eyes of a Polish striking worker in the original replaced with a black veil obscuring an Iranian man's eyes, the title translated from Polish to Persian. *Only Solidarity and Patience Will Secure Our Victory* (Fig. 24.) renders the iconic Polish strike slogan in Farsi, surrounded by the national colours of both Iran and Poland. The layering repurposes historical reference in strange ways, slogans made alien or given a new ethical direction via their translation into another language or national context. The banners are both statements of support of cultural history, but also, in the same way as political banners at marches and demonstrations, point to how things might be otherwise. They are artefacts of a cosmopolitan community that does not yet exist.

I will provide deeper analyses of these works below, but one further aspect of the group's practice must be set in place before continuing. Throughout their voluminous writings, Slavs and Tatars are clear that they do not think they are creating mere random connections and happy coincidences. The group reiterate that their purpose in collaging esoteric materials is cognitive engagement with the crises of national self-determination and cosmopolitanism that their work responds to. This is explored in several ways. In a similar vein to Haacke, the group emphasise the epistemic value of historical, archival research, scanning the past for actual evidence of moments of cultural overlap. But Slavs and Tatars pursue this even further, commissioning essays from researchers working on the cultural phenomena they are interested in (Slavs and Tatars, 2017). By opening their own inquiry to confirmation and extension from other researchers, and by often reintegrating this research back into their

⁶⁸ I will be assuming throughout that the audience encountering these works is somewhat appraised of the materials and relevant background information for these works. Explanatory text-based works are often displayed alongside the other works, giving the audience an opportunity to move between the pieces and the details of the references found in the texts. In Fig. 14. you can see audiences reading a publication entitled *79.89.09* in the presence of the banners.

gallery-based works, the group attempts to correlate their own theses with the evidence and argument of other experts.

But the group also acknowledge that the cognitive engagement this work facilitates is not simply compassed by its information relay. Reflecting on this cycle of works, Slavs and Tatars put forward the following mission statement:

Via our new cycle of work [*Friendship of Nations*] ... what we'd like to propose is something slightly counter-intuitive: looking at something else as a prism on the chosen topic of study, going somewhere else which initially might not seem relevant instead of directly heading towards one's destination. We think this is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of any idea or topic. (Slavs and Tatars, 2013)

This statement reframes the nature of the cognitive engagement the project aspires towards. First, in aiming at 'comprehensive understanding' Slavs and Tatars aim towards a highly ambitious cognitive goal. They are aiming not to just convey some discrete piece of information but appear to be aiming towards the more holistic outlook on crises that I advertised in §3.7.. However, the group is clear that their works should not be understood as simply providing 'comprehensive understanding' in a direct way. Their works instead provide oblique vantage points which they take to be directly conducive to building a comprehensive understanding of the crises under investigation.

Slavs and Tatars are thus distinctly interested in the cognitive dimension of engagement. But the particular approach they are attempting to take is not easily amenable to K-cognitivist analysis. Their comprehensive epistemic ambitions and the open-ended, exploratory nature of their work requires a different kind of cognitivism.

4.3. Understanding

Whether they know it or not, Slavs and Tatars' appeal to understanding rather than knowledge is highly apt for the kind of cognitive engagement they are pursuing. At first pass, epistemologists take understanding to share much with knowledge. It is a cognitive success term, meaning that understanding in some way answers to the facts – though, as we will see in §4.5., much hangs on how we interpret 'in some way.' I will assume here that understanding aims at aspects of the real world. As such, I will not focus on analysing statements such as 'X

understands a flat-earth theory, even though they themselves don't accept it.⁶⁹ Nor will I focus on claims such as 'X understands the history of Middle Earth and the ways in which Tolkien has brought this to life, even though they accept that the *Lord of the Rings* is a fiction.'⁷⁰ Finally, in pursuing an epistemic account of understanding I will not be discussing *Verstehen*, meaning broadly understanding of another person's point of view.⁷¹ However, I allow that developing this last kind of understanding will be very important to fully grasping a crisis, for to understand how certain problems have appeared requires us to understand how others are attempting to interpret the present, even if their interpretation may be wholly incorrect. Nevertheless, I have chosen to focus more on the ways in which we can gain a more or less accurate grasp of a crisis, which requires an epistemic conception of understanding. I leave it open as to how the account I develop here could incorporate insights from the *Verstehen* tradition.

Though knowledge and understanding both respond to the facts, they are distinct epistemic concepts. Jonathan Kvanvig proposes that understanding is fundamentally different from knowledge because it aims at targets that are broader than a single truth:

Understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information. One can know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question. (Kvanvig, 2003: 192)

More than simply holding the right facts, understanding requires agents to put these facts together and thereby attain a more comprehensive cognitive standing on the domain of inquiry. Say that we attribute an understanding of the London underground system to a commuter. In doing so, we are not just saying that, given a multiple-choice quiz, they would be able to simply relay the right facts about various features of the underground. Their understanding is displayed in their ability to connect these facts together. It is only by accounting for the commuter's comprehensive, interconnected picture of the facts about the system that explains how they can successfully move through it without even looking at a

⁶⁹ Riggs (2003) calls this a distinction between seeing a theory as embodying an understanding and seeing a theory as being merely intelligible whilst also being epistemically valueless.

⁷⁰ This is perhaps closer to the idea of understanding an artwork or engaging in 'aesthetic understanding'. See Scruton (1983); Hills (2017; 2021); Marín (2021); Schellekens and Dammann (2021); Page (2022b).

⁷¹ For an overview of this idea see Di Cesare (2016).

map, reliably go to the part of the platform where the carriages will be most empty, quickly reorganise their route when their journey gets interrupted by a cancelled train and answer a lost tourist's questions. Simply knowing all the relevant facts in isolation would make such activities very difficult.

This example also brings into view a further feature of understanding. Epistemologists often argue that agents 'grasp' an understanding. This means not only that an agent can see the connections between different parts of their cognitive stock, but also that they can *do* things with this more comprehensive picture. Catherine Elgin argues that:

[Understanding] involves knowing how to wield the commitments that bear on the topic – how to draw the inferences and perform the actions that the understanding licences. That know-how is ... a multitrack disposition – an ability and propensity to make certain inferences and eschew others, to perform certain actions and refrain from others, to engage in and endorse certain forms of higher-order evaluation and criticism and avoid and repudiate others. (Elgin, 2017: 56)

For Elgin, having an objectual understanding is not a passive matter. To actually show that one has such an understanding one must be disposed to actively deploy it. The commuter displays their understanding not simply by relaying how various facts are interconnected, but by being able to draw further inferences, see patterns and regularities, deal with problems, and answer questions. As Alison Hills puts it, to have an understanding requires that an agent have a body of information "under control" (Hills, 2015: 3).

This is a further point at which knowledge and understanding are thought to diverge. On most accounts to count as knowing something you simply need to truly believe with some reasonable confidence. But you do not then necessarily need to display any of the further abilities that go under the label of 'grasping.' By contrast, epistemologists of understanding argue that displaying a grasp of a comprehensive body of information is a necessary condition for having an understanding.⁷²

⁷² It is the grasping condition that many epistemologists argue makes understanding more valuable than knowledge, in so far as understanding is often seen as a greater achievement. See, Kvanvig (2003); Pritchard (2010); Grimm (2012); Carter and Gordon (2014).

Epistemologists of understanding tend to agree upon these basic features of understanding, but then part ways depending on the kind of understanding they study. For instance, epistemologists working in philosophy of science often focus on what is called ‘explanatory understanding’, seeing scientific understanding as ultimately arriving with when one can explain a phenomenon by correctly seeing its various dependence relations, and being able to grasp the explanation by charting the modal relationships that obtain between propositions and manipulating mental representations (Wilkenfield, 2013; Grimm, 2014; Hills, 2015; Khalifa, 2017). I will instead focus on a different kind of understanding called ‘objectual understanding.’ This is a broader kind of cognitive standing, characterised as an understanding of a topic or subject matter. We often say that, for instance, a scientist has a good cognitive standing on a complex subject like string theory, a historian understands the origins of the First World War, or that a philosopher has a good grasp of the topic of the metaphysics of free will. Understanding these broad topics certainly requires one to grasp all kinds of explanations. But one’s grasp of the complex of information needed to gain a cognitive standing on these topics might not simply reduce to only the explanations one can offer. For instance, the commuter displays their understanding of the underground system by doing various things without necessarily needing to also have any idea how to explain any parts of the system. The same may be true in many domains where we can see clear relations between facts and act upon our ability to see such relations, without also being able to explain why these relations occur.⁷³ Moreover, the complex topics and subject matters just listed are hardly things for which we always have all the explanations to hand. To understand a live subject matter or topic into which many people are attempting inquire, one often also has to grasp where the current holes in understanding are, and what open questions and debates inquirers are still trying to resolve. If correctly representing and responding to these things are important aspects of a good grasp of topic or subject matter, then we should be wary of attempting to reduce all understanding to explanation.⁷⁴

However, if an objectual understanding doesn’t simply arrive in the form of an explanation, how exactly should we characterise it? The foremost defender of the notion of objectual

⁷³ Some examples of non-explanatory understanding identified by philosophers of science include displaying the ability to correctly operate equipment (Lipton, 2009), forming apt taxonomies (Gijssbers, 2013), or being able to accurately model certain aspects of the world for which we have no explanation, such as the ways in which animals regulate their own size (Elgin, 2017: 42).

⁷⁴ For attempts to argue that all understanding is only explanatory understanding, see Khalifa (2017).

understanding, Catherine Elgin, argues that it requires an agent to grasp an *account* of the topic under consideration:

[An account] consists of contentions about a topic and the reasons adduced to support them, the ways they can be used to support other contentions, and higher-order commitments that specify why and how evidence supports them. It also contains normative and methodological commitments specifying the suitability of categories, the criteria of justificatory adequacy, and the ways to establish that the criteria have been met. (Elgin, 2017: 12; see also Baumberger and Brun, 2020)

Objectual understanding arrives by seeing how both our lower-level commitments – our specific contentions on aspects of a topic – and our higher-order commitments – the wider epistemic norms, methods, and goals we accept – interact and support each other.

Developing an account involves an agent understanding not just that a certain fact obtains, or just grasping why something happens the way it does, but also having “some awareness of how the different explanations fit into, contribute to, and are justified by reference to the more comprehensive understanding in which they are embedded.” (Baumberger, 2011: 78)

An agent that has an objectual understanding can see, for instance, how the certain lower-level commitments are consistent or inconsistent with their higher-order commitments concerning what kinds of evidence might be admissible in a specific domain of inquiry. They might see how an explanation illuminates the significance of other commitments they hold or see how it causes them to revise their goals in inquiry. It may also allow an agent to use their justificatory criteria and current evidence to devise apt experiments that might yield more relevant evidence and push inquiry forward into uncharted waters. In all these ways, an agent doesn't just hold an account, but shows that they grasp it, in so far as they show they can also wield their commitments.

My proposal is that we should see crises as requiring objectual understanding. As I proposed at the end of the last chapter, crises are complex objects of cognition. The comprehensive cognitive outlook of understanding is aimed at the correct level of broadness to fit this. But whilst correctly cognitively engaging with a crisis certainly requires us to correctly arrive at various explanations, we should not expect it to bottom out in only producing explanations. Crises are often too unresolved and fractious to simply be grasped through explanation. Rather, they are like complex topics or subject matters, requiring broader coherent accounts rather than simply answers to why questions. We can thus give a rough approximation of the

version of U-cognitivism I will argue for: when contemporary art cognitively engages with crises, it aims to in some way lead an audience to grasp a good comprehensive account of a contested domain of inquiry. In doing so, an audience has to not just come to hold this information but must also come to be disposed to deploy it by wielding their commitments.

I will finish by drawing attention to one final aspect of understanding that helps to further distinguish U-cognitivism from K-cognitivism. Knowledge is usually considered an outright matter: you either know a fact or you don't. By contrast, understanding, both explanatory and objectual, comes in degrees. We can rightly attribute understanding to agents who appear to differ wildly in their cognitive standing on a topic. For instance, a school child learning about various features of evolution has some basic grasp of the topic. They can hold together some facts, tell their parents what they learned at school, and perform some basic exercises set by their teachers. But the child does not have so great a grasp of the topic as an undergraduate taking modules on the topic of evolution. The undergraduate will have access to more facts that fill up gaps or displace falsehoods and is able to produce their own experiments and reports which may begin to exhibit some original findings. These undergraduates in turn have a lesser understanding of the topic than their Nobel prize-winning professor. The professor clearly has a better understanding than the undergraduate, and the undergraduate a better understanding than the school student. However, given the structures of understanding outlined above, it seems wrong to then withhold objectual understanding from the undergraduate. It also seems strange to withhold from the child who is correctly holding a limited account and showing evidence of an ability to deploy it. Rather, it seems better to say that each agent has achieved objectual understanding to a different degree.

There is an open question concerning exactly what burden this observation should put on epistemologists. One option is to say that an adequate theory of understanding should aim at telling us what *maximal* understanding looks like, and work back from there (Khalifa, 2017; Kelp, 2021). If we care about understanding as a form of cognitive success, we want to know the ultimate, ideal epistemic ends we strive for and then try to work out what steps lead agents closest to that end. Another option is to say what the most minimal form of understanding looks like, and work our way up (Grimm, 2017). Since understanding comes in degrees, then to get clear on what understanding actually is it is sufficient simply to say when and how someone moves from no understanding to the lowest rung of the ladder.

The approach I will follow on this matter is a middle way proposed by Christoph Baumberger (2019), who argues that all that is needed is to simply say what it might mean to have some degree of understanding, avoiding setting the bar too low, making understanding a wholly trivial matter, or too high, which risks making no sense of the cognitive achievements of school children or other neophytes. Baumberger proposes that for an agent to have some degree of objectual understanding 1) their theory must in some way answer to the facts, 2) the agent grasps the theory insofar as they are able to act upon it in various ways, 3) that they are in some sense committed to the theory, insofar as they take it to be suitable to yield the kinds of epistemic goals they might be seeking, and 4) the commitment to the theory is justified. So long as an agent can give an account that displays all four features to some degree – even if they only have a limited answer to the facts, a limited grasp, a wavering commitment, and only partial justification – they can be attributed a degree of objectual understanding.

Naturally, to fully assess this proposal we need a better sense of exactly how an account answers to the facts, and how it can actually be justified. I will fill out these details in §4.5.. For now, it is enough to note that this formulation of the characteristics of a degree of understanding also helps us to articulate the improvement in cognitive standing that I take to be central to engagement. The four aspects of objectual understanding give us four different axes along which an agent's understanding can improve or diminish. One can better answer to more or less relevant facts, one can do more or less with one's account in more or less reliable ways, one can better or worse match one's goals to one's theory, one can do better or worse in justifying one's account.

On Baumberger's view, it is a cognitive achievement for any agent to improve their degree of understanding, irrespective of the level of objectual understanding they started from or the level they reach in the process of improvement. The virtue of this view is that it helps us understand why it is a cognitive achievement for both a child and Nobel prize winner to genuinely shift their level of understanding, even if latter's understanding is clearly ultimately of a higher degree than that of the former. Following this, I hold that, when attempting to locate the cognitive value of art, the U-cognitivist need only locate upward shifts in the audience's degree of understanding caused by the artwork, without specifying some predetermined threshold the audience must meet in order to count as having the right level of understanding. Cognitive value simply lies in an artwork shifting an audience upward by

some unspecified degree from whatever initial understanding of the crisis they had when they first encountered the work. For some audience members, this leap may be huge. For others looking at the same artwork it may be quite small. I claim that in both cases, the artwork is rightly judged as being cognitively valuable.

One may worry this is too small a demand. It allows for cases in which artworks might shift an ill-informed audience's objectual understanding by simply showing them basic facts about a crisis, whilst also failing to shift the understanding of experts who encounter the artwork. Or, conversely, it allows for cases where we say an artwork is cognitively valuable because it appeals to experts, whilst leaving the non-expert public entirely perplexed. In these cases, though the artwork shifts some audience's degree of understanding, it only has cognitive value for a small section of its audience, and no cognitive value for others. I see no reason to object to this. Academics produce outputs aimed at different levels – journal articles, trade books, podcasts, bite-sized TikToks – each has cognitive value for the relative audience, though the same output might not be valuable for all audiences. It would seem strange to criticise an academic for not bringing the audience of a popular podcast up to an expert level of understanding just as it would be strange to criticise the academic if experts ignore the podcast in favour of reading their journal articles. In the same way, the cognitive value of artworks needn't be felt by all possible audience members who might encounter it. All that the U-cognitivist need defend is that some audience members actually do manage to shift their degree of understanding upwards, even if only by a little.

4.4. Understanding Through Art

With a conception of objectual understanding in hand, we are now in a position to see how it provides a better way to account for the cognitive value of contemporary art. First, it can capture what it means to take complex, multifaceted, contested crises as objects of cognition. Second, if engagement involves improvement, the graded nature of understanding provides an alternative route to explain what improvement might consist of in. The cognitive value of contemporary art lies not simply in arriving some piece of knowledge or not. Rather it lies in raising or lowering our degree of understanding, whatever that degree might be. Even if the understanding that an artwork helps facilitate is not complete, the account of objectual understanding I have pursued can still make sense of an artwork's cognitive value.

The question is now exactly how contemporary art, in its boundless variety, actually achieves these cognitive feats. Following the example of the last chapter, I think it is again helpful and important to get clear on whether we are trying to account for objectual understanding *in* art, or objectual understanding *through* art, or both. When we speak of objectual understanding achieved *in* art, we mean to say that artworks convey an account or theory of a topic to their audience such that an audience ultimately attributes any credit for the objectual understanding gained to the artwork and not to themselves. That is to say, we gain objectual understanding wholesale from the artwork. When we speak of the objectual understanding achieved *through* art, we mean to capture the fact that artworks present audiences with more or less connected sets of considerations, which audiences set to work amongst the sets of commitments and cognitive skills they bring to the artwork in order to try to develop and improve their own account of the crisis under consideration. On this view, objectual understanding is thus not something we should expect to be gained wholesale from artworks, but rather something that emerges through co-production between an artwork and its audience.

As we have seen, unpacking the implications of this distinction helps to determine exactly what epistemic contributions we should expect art to make and what we should expect of audiences. However, whereas the K-cognitivist could attempt to frame cognitive engagement in terms of knowledge *in* art and knowledge *through* art, I claim that the U-cognitivist is compelled to focus only on understanding *through* art. No doubt, some artworks may plausibly aspire to give an audience an entire account of a topic. A novel may present us with a particularly rich account of the crisis of economic inequality in developed nations, showing us the ways in which this crisis has come about and the ways in which it affects the lives of its characters. It may also attempt to give a clear demonstration of exactly why this issue is so damaging and urgent, and put forward some proposals, sketched within the narrative, of what could be done about this. In reading such a novel, the audience come to grasp a complete account of the crisis at hand in much the same way they might by reading a textbook (albeit one with more expressive and emotional depth to it), appreciating the objectual understanding of the crisis contained within the work. Aspects of Slavs and Tatars' project could be seen to elicit understanding in this way. The group's books, lectures, and commissioned essays aim to show how a set of historical facts hang together such that the audience can gain an understanding of a particular topic – Samaritanism, religious theatre, the military careers of Syrian bears, etc. Since these topics are quite obscure, Slavs and Tatars

and their collaborators are under pressure to try to help a neophyte audience out as much as possible. In cases where an audience lacks much information about an esoteric topic under consideration and where they might struggle to grasp things on their own, it is surely useful to simply try to convey an objectual understanding wholesale.

However, there are several worries for talk of objectual understanding *in* contemporary art. Some echo concerns we have already seen raised by K-cognitivists. Just as it would seem only a minority of artworks try to actually make explicit assertions about the world, so too do only a small number of contemporary artworks try and convey a total account of a crisis. More often, artworks approach fractious issues in more fragmentary and partial ways. Artworks present sets of specific details or present only particular and partial perspectives, but do not try to draw out for the audience how these fragments connect together to form a complete account of a crisis. Slavs and Tatars' banners exemplify this tendency. We are presented with all manner of culturally specific symbols, phrases, decorative flourishes, and details about particular craft methods used to make the works. But the group does not tell us, as part of the artwork, how these should come together into an account of the crises at hand. The works are tacit about what they expect the audience to make of these connections. Moreover, I don't think that the audience can simply grasp the account the banners are meant to give by simply delving back into the more discursively explicit lectures and essays the group produces. Nowhere in the essays or lectures do Slavs and Tatars tell their audience what account they are trying to give using the particular symbols found in the banners. The audience has to step in and work out for themselves how to connect up the writing with the objects in order to see what more comprehensive understanding they might come together to produce.

Moreover, audiences often engage with artworks with many relevant commitments already in place. The idea of understanding *in* art is most plausible when we focus on neophytes who have no account of the issue at hand. With this kind of audience, we can easily track the way in which their cognitive improvement arises: they have moved from having no account of a crisis to having an account. However, when viewers encounter artworks with all manner of cognitive commitments already in place, they don't just take on an account wholesale, but instead integrate whatever considerations the artwork offers with their current commitments. In the case of Slavs and Tatars work, audiences may arrive either with object-level commitments about the shared political and cultural histories of Iran and Poland. Or they may only arrive with higher-level commitments concerning the methods they think

appropriate to inquire into such topics, what evidence might be appropriate to building such accounts, or what sort of goals they have for responding productively to crises. Once we move from considering neophytes to considering audiences who come to artworks with some degree of understanding of the issues at hand, the need to account for interaction between an audience's prior commitments and the considerations offered by art becomes even more central to making sense of how understanding arises. It seems more that these artworks are intended not to just give a complete account of the crisis, but rather are intended to go to work on commitments the audience already have, however loosely connected and difficult to wield they may be.

The final reason to be sceptical of the notion of objectual understanding *in* art concerns worries about the possibility of transferring an understanding from agent to agent. The most straightforward way to make sense of gaining knowledge *in* art is to see this as knowledge an audience gains via testimony. However, epistemologists of understanding have raised doubts concerning whether an objectual understanding, like knowledge, can also be gained via testimony. The main problem is that understanding requires not just transferring all the relevant propositions that make up an account, but also a grasp of the account (Zagzebski, 2009; Hills, 2009; 2020; Gordon, 2017; Malfatti, 2021).⁷⁵ The regular commuter can tell a tourist how to get from one part of the underground network to another, trace the route on a map for them with their finger, and even draw out a diagram for them, but grasping the underground system requires that the tourist then attempt to wield the set of commitments they have acquired for themselves. If they cannot do this – that is, if they cannot then demonstrate that they too grasp the account – they do not appear to have developed an understanding. As Linda Zagzebski puts it “The person’s own mind has to do the ‘work’ of understanding.” (Zagzebski, 2009: 146) To be clear, this is not to say that considerations acquired via testimony cannot improve understanding (Gordon, 2017: 300-312; Malfatti, 2021: 1354-59). The claim is simply that an objectual understanding cannot be handed over wholesale to a passive hearer in the way that many think knowledge can because a grasp is something that one cannot just passively acquire from another. Rather, it is better to say that understanding arrives via ‘collaboration’ (Gordon, 2017: 314) between speakers and hearers, the former supplying some relevant considerations and the latter attempting to grasp them.

⁷⁵ Boyd (2017) has offered one of the few rebuttals of this view, but he finds that understanding via testimony can only be achieved in cases where the thing to be understood is very simple. Given the complexity of crises, I am not sure his arguments can be easily applied to the kinds of cases I am dealing with.

Understanding *through* art thus seems like the most plausible way in which objectual understanding is actually acquired from an artwork. The audience doesn't just passively take up an account but has to step in and try to autonomously connect it with their own commitments and attempt to wield the new account they arrive at. By aiming at objectual understanding, artworks invite audiences to become active participants in attempting to cognitively engage with crises. A key project for U-cognitivists is thus to understand exactly how cognitive value can be produced through this kind of co-production.

4.5. Co-Production and Reflective Equilibrium

In good cases, contemporary art improves an audience's degree objectual understanding. In the bad cases, it diminishes it. But this raises the question of exactly what a good or bad understanding of a topic actually consists in, and how exactly an artwork can make it better or worse, epistemically speaking. I have already gestured at some answers: it is, in some way, connected to the facts and it must be, in some way, justified. But in what way? What is it exactly that makes a change in degree an epistemic improvement or decline?

There are several different ways to answer this, but I will again hew close to Catherine Elgin's approach. I continue in her footsteps for two main reasons. First, her criteria for improvement are keyed to the nature of objectual understanding. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Elgin's epistemology attempts to account for the way understanding is achieved across domains of inquiry, attempting to account for the achievements of our most epistemically advanced fields – the natural sciences – but also to make sense of the serious epistemic contributions of the arts.

Elgin's view is that the goodness of an objectual understanding is a function of its distance from reflective equilibrium.⁷⁶ The process of inquiry can be described as a process of attempting to bring an account, by degrees, toward this end. Elgin's position is rooted in a widespread intuition about the structure of justification an understanding must take. Kvanvig proposes that, in a good understanding, "the various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of

⁷⁶ This view is also defended and developed in Baumberger and Brun (2020). The idea of reflective equilibrium has its canonical formulations in Goodman (1954) and Rawls (1971) – for a survey see Cath (2016).

relations that coherentists have thought constitutive of justification.” (Kvanvig, 2003: 192-3) For the coherentist, broadly speaking, a belief is justified so long as it is coherent with other beliefs one holds. If a belief has little to no support in relation to one’s other beliefs, we have reason to downgrade our degree of doxastic ascent. Conversely, it may be the case that, on its own, a belief may look like it should be given little credence but that, if it becomes apparent that it is actually well supported by one’s other beliefs, we have good reason to accept it.

Kvanvig proposes that objectual understanding is justified when the various commitments from which it is constituted hang together coherently. However, coherentist accounts of justification have long been beset by deep problems. One worry is that coherence *alone* is not a strong enough condition on justification. A conspiracy theory may be made almost entirely of falsehoods which, when put together, turn out to cohere with each other. When a conspiracy theorist is faced with a truth that contradicts their coherent body of beliefs, they have reason to reject it since their account doesn’t confer justification upon the belief. Epistemically, it looks like something is going seriously wrong if coherence can lead to a decrease in connection to the truth. On the other hand, one may also worry that coherence is too demanding. Suppose we have a coherent set of commitments yielding an understanding of a certain topic. We are then presented with two new pieces of relevant evidence, both of which are at odds with our account and are at odds with each other. If we try to simply integrate them into our coherent account as it stands, it will fall apart. That is, if we only demand coherence then the common appearance of relevant yet conflicting information may lead to coherence rarely getting off the ground and may lead to our acceptance or rejection of various pieces of information to appear irrational, deriving from our dogmatic acceptance of what we currently take to be coherent.

Moving from mere coherence to reflective equilibrium helps to sidestep some of these worries. The defender of reflective equilibrium accepts, alongside the coherentist, that the various sets of commitments that make up a good account must be “consistent, cotenable, and supportive” (Elgin, 2017: 71) amongst themselves, and more reasonable in light of each other than they are in isolation. But the defender of reflective equilibrium also holds that accounts are, further, subject to comparison to all other accounts of the same topic. If “the account as a whole is as reasonable as any available alternative in light of the relevant antecedent commitments, its equilibrium is reflective.” (66) What this means is that whilst an account

may appear internally coherent, if one's position appears to be less coherent when compared to another, then one has reason to alter one's account in order to improve upon it.

Elgin holds that accounts that are in reflective equilibrium have achieved 'epistemic tenability', simply meaning that an agent has arrived at an account which they cannot currently find any reason to give up. The process of inquiry is thus a process of increasing the tenability of one's account. As Elgin conceives it, agents come to inquiry with various commitments they take to be tenable, insofar as they have not yet had reason to abandon them. As they are confronted with new considerations that are germane to the object of inquiry, they assess these incoming considerations against their initially tenable commitments, and the commitments taken to be tenable in other competing accounts. In some cases, novel considerations will help strengthen one's initially tenable commitments, decreasing the possible reasons one may have for giving them up, and showing one's account to be just as good, if not better, than others. However, in other cases considerations will be rejected, since one has overwhelming reason not to accept such considerations or think that any other good account would accept such reasons. Inquiry is thus framed as an attempt to increase the equilibrium of one's own account, but always with reference to other good accounts accepted within one's epistemic community.

Elgin's view gives us a way to make sense of what the process of gaining or losing understanding *through* art looks like. Audiences come to artworks with certain commitments in place that they take to be tenable. Artworks then present audiences with sets of considerations which serve to supply them with new commitments, elicit new emotional responses, or raise questions, all of which test the commitments an audience currently takes to be initially tenable. By subjecting their prior accounts to the tests supplied by the artwork, audiences find new reasons to give up commitments, accept new ones, suspend judgement, or stand firm. In good cases, the considerations offered by artworks can help audiences bring their accounts into greater equilibrium.⁷⁷ In bad cases, they block an audience from being able to join

⁷⁷ One may object here that just giving up an incorrect commitment without taking on any new commitments to fill its place doesn't necessarily look like an improvement in one's degree of understanding. However, I hold this may still represent an improvement in understanding because eliminating incorrect commitments can help to more closely join one's existing commitments and might help an agent to realise exactly which commitments they hold that are central to their grasp of a subject. Eliminating a commitment may thus help an agent to get a better view on the commitments they already hold, even if they haven't added any new commitments to their account.

together their commitments or get audiences to mistake genuinely tenable commitments for untenable ones.

By charting the considerations audiences have taken on from artworks and seeing the way they have used these to reshape their accounts of a crisis, we can assess the ways in which an audience's objectual understanding of a crisis has changed. However, Elgin's account also helps us to see that, in order to then bring the accounts they arrive at into *reflective* equilibrium, audiences have to see how the new accounts of a crisis they arrive at compare with other accounts. Just because an artwork coheres with one's commitments is not yet reason to think that one has reached the best understanding one could reach. This is a further reason to emphasise the importance of audience activity and autonomy in the process of developing an understanding. They must attempt to work out for themselves whether the accounts they develop are not only in equilibrium, but also whether they survive reflective assessment. When the changes effected by interaction with an artwork sustain reflection, the audience has reason to claim that the artwork has improved their objectual understanding. When the changes effected are quickly washed away, reset, or shown to be otherwise leading one towards untenability, the audience has reason to claim that the artwork has diminished their objectual understanding.

This gives us a more substantive account of how it is that co-production actually takes place and how it leads to understanding. More strongly, Elgin also claims that reflective equilibrium is *the criterion* of good understanding. However, in forwarding this conclusion, Elgin still faces a host of questions concerning the role of truth in her theory. Some epistemologists have observed that Elgin's account seems, like other coherentist accounts, to miss the more basic intuition that a better understanding is simply the one that is closer to truth. Elgin's challengers hold that good understanding ultimately aims towards "fully comprehensive and maximally well-connected knowledge of a phenomenon *P*" (Kelp, 2021: 107). Only looking for different degrees of tenability seems to set the epistemic bar far too low. Rather than say that better or worse accounts are closer or further from reflective equilibrium, why not simply say that degrees of understanding are marked by their proximity towards complete truth and hold the ultimate aim of all understanding to be a maximally *true* account of a subject matter or topic?⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Defenders of this view, like Kelp, freely admit that this actually brings the concepts of understanding and knowledge far closer together than other epistemologists allow.

A central part of Elgin's epistemology is the bold suggestion that veritism – the idea that truth is the criterion for any good epistemic standing – is simply the wrong criterion to account for the way understanding develops and improves in the real world (Elgin, 2017: 9-32). She defends this in two ways. First, Elgin proposes there can be multiple best accounts of a phenomenon, rather than just one. She holds that this accurately represents what our most advanced scientific inquiry looks like, and that we should have no reason to think that, given the limited resources humans bring to inquiry, we should ever expect full convergence onto just one maximally true account. Further, she argues that there can be ties at the top level of understanding because different accounts have different desiderata for success. Referring again to science, Elgin observes that some theories may privilege scope, whilst others privilege sensitivity.⁷⁹ There is no reason to expect that we should then be able to arrive at a better level of understanding that reaches an optimal balance between them. And there is no reason to think that an account with more truths will necessarily be the one that fulfils either of these desiderata (82-89).

As interesting as this argument is, I will not attempt to pursue it further here, for I do not feel it helps to illuminate much about art. Rather, I am interested in Elgin's second line of defence. She reasons that whilst good accounts should not be completely detached from truth, if we expect the best accounts of phenomena to simply be constituted *only* of truths then we cannot make sense of the way false and non-truth-apt representations play an indispensable role in advancing our understanding. Elgin argues that if we expect our best scientific accounts to be true then we can't make sense of scientists' widespread use of idealisations, models, curve-smoothing, stylised facts, ceteris-paribus reasoning, thought experiments, laboratory experiments in controlled conditions, and diagrams. Some these aspects of scientific inquiry falsely represent the phenomena they purport to understand, whilst others simply make no claim in particular about how things are. Yet all play crucial roles in our best scientific theories and do not look like they are likely to be eliminated any time soon. Elgin believes that acknowledging the epistemic import of these parts of science opens the door wide for us to better understand the ways art also uses falsehoods and non-truth-apt presentations to improve our cognitive standing.

⁷⁹ For a similar argument that there is no single top level of understanding see Camp (2019), who argues that there may be incommensurable differences in perspective between different best theories of a phenomenon.

Elgin's central claim is that representations that don't aspire wholly to truth are often used to help draw our attention to properties of the things that they represent.⁸⁰ In doing so, they give us epistemic access to those properties. They might not reveal any new facts, but they do help us to look at the facts that we already know in new lights. Consider the ideal gas law. This law is indispensable for our best understanding of thermodynamics, but it falsely represents the molecules in a gas as consisting of perfectly elastic spherical particles that are of negligible volume and exhibit no mutual attraction. In doing so, the law focuses on only correctly representing a gas's temperature, pressure, and volume, and downplays all other features (Doyle, et al., 2019). Were we to try to create a more accurate model of the gas, these features would be far more difficult to get into clear focus. The idealisation thus helps to find scientifically useful signals within the noise of empirical detail. Since a falsehood like this helps scientists advance inquiry and improve the tenability of their theories, they simply have no reason to ascent to the demand to drop the falsehood from a theory that has achieved reflective equilibrium.

But presentations that are not false can have similar effects. To see this, let us move from science back to art. Unlike prior dance traditions, Yvonne Rainer's dance piece *Trio A* (1968) does not attempt to tell a story or convey any emotions to its audience. In this piece, the dancer works only with a minimal, non-stylised vocabulary of movements, many of which appear indistinguishable from moments one could see on the street. Elgin argues that though this work is unassuming on first glance, it can significantly improve our cognitive standing by improving our epistemic access to properties of everyday embodied movement. Rainer gets her audience to *focus* on the aesthetic qualities of supposedly mundane gestures by abstracting them from their usual context, and thereby making them strange, extraordinary, and worthy of further attention. In presenting the gestures in this estranged way, the work gives us epistemic access to aspects of the world that would usually pass us by. It is this presentational strategy that Elgin thinks makes a deep epistemic difference (Elgin, 2017: 209-211). By seeing certain features of how we move, we better understand the capacities of bodies and how our minor movements shape the aesthetic presence we have in the world. Rainer does this not by

⁸⁰ I will note here that there is an alternative path to articulating this insight that comes from Elisabeth Camp (2015; 2019). Camp argues that art we navigate the world not only using concepts, but also using characterisations, perspectives, and frames that bring certain features of the world into focus and downplay others. These needn't be true in and of themselves but can contribute to an agent being able to better epistemically access the world around them. Like Elgin, Camp has applied this view both to understanding epistemic improvement in the arts – Camp (2018b) – and the sciences – Camp (2020). I have focussed here on Elgin's account and have yet to fully consider how it compares and differs from Camp's.

presenting us any new truths, but by finding ways to better show us the significance of things we already know.

However, Elgin is careful to make clear that not just any falsehood or shift in significance will improve our account. They must be ‘felicitous’, meaning that a divergence from the truth or noncommittal stance on the world is, ultimately, unimportant to their capacity to actually provide epistemic access. The ideal gas law improves our epistemic grasp of certain aspects of thermodynamics without also hindering our understanding of other truths about gasses. Conversely, an infelicitous falsehood makes a difference, blocking epistemic access and pushing our accounts in the wrong direction. Were the ideal gas law to distort or obscure what it purports to give access to – were it to begin to also falsely represent a gas’s temperature, for instance – then its felicity would fall into question. Just so long as we have no reason to reject the deliverances of a felicitous falsehood, we can accept it into the canon of tenable commitments that constitute our reflective equilibria.

This gives us several new routes to understand how art can affect our understanding. First, Elgin is keen to emphasise that models or emphases are not just features of accounts that can be rejected when reflective equilibrium is achieved. Rather, they become integral to our understanding. Without them, it can be hard to see the facts in the right relationships. If we only strive towards knowledge, models and other such devices might simply be temporary aids. This is especially true in the case of false representations. If you can only know truths, then those that pursue knowledge have reason to ultimately try to wash falsehoods out of their theories. Elgin thinks that to strive in this direction would completely distort the structure and content of our best scientific theories. Scientists do not strive to remove the ideal gas law from thermodynamics, since doing so severely limit our epistemic access to the world. It would also distort the cognitive value of art. It would make it entirely unclear why we tend to think that the considerations offered by artworks are not just temporary aids but can become central parts of our accounts of aspects of the world.

Second, by arguing that accounts can improve without the addition of new truths, Elgin opens the doors wide to seeing the full variety of ways art can shape our cognitive standing. But she is not alone in this project. The hallmark of what have been dubbed ‘neocognitivist’ views is “the denial that cognitive value is always a matter of truth and knowledge.” (Gibson, 2008: 585) Giving an overview of what such positions amount to within the context of literary

cognitivism, Jukka Mikkonen offers the following summary: “[Neocognitivists] state, roughly put, that the cognitive value of literature lies in the works ‘advancing’ or ‘clarifying’ readers’ understanding of things they already know, ‘enhancing’ or ‘enriching’ their existing knowledge, ‘entrenching’ their ways of thinking, or helping them to ‘acknowledge’ things, to see concepts contextualised in ‘concrete forms of human engagement.’” (Mikkonen, 2015: 274) Here we do not just expect art to convey information, but more often expect it to make cognitive advancements by playing upon the commitments we already employ in getting to grips with the world, making connections or drawing certain aspects of our existing stock of tenable commitments to attention. In a similar vein, Eileen John suggests that art aims to highlight “which questions have urgency or are ‘alive’ for us – which views claim our attention, curiosity, and concern” and helps get “knowledge ‘off the ground’ in some way, perhaps by setting terms for thought or theorising or by participating in the presentation of a theory.” (John, 2013: 390-91) On this view artworks can alter the audience’s cognitive engagement with the world, not by providing any new knowledge, but by enlivening and focussing the process of inquiry and theory building. U-cognitivism is a natural fit for neocognitivist outlooks, supplying a view of the epistemic ends that such shifts in cognitive standing might arrive at.

I will now turn back to Slavs and Tatar’s work and look at two different kinds of understanding-altering considerations they offer. To be clear, there are many more kinds of consideration that could be studied. I have simply chosen to focus on two that I feel best help us to grasp the cognitive value of *Friendship of Nations*. As has been my own emphasis throughout this chapter and the last, I will refrain from focussing on the role of falsehood and fiction, since I take it that neocognitivists have already done much to study the way these contribute to understanding.⁸¹ Rather, I will put my focus on the way Slavs and Tatars advance our understanding not through assertions of truth, but through emphasis and provocation.

⁸¹ See, for instance, John (1998); Gibson (2014); Camp (2018b); Cunliffe (2019); Phelan (2021); Mikkonen (2021); Green (2022: 278-285); Page (2022a).

4.6. Emphasis and Provocation

In the last section, I used the term ‘consideration’ to capture the range of different ways an artwork can enter into an audience’s understanding.⁸² At a very basic level, considerations constitute what the artwork offers an audience, and what they attempt to integrate into their accounts of an issue. More strongly, considerations constitute the artwork’s positive or negative contributions to inquiry. They are what artworks are intentionally putting forward to shift their audience’s understanding of an issue.

The first category of considerations I will focus on are what I call *emphases*. This covers the range of different ways in which artists can bring aspects of an audience’s cognitive stock into focus and downplay other aspects. One way this occurs in art is through recategorisation. In various domains of inquiry, cognitive advancement is made not only by discovering new information, but by working out how to aptly categorise the information we already have access to. Category schemes show likenesses and differences between pieces of information, helping us to clearly see connections and patterns, and to emphasise or downplay certain features of that information, as well providing a framework for integrating new information.⁸³ For the neocognitivist, categorisation presents a novel route for understanding cognitive advancement in art (Young, 2001: 84-85; Elgin, 2002; Baumberger, 2013). By taking syncretism as their artistic brief, Slavs and Tatars’ practice emphasises this very activity. Their groupings of material lead us to see certain connections that we wouldn’t have seen before. This can occur within a single banner. For instance, we may not have thought that the *Simorgh* and *Kotwica* were at all similar, one a mythological creature, the other a political symbol. But by placing them alongside each other one could consider whether, like the *Kotwica*, the *Simorgh* might also be able to become a potential new symbol for progressive Iranian politics. Categorisation also occurs across the banners as a group. For instance, seeing Iranian and Polish craft aesthetics together, we can see that there are similarities in some of the forms used, such as highly complex patterning or heavily layered embroidery. Indeed, it is often

⁸² In principle, the observations I make in this section could also help support the K-cognitivist cause. Being able to see a new link or property of something, or responding to a provocation may lead one to arriving at knowledge as well as understanding. The difference is that, for the U-cognitivist, these considerations are *part* of an understanding, whereas for the K-cognitivist they are more like signposts towards knowledge. For the K-cognitivist the cognitive value of these considerations is thus lesser compared to the truths they lead to. For the U-cognitivist since these considerations contribute to a wider account and are not just staging posts on the way to some epistemic goal, they more clearly have cognitive value in and of themselves.

⁸³ One kind of categorisation that has been thoroughly studied within aesthetics, which I will not focus on here, are metaphors. See Camp (2016).

hard to make out exactly which culture some of the aesthetic elements are derived from, similarities at the aesthetic level overriding difference at the cultural level. Conversely, the banners also mark some interesting dissimilarities. Some of the images and slogans are filled with a progressive sentiment towards change, but other are more cautious and critical. *Men of Iran* seems to propose that there is a blindness in Iran that needs to be lifted, and *Beware the Anti-Imperialist Imperialist* pushes us to be wary of regressive tendencies masquerading as progressive. These help to temper the celebratory tone of the other works, making us more open to look for problems and dissent in the midst of the rhetoric of progress. Such trains of thought are made possible for audiences by the artists categorising things in specific ways. Different categories effected within artworks can give epistemic access to specific qualities of the information under consideration, even if categories are not true or false in and of themselves.

Another route to emphasis is the phenomenon of exemplification. If recategorisation aims to bring certain relations into focus by bringing sets of information together, then exemplification aims at specificity, bringing attention to a single property and its extension (Goodman, 1976). When an item exemplifies it does not serve as a symbol that denotes something else. Instead, when serving as an exemplar or ‘sample’ an item refers to some feature or set of features that the item instantiates. I will be particularly broad here, allowing that a feature is simply any property, pattern or relation that an item has, “static or dynamic, monadic or relational, and ... at any level of generality or abstraction.” (Elgin, 2017: 185) By simply having a feature, an item instantiates it. For instance, a tailor’s swatch instantiates the features of squareness, diminutive size, colour, texture, being in a booklet, being a tailor’s swatch, and so on. When it is used as a sample, it is used to *draw attention* to one or more of these instantiated features. Working out what is exemplified often involves interpretation on the part of the agent providing the sample or is determined by the context in which the item is deployed. When the tailor’s swatch is used as a sample in a tailor’s shop, we commonly take it to exemplify its colour or its being made of a certain material, and its other features are downplayed. Alternatively, if one were learning English and wanted to know what a tailor’s swatch was, a teacher might point to the swatch to exemplify its feature of being-a-tailor’s-swatch, overlooking its particular colour and texture. Finally, by being aware of a particular feature we can better notice its extension, seeing instantiations of the same feature in other items or contexts. For instance, upon noting what is exemplified by the tailor’s swatch, we can

appreciate the occurrence of a particular colour and texture in various garments in the tailor's shop.

Exemplification is so common that it is often unremarkable but has been particularly important for U-cognitivists (Goodman, 1976; Elgin, 2002; 2017). First, artworks often draw attention not only to what they are trying to represent, but also to features that they have. Rather than tell through propositions, they simply *show* us things. Second, since exemplification brings certain features of something into focus and downplays others it can serve a distinctive cognitive role of making certain features and their extensions epistemically accessible. For example, Slavs and Tatars' works do not represent the property of being a product of craft technique or being produced in Tehran and Łowicz, but they do instantiate it. By presenting the works with wall texts and other publicly available information that tell the viewer of the materials the work is made from and their provenance, audiences can be made aware that these properties are worthy of attention. This subtle change in emphasis moves craft technique from something that may be a background factor in our investigation of cosmopolitanism to a position of prominence. For instance, we can now consider this as an additional factor when trying to understand how political expression is manifested in Iran and Poland, and where a potential overlap of national traditions might occur. By exemplifying the features of traditional craft, new possibilities for seeing and activating friendship and syncretism become available.

The second category of considerations is constituted by what I call *provocations*. I use this term to cover all manner of modes of presentation that do not assert any specific facts concerning an issue, nor simply try to *just* draw attention, but instead propose to the audience a route for further inquiry. I will focus here on how this arises through artworks posing questions.⁸⁴ It would first appear that problems, questions, and ambiguities are what we have when we have *not* made cognitive advancement, representing confusion rather than progress, an insecurity rather than certainty about what the truth of a given situation might be. However, from another vantage point they are precisely the indispensable core of cognitive improvement. Problems often arise from an inability to apply our usual patterns of thinking in a normal

⁸⁴ I note that other neocognitivists have discussed a similar idea. Other provocations could include the intentional presentation of ambiguities – John (1998); Stejskal (2016); Mikkonen (2021) – the presentation of open-ended hypotheses for imaginative exploration – Novitz (1987); Kivy (1998) – or the presentation of thought experiments – Carroll (2002); Elgin (2007).

way. When this happens, they often make us realise that we are less sure of how we should apply our commitments than we usually think we are. To move past problems, our previous ways of thinking usually need to alter in some way. In turn, formulating questions helps us to work out what directions our inquiries need to go in. A specific, carefully formulated question serves to bring specific aspects of our confusion into focus, and to make these the main focus of ongoing inquiry. Whereas a problem may simply induce confusion, a question, whilst not directly solving the difficulty, at least draws out what features of a situation are most germane to the confusion experienced, and what are most in need of further understanding (Dewey, 1938: 105-108; Gordon, 2017: 304-307; Watson, 2018).

Slavs and Tatars' project is filled with strangeness and difficulty. For instance, we can easily tell that the phrase 'Beware the Anti-Imperialist Imperialist' is a warning to someone, specifically an agent who thinks they are on the side of the anti-imperialists but are really allied to those who have the opposite motives. But the group have made it intentionally unclear exactly who this warning is aimed at. We might initially think that it is aimed at those resisting the Shah and his mix of Persian monarchism and uneven accessions to Western liberalism. Or it could be aimed at the members of the *Solidarność* movement, resisting the once liberating yet slowly stifling ideology of Soviet Communism. But is it aimed at both of them at once, with their very different ideas of what a contemporary imperial power might look like – the West for Iran, the Soviet Union for Poland? These are surely two very different kinds of imperialism and anti-imperialism, neither of which seem consistent with each other. Moreover, on another reading it could well be aimed at people living in Iran and Poland today, living under new regimes with their own repressive tendencies (for instance those directed against women or immigrants or those of other faiths), which, in turn, are under pressure from larger geopolitical forces. This work reveals a problem of how to apply these two concepts within the context of Iran and Poland's recent history.

Yet the work doesn't create mere confusion. It also supplies us the terms to formulate new questions: when it comes to Poland and Iran, are we talking about anti-imperialist revolution, or imperialist counterrevolutions? And given the celebratory tone of the colourful banners, we can further ask who should be celebrated, and who critiqued? Without prompting such questions, we could have made the mistake of treating the issues under consideration with too great a degree of simplicity. We can see that if we want a better cognitive standing on the issues, we would do well to sharpen up our responses along these lines.

Emphases and provocations may add no new truths to an audience's cognitive stock. But they do seem to act as what Slavs and Tatars have called 'prisms', refracting information to reveal a range of new degrees of significance, comparison, and open roads of inquiry. These considerations get audiences to *assess* their accounts in this new, refracted light and to try out a new way of actively inquiring into a topic. They help to redistribute tenability across an audience's commitments and provide routes for audiences to see how holes in their account could be filled. In doing so, they press audiences to new kinds of action, getting them to apply and test their own capacity for grasping. Even though a contemporary artwork may have no aspirations or means to simply try to convey an understanding in a wholesale way, we can now see that it can still make the difference in an audience moving from one level of understanding to another by tightening or loosening the tenability of their account.

4.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that in order to account for the broad, comprehensive, active cognitive engagement that contemporary art strives towards, we do better to adopt a U-cognitivist framework rather than a K-cognitivist one. More specifically, if crises are a distinct target of cognition for contemporary art, I have argued that we should try to grasp how contemporary art yields objectual understanding. However, I have also emphasised that we should not then simply expect to find this kind of understanding *in* art. Rather, my addition to the U-cognitivist project is to emphasise the fact that contemporary art improves understanding by entering into co-production with its audiences. Contemporary artworks provide considerations audiences are expected to autonomously set to work amongst their own set of initially tenable commitments. I have focussed on the ways in which the emphases and provocations found within art serve this purpose. These considerations alone don't amount to full understandings of a crisis, but they add to an audience's ability to change their degree of understanding, either increasing or decreasing the tenability of their account.

In advancing this version of U-cognitivism, I believe I have provided an answer to aesthetic cognitivism's epistemic question that more aptly captures the distinctive features of contemporary art than K-cognitivism could provide. But the case for U-cognitivism is far from settled. One set of questions concerns exactly how this helps the cognitivist answer the value question. An artwork may well improve our understanding in the ways I have outlined

here. But does that also tell us that a contemporary artwork is then valuable *as art*? In order to complete my cognitivist account of contemporary art, this is the question that needs to be answered.

A further set of questions concerns the implications of incorporating audience autonomy into an account of the ways in which cognitive value is realised. If, when gaining knowledge or understanding *through* art, the audience doesn't simply take up an account wholesale but instead brings considerations it offers to bear on their own commitments and incorporate them into their own ongoing cognitive projects, then in what sense is it correct or incorrect to praise or blame the artwork when an audience's cognitive standing is or is not improved? Might it not sometimes be more apt to praise or blame the audience, since they have had a hand in shifting cognitive standing? How far can a contemporary artwork help to constrain and shape an audience's epistemic autonomy? These are pressing questions that emerge from the accounts of both K-cognitivism and U-cognitivism I have developed. As I will now illustrate, they are questions that directly bear on assessing a contemporary artwork's artistic value.

Chapter 5: Co-Producing Artistic Value

5.1. Introduction

Thus far, my discussion of the cognitive value of contemporary art has focussed on tackling the ‘epistemic question’ of cognitivism. But the ‘value question’ has been only glanced at. If a contemporary artwork has cognitive value when it improves an audience’s degree of objectual understanding, does this also explain why that artwork is valuable *qua* art? Providing an answer to this question is important for two reasons. First, it is an expectation that any philosophically satisfying account of aesthetic cognitivism will provide some response. Second, answering this question is important for my project of investigating contemporary art. Recall that in §1.2. Hal Foster raised the worry that any grounds for arriving at critical judgements about contemporary art have ‘floated free.’ Showing how my account of U-cognitivism bears on artistic value has the potential to reply to this worry.

However, what I want to do in this chapter is also bring into focus how my emphasis on the autonomous contributions audiences make in co-productions impact any answer to the value question. Cognitive value is achieved by audiences seeing how the considerations offered by the work fit with their own commitments and seeing how they might be able to make use of considerations to further improve their degree of understanding. But stating the point in this way overlooks just how hard this might be for audiences. People come to contemporary art with all kinds of different levels of cognitive and appreciative skills, and different sets of prior commitments, biases, prejudices, and other patterns of thinking. Contemporary art presents considerations that are often highly strange and demanding. All of this can make co-producing cognitive value a tall order. A key point that I will draw out in this chapter is that cognitivists – especially those working on contemporary art – need to take these real difficulties seriously and think hard about these impact their accounts of artistic value.

In §5.2. I will argue that defenders of contemporary art should endorse a functionalist account of artistic value. I claim that this account helps to place contemporary art’s absolute heterogeneity and its strive towards engagement at the centre of critical discourse. In doing so, it helps us not just understand how a contemporary artwork is properly valued as art, but also what makes an artwork distinctly valuable as *contemporary* art. In §5.3. I will turn to

consider how my emphasis on co-production affects the functionalist view. I focus on Adrian Piper's *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems* (1980), in which the artist presented an engaged work to an audience who then misunderstood the work and failed to improve their understanding. This raises a question for the functionalist: should this be judged as an artistic failure or not? I claim that the answer is not straightforward. To understand the artistic value of this work, we need to understand how responsibility for cognitive improvement is distributed across a co-production.

I argue that Piper's case helps us to see that in contemporary art this is likely to be a complicated endeavour. In §5.4. I will argue that many co-productions in contemporary art take place in an 'atmosphere of artistic exceptionalism.' By this, I mean that artists are often encouraged to deviate from the normative expectations their audiences might bring to their works. Audiences may well fail to meet the challenges this brings, but I will show that this should not necessarily diminish the idea that difficult art cannot still be cognitively or artistically valuable. In fact, I claim that understanding the phenomenon of artistic exceptionalism helps us to understand how artworlds coordinate to realise artistic value.⁸⁵ However, in §5.5. I add some caution to this picture. The lines that contemporary artists draw between the normative exemptions and normative expectations are often difficult to make out. There is a normative opacity in co-productions in contemporary art, making them a particularly risky way to achieve engagement. In §5.6. I will argue that contemporary artworlds have developed means to mitigate these risks. Co-productions are managed by all manner of mediating parties – curators, conservators, art critics, etc – who help artists and audiences best explore a difficult artwork's cognitive and artistic value.

5.2. Artistic Value

To motivate the value question of cognitivism, consider the following worry. We can improve our objectual understanding of crises via many channels. We could read an academic monograph, a government report, watch the news, or talk to people directly affected by the crisis. As we have seen, many contemporary artworks use means of communication that are identical to the means used within other disciplines. The question that then arises is whether

⁸⁵ By artworld, I simply mean the social worlds in which agents attempt to coordinate together to display, appreciate, discuss, buy and sell, and otherwise engage with things *as* art.

there is anything special about the way contemporary art contributes to our objectual understanding *as* art.

Moderate anti-cognitivists – those who accept that art can have cognitive value – argue that the answer to this question is no. They can accept that art can realise all manner of values, but claim that only some of these are distinctly linked to valuing a work as art. One historically popular way to pursue this is to show that art is distinctly capable of bringing forth vivid experience of aesthetic value, and that to value something *as* art is to focus singularly on its aesthetic rather than cognitive achievements. No matter how cognitively improving a work of contemporary art is, if it has no significant aesthetic value then it is not artistically valuable. A cognitivist can attempt to sidestep this worry by arguing that cognitive value and aesthetic value are often realised at one at the same time in some artworks, and so in *these* cases the cognitive value a work achieves is directly relevant to its artistic value.⁸⁶ However, there are reasons to be cautious of this move. On ‘autonomist’ views of aesthetic value, it is questionable whether the realisation of cognitive ends is compatible with aesthetic experience.⁸⁷ This is because to value something aesthetically is to value it in a disinterested way, suspending judgement of its achievement of valuable ends, such as the achievement of knowledge or improved degrees of understanding. If this view of aesthetic evaluation is correct, then my approach to cognitivism looks to be at odds with aestheticist accounts of artistic value.

Though the view that properly valuing something as art is to attend to its aesthetic value has some contemporary defenders (Zangwill, 2007), it has declined in popularity. One serious difficulty it faces is accommodating the fact that there exist artworks that appear to have little interest in pursuing aesthetic value, but which are highly valued by art critics. Contemporary art is filled with readymades that are perceptually indistinguishable from everyday things, information-based artworks, and artworks that are intentionally unsettling and ugly, but which are all lavished with high critical praise.⁸⁸ Absolute heterogeneity has led to artists exploring many new terrains of aesthetic value, but it has also led to artists trying to realise

⁸⁶ A defence of this kind of view can be found in Schellekens (2007: 84-87).

⁸⁷ The canonical formulation of this idea is found in Kant (2000: 89-96). See also Diffey (1995) for application of such a view to cognitivism.

⁸⁸ Zangwill (2007: 69-73) does attempt to make sense of this by arguing that when we value supposed non-aesthetic works, our judgements of their value only make sense by comparing our judgements to other artworks with high aesthetic value.

other objectives for art. The claim here is not that aesthetic evaluation deserves no place in the evaluation of contemporary art. It is simply that, unless the philosopher of contemporary art wishes to risk an unpalatable dismissal of many canonical works, the safer route is to attempt to incorporate more than just aesthetic value into our accounts of artistic value.

What I take to be the most promising way to understand the artistic value of contemporary art is to endorse a functionalist theory of artistic value. The central proposal of functionalism, as articulated by its two key exponents Jonathan Gilmore (2011a; 2020) and Noël Carroll (2016; 2022), is that artworks can pursue and realise all kinds of values, but the values that are then also artistic values are those that arise from the successful realisation of an artwork's constitutive functions. Both thinkers begin with the observation that artists intend their artworks to do something – to elicit certain emotions and imaginings, to have certain aesthetic responses, to spur audiences to political action, to get them to gain insights into the world around them, etc. They thus intend to bring all manner of different values to light, be they moral, aesthetic, political, cognitive, etc. However, as with many artefacts, an artwork could be used to perform many functions and bring forth many values. A painting could be prudentially valuable when used to cover a damp patch on the wall, or an NFT of a crude digital drawing of an ape could be economically valuable as an instrument of financial speculation. Functionalists argue that the various functions an artwork can serve fall into two categories. The things the artist intends their work to do fix the artwork's constitutive functions – the functions a thing possess in an essential way, such that it would not be that thing were that function to be absent.⁸⁹ The functions an artist doesn't intend, but to which an artwork can be turned, are its incidental functions. Whilst such functions can be performed by things, they are not essential to that thing. When we value something *as art* we are interested in its constitutive functions.

⁸⁹ The subject of how exactly we should track artistic intentions and how they can be realised is a fraught topic. Throughout this thesis, my argument has rested upon the assumption that artist's intentions can be tracked and can guide our responses to works. I admit that this assumption needs further study. There are all manner of questions about intentions left to answer that bear upon my argument: what if these intentions are not transparent?; what if an artist is incorrect about their true intentions?; what if their intentions stay unsettled for some time after a work is finished and could be revised at later dates?; what if no artist's intentions have been recorded? As a preliminary response, it at least seems reasonable to me that we can attend to what artists are trying to do in order to direct our appreciation, whilst allowing that they may intend their work to be unresolved, ambiguous, or open to interaction. As such, the version of intentionalism I accept is not one in which artist's intentions must be a finished matter. But more needs to be done to substantiate the intentionalism that undergirds my position and to separate it from anti-intentionalist approaches.

To see this, consider a Mark Rothko painting and a perfect forgery of it. The original Rothko is made to elicit deep aesthetic and emotional experiences in its viewers, whilst the forgery is simply made for economic gain.⁹⁰ Though they are perceptually identical, they can be differentiated by their constitutive functions. Rothko's original may fetch much money at auction and the forgery may also elicit deep aesthetic and emotional responses, but in both cases these are merely incidental functions of the respective works. We would think that there is something amiss with simply valuing the original for its economic value. Though this is wholly possible, to value it in this way would be to ignore its constitutive function, and thus not be a way of valuing the artefact as the artwork Rothko intended it to be. Likewise, the sense of disappointment an audience feels when realising a work is a forgery is explained by the fact that the constitutive function they thought the work had turned out to only be incidental.

To evaluate a work *as art* is thus to focus on its constitutive functions, which are fixed by the intentions of the artist. Functionalists provide a rich account of how evaluative practice arranges itself around this goal. The central task for the functionalist appreciator is to identify what a work's constitutive functions are. Identifying a constitutive function in turn carries with it a normative force: "To say an artifact or work of art has a function entails that it is *supposed to* serve that function." (Gilmore, 2011a: 299) The functionalist evaluator is thus interested in working out whether the artwork has managed to live up to the normative demands the artist has placed upon it, or if the artwork has 'malfunctioned', failing to bring about its creator's intentions.

However, this on its own is not enough to track artistic value. There are cases where artists may make works that realise their constitutive functions fortuitously. An artist may make a large sculpture that aims to challenge an unjust political regime. One day the leader of that regime happens to stand near this work and, at just that moment, a minor earthquake causes it to crush them to death, leading to a consequent change of political regime. The artist's constitutive intentions have been realised but the artwork has only accidentally fulfilled its intended function. It would seem strange to say, in this case, that any political value that

⁹⁰ Many accounts of artistic value may wish to dismiss the pursuit of economic value out of the scope of values that can be appropriately artistic. However, I agree with Gilmore (2020: 216) that this is unwarranted. As he points out there are works of contemporary art, such as Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull *For the Love of God* (2007), that are specifically intended by their artists to aim to be embroiled in certain kinds of transactions and achieve certain kinds of remuneration.

arises from this accidental assassination is also a reason to artistically value the work. Any heavy object could have done the same job.

To deal with such cases, the functionalist holds that evaluation doesn't just consist in judging whether a function was brought about, but also understanding whether the particular means the artist chose to pursue their intention help to explain how it has or hasn't managed to achieve its constitutive function.⁹¹ The relevant means could include the way they have manipulated materials, their adherence to or breaking from genre conventions, or their control over stylistic and expressive features of their own practice. I will here adopt Carroll's convention of simply calling these means an artist's 'artistry.' In the case of the falling statue the achievement of artistic intentions cannot be explained by any reference to the artistry of the work. By contrast, had the sculptor used their artistry to make a work so expressively rich that it managed to move sufficiently large numbers of audiences to action against the regime, then the work is a candidate for being valued as art.

This helps to also make sense of different kinds of artistic failure. When an artwork fails to bring about its constitutive function, we can ask whether such a failure has anything to do with the artistry of the work, or not. If the sculpture is censored by the regime and locked in a vault, it cannot perform its function. But this is no fault of the work's artistry, and hence is no strike against its artistic value. Conversely, had the sculpture been created with noble intentions, but, through inept artistry, led to many audiences thinking the sculpture is actually praising the regime and thereby blinding them to real injustices in their society, we have grounds to critique it as art. Artworks most clearly fail when their artistry conflicts with their creators' intentions.

The final part of functionalist analysis is to inquire into "whether its [the artwork's] realisation of those functions is worthy or valuable." (Gilmore, 2011a: 301; see also Carroll, 2022: 16) It may be the case that an artwork successfully manages to bring about terrible ends. Think here of an intentionally anti-Semitic work of art that, through its manipulative artistry, successfully convinces its impressionable audience to take up anti-Semitic views. Even though the artwork successfully brought about its constitutive function through its artistry, what it realised was not

⁹¹ For a similar view forwarded by another leading pluralist account of artistic value, see Stecker (2012).

ultimately of any positive moral or cognitive value. The negative judgement of the badness the artwork brought about is a genuine judgement that the work is bad *qua* art.⁹²

The functionalist account has wide application across the arts. I endorse it here because it is highly apt for making sense of the key features of contemporary art. To claim that contemporary art is centrally concerned with engaging with crises is to claim that contemporary art is distinctly identified by a particular function. By foregrounding what an artwork is trying to *do*, the functionalist view helps to show how engagement can be central to appreciating contemporary art as art. We can evaluate the artistic value of works of contemporary art that manage, through their artistry, to improve their audience's standing on a crisis, be that by improving engagement along cognitive, aesthetic, or practical lines. When a contemporary artwork intentionally decreases an audience's capacity for engagement, or when it fails to find apt means to bring about any engagement at all, the work fails *as* art.

This allows us to see how my account of the cognitive value of contemporary art is also a way of explaining its artistic value. If a key way to engage with crises is to improve your cognitive standing on a crisis, and if an artwork can both intentionally aim to do this and, through its artistry, lead an audience to an improved level of understanding, then we have a clear way to understand how it has achieved its constitutive function as a work of contemporary art. If a contemporary artwork strives yet fails to do this, leading its audience to a worse cognitive standing, or to no change in their standing at all, then we have reason to think that it is not a good work of contemporary art.

However, some care must be taken with the way I have just applied the functionalist view. First, I allowed in §3.2. that there may be other ways to improve an audience's cognitive standing that do not require improvements in cognition. My claim is thus not that all contemporary art must be cognitively valuable in order to be artistically valuable. My claim is

⁹² Clearly cases are not always as clear cut as this. As many inquirers into the moral value of art have shown, works like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* are highly ethically dubious but aesthetically compelling. So, whilst the work is bad along the moral dimension, it is good along the aesthetic dimension. These cases are complex, but in the Riefenstahl case it seems that the functionalist can help by asking whether Riefenstahl intend the aesthetics of the work to directly support its ideological message or not. If they did, then simply praising the aesthetic value of the work whilst ignoring its moral stance is perfectly possible, but it is not a judgement of the work's artistic value, since it ignores the intended function of the work. Whether the interaction of the intended moral and aesthetic value within the work is ultimately redeemable is not a matter the functionalist needs to adjudicate on. For more on how functionalism impacts this debate, see Gilmore (2011a: 302-304; 2011b).

simply that, in the many cases where it is appropriate, the brand of U-cognitivism I have advanced provides a clear route to articulate a contemporary artwork's artistic value.

Second, the way I have applied the functionalist view to contemporary art appears to claim not that constitutive functions are determined by *artist's* intentions, but rather by the functions of the wider category of 'contemporary art.' My view looks like it is grounding functions in the wrong way. This worry can be quickly addressed. Artists often intentionally attempt to make work within a particular category of art, and in doing so take on functions that are attached to the category. For instance, Catherine Abell (2014) points out that particular genres have functions, and artworks within that genre are judged on how well they have managed to bring these functions about: comedies are intended to be humorous, horror is intended to induce fear in audiences, etc. Failed comedies make no one laugh, failed horror causes not even a hint of fear. So too, I hold that when artists intend their work to be viewed as contemporary art, the artist allows themselves to be liable to be judged for how well or badly they have managed to bring about engagement via their artistry.⁹³

However, Gilmore and Carroll point out that talk of category membership is still only one way to identify an artwork's function. Some constitutive functions can only be understood by attending to artist's more specific intentions. This helps to deal with cases where a work fails as a work of a particular category, but still succeeds on its own grounds.⁹⁴ I take this point to be consistent with the argument, put forward in §2.5., that there may be works of art like those of Anish Kapoor that are not best evaluated by the standards of contemporary art, but where their greatness shines when looking closely at the individual artist's intentions. Nevertheless, at other times it is still appropriate to show how other works shine when they are judged by the constitutive functions of the category of contemporary art. I take the moral to be that in order to work out whether it is appropriate to judge something as contemporary art, we should pay attention both to the individual artist's intentions and the broader

⁹³ As I conceive it, artists can 'intend their work to be viewed as contemporary art' in many different ways. Their intentions might be recognised not through their assertion that 'this work is contemporary', but this is surprisingly rare. Rather, it seems the intention to make contemporary art is realised through more subtle means, such as the artist choosing to attend schools that specialise in contemporary art (not all art schools do), assenting to have their work displayed within and collected by institutions of contemporary art, being inspired by and aspiring to have their work judged alongside canonical works of contemporary art, or allowing critical assessments that focus on the work's achievement of engagement.

⁹⁴ This helps to deal with cases where artists make artworks in certain categories but choose to defy the usually functions and evaluative standards of that category. For instance, Andy Kaufman's stand-up routines look to fail as stand-up comedy, but seeing their artistic success lies in understanding what Kaufman's intentions were and how these have come about precisely through his choice to challenge his audience's expectations.

functions of the categories it is placed within. Sometimes these will mesh, and at other times they will not.

Functionalism can also accommodate the other key feature of contemporary art – absolute heterogeneity. This can be a difficult aspect of contemporary art for theories of artistic value to reckon with. For instance, Dominic Lopes (2014: 92-96) argues that there is no single value that art *as such* has. What makes breakdancing valuable will be different and incommensurable to what makes a piano concerto valuable. To simply try to say how all art, in its infinite variety, should be valued simply as members of one single category of art is a fool's errand. However, Lopes (130-142) then recommends that artistic value is more precisely judged relative to what makes works of its artistic kind good, where its kind is most prominently understood as being fixed by the medium it is made from. The artistic value of a painting is found not in what makes art *as such* good, but in what makes works in the art medium of painting good *as paintings*.

The benefit of this view is that it gives a clear way for appreciators to attend closely to a work's artistry by noting how an artist has used the particular affordances of a medium to realise particular values. However, this view runs into difficulty when we turn to trying to appreciate a work *as* contemporary art and compare it to other works of contemporary art. Lopes is pulled in two directions. On the one hand, contemporary art contains all kinds of novel media. Contemporary art teems with 'free agents' that, according to Lopes (194-202), do not fit extant theories of art kinds, and thus require us to keep developing novel accounts of the media they use. But the worry here is that contemporary art may confront us with many innovative artworks for which we have no apt theory yet, and thus no ability to evaluate the work as art. As such, there will be large swathes of contemporary art that, on Lopes' view, can't immediately be subjected to artistic evaluation. We need to wait for the right theory of its medium to be produced, meaning that the value of much innovative contemporary art may simply be unknown.

On the other hand, I hold that contemporary art is a distinct category for art evaluation. We appreciate a contemporary painting both as a painting, but also as a work of contemporary art. If this is right, this might help us integrate the cases Lopes struggles to accommodate – free agents can still be evaluated *as* contemporary art. But the problem Lopes poses is that, as a result of absolute heterogeneity, the category of contemporary art can contain all art media

within it. To evaluate something *as* contemporary art requires the evaluator to be able to critically compare works produced in all different kinds of media. Since Lopes attempts to get away from categories that push us to such broad comparisons, it is unclear how his view can account for an appreciative category as absolutely heterogeneous as contemporary art.

The functionalist provides two ways around this. First, as we have seen, the functionalist can compare works of different media by focussing on how they have fulfilled their shared function of engagement with crises. This gives us stable ground for assessing works *as* contemporary art across their variety. Second, the functionalist needn't try to reduce artistry to recognised categories of art media. The point they raise is simply that we attend to the ways in which the means the artist has chosen, whatever these may be, are turned to achieving or blocking the work's constitutive function. Many of Lopes' observations about media and the role it plays in evaluation can be accommodated within this view – to evaluate a work of contemporary painting we want to attend to how it uses the specific means *of painting* to achieve engagement. But the functionalist allows us to also find ways to appreciate categories of art in which works made in many different media are judged together and how novel and traditional art media can be judged alongside each other.

However, one may worry that this makes functionalism too loose a view. Vid Simoniti (2018) has pointed out that works of socially engaged art – one of the central genres of contemporary art – aspire towards activist ends, aiming to make material differences to various social ills. What Simoniti thinks makes them unique is that they do so by using means that are indistinguishable from non-art activist projects. For instance, Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects* (2006-ongoing) aims to combat gentrification and improve the urban landscape and liveability for the residents of the South Side of Chicago. It does so by refurbishing buildings to create new social spaces for the community. The question is what makes this work valuable as art if its ends and means are identical to those used by urban activists. Why not just say this is a good work of urban activism and skip valuing it as art altogether?

Here functionalism looks like it is in trouble. Gates's work is fulfilling its functions using apt means, but those functions and means don't seem to be artistic. So how does *art* get into the picture? There are several options open to the functionalist here. One, attempted by Simoniti (Simoniti, 2018: 77-80), is to simply argue that if there is a suitably capacious and acceptable theory of art *as such* that can accommodate Gates's work, and if the work is regularly highly

valued *as art* by art critics, then this is enough to say that it is also artistically valuable. Gates's work fulfils both these conditions, so it is good art. However, I think this approach is too weak. This view can tell us that the work is art, and that it is valued, but not *why* anyone would ever want to evaluate it as art. What I think Simoniti misses is that socially engaged artists could well have intended their projects *not* to be art. It was wholly within Gates's power to assert that his project in Chicago was simply part of his work not as an artist, but as a concerned citizen and activist. So it is apt to ask why Gates allows his work to be judged as art, when he so easily could have chosen not to, and to evaluate the work in light of the answer that can be given to this question. *Contra* Simoniti, I propose that a better way to evaluate a socially engaged artwork *as art* is to try to explain why the artist has allowed the work to be judged as art, and what consequent difference this intentional decision makes to the way we understand its value. Were Gates to categorically assert that the work is only a project of activism, any attempts at evaluating it as art would seem to be completely beside the point. Conversely, if the artist allows that the work is art, but it turns out, on critical reflection, that this makes no difference to how we respond to it, then it seems like judging its artistic value explains nothing new about it and is thus redundant.⁹⁵

Clearly, this line of argument requires evaluators to try to work out what exactly an artist's particular theory of art might be. This is often hard to do. Artists may appear to have no particular theory of art at all, simply tacitly accepting whatever general views are at work in their particular artworld. Or they may assent to very bad theories of art, or theories that directly conflict with their choices. This can all be admitted on the response to socially engaged art I am putting forward. I simply hold that, when dealing with artworks with functions and means that are identical to other non-art domains, part of the critical task of the functionalist involves trying to elaborate and evaluate the particular conception of art an artist might be relying upon, and to see what, if any, useful explanatory work it can do in understanding the artwork's value. The basic point here is that a particular function or means

⁹⁵ There are interesting cases of things that are clearly not art and are not intended to be art, but that may benefit from being evaluated as art. Eileen John has argued that even though meals are not art, there is a benefit to working out how they are artistically valuable, since doing so bring attention to the way "that participants in a meal can take reflective charge of the possible goods to be realised at the meal and can achieve something valuable from that position." (2014: 265) Though I am uncertain whether I agree with this view of artistic value, I allow that there is a way of seeing this view as being compatible with my basic point. If it is the case that a non-art practice looks like it might benefit from being viewed as art then, so long as such a judgement doesn't seriously damage our grasp of the goods of that discipline, then perhaps such judgements can be allowed. However, if such a judgement were to create uproar from those involved in the practice and would not help to explain it, I would think we have reason to abandon such activities, as tempting as they may be.

is a candidate for being incorporated into artistic evaluation if, at minimum, an artist thinks that what they are doing is making art and that their work being art is central to explaining how they are pursuing their intentions using the means they do.⁹⁶

Finally, the functionalist account is compatible with the idea that the realisation of cognitive value emerges through co-production. To restate the conclusion of the last chapter, a contemporary artist intends for their artwork not just to hand over a full understanding of a crisis, but rather intends to offer various, open-ended considerations that are offered up to an audience for them to spur their own inquiry. To some, it might sound strange to see this as a process that could qualify for functionalist analysis. Intending one's audience to arrive at a non-specified shift in understanding may sound like no clear constitutive intention at all. Carroll (2022: 12-13) argues that this way of thinking misinterprets the functionalist position. He points out that it is wholly possible that an artist can genuinely intend for their work to be open-ended and for this to be a key way in which its values come to fruition. Artists often have to carefully shape their artistry to achieve this, and can easily fail in this intent, accidentally making their work too closed by making it straightforward and didactic. If an artwork that is intended to be open-ended leads to audiences either all end up with exactly the same insights or experiences, or to audiences getting so confused that any productive exploration of the possibility space the artwork is meant to open up is completely blocked, then the artist's work is malfunctioning. Artists can thus intend for their work to allow for audience autonomy, leading them down open roads of inquiry. In such cases, the functionalist critic needs to attend not just to the shifts in understanding audiences arrive at, but also how the artwork has managed to facilitate such autonomy through their artistry. I believe the views put forward in the last chapter do just this.

The functionalist view also helps us to distinguish between cases where audiences achieve cognitive improvements through genuine co-production, and cases where the artwork is simply incidental to their own improvement. Were the audience to rationally reconstruct the process they went through to improve their understanding and were they to find that they needed to make no reference to considerations offered by the artwork, then it would seem

⁹⁶ To give a brief preview of what is to come, my account of 'artistic exceptionalism' below contributes one way to account for what 'assenting to a work being judged as art' might entail – it is to demand that an audience focus on the normative exemptions an artwork is playing with. Such a view is very close to Claire Bishop's (2012) account of socially engaged art, which argues that we need to attend to how the artist has used their artistry to introduce antagonism into their social context.

that even though they have reached a cognitively valuable improved understanding of a crisis, the artwork cannot be credited for making any appreciable difference to inquiry. In this case, any assessment of the audience's cognitive improvement is not an assessment of the artistic value of the artwork.⁹⁷ Artistically valuable contemporary artworks make the difference.

5.3. Misunderstanding and Responsibility in Co-Productions

We now have a way to make sense of how the artistic value of contemporary art is to be judged. However, my emphasis on the idea that audiences must engage in some autonomous thought and inquiry in order to arrive at a change in understanding opens some new problems. Successfully entering into co-production with a contemporary artwork can be a difficult endeavour. Contemporary artworks deal with complex, fraught, unsettled crises, and often use particularly strange communicative means. Audiences come to art with different sets of commitments, different levels of interpretive, appreciative, and cognitive skills, and different levels of familiarity with (and taste for) the sheer strangeness of much contemporary art. It can be easy for an unprepared and unskilled audience to get confused about exactly what considerations a contemporary artwork is offering and how they are to be applied in inquiry. Audiences can misunderstand what considerations are actually on offer, misusing the artwork and pushing their understanding in the wrong direction.

This is an unfortunate and common occurrence. But this raises a question for the account of artistic value just developed: when an audience misunderstands a difficult work of contemporary art, and hence fails to realise any cognitively valuable changes, is this also an artistic failure? For some, the answer to these cases may seem obvious. If there are audiences who can realise the work's cognitive value by rationally reconstructing the ways in which the artwork has made a positive difference to their cognitive standing, then it is clearly the case that the audience who misunderstands has simply failed to grasp the genuine value of the

⁹⁷ Somewhat more ambiguous are cases where audiences arrive at an understanding of a crisis that the artist didn't intend to address, making use of the considerations offered by the artwork. For instance, one may find that reflection upon a Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* may help one to understand a contemporary political situation – see, for instance, Greenblatt (2016). Shakespeare clearly did not specifically intend his work to address, say, the 2016 US election, so any improved understanding he gives us of specific events is not necessarily a judgement of the work's artistic value. However, I allow that perhaps things are more complicated than this – Shakespeare's work makes points about politics, tyranny, and democracy more generally, which can be applied to other situations. So perhaps some realisations are genuine judgements of the work's artistic value, since they track these more general intentions. In such cases, it seems to me that judgements of artistic value depend upon working out whether the audience are responding to the more specific intentions or more generic intentions of a work.

work. If there are cases where all audiences misunderstand, then we have reason to question whether the work really has any artistic value as contemporary art.

However, I do not think that answering these questions is this straightforward. If contemporary art strives to alter its audience's cognitive standing, we have reason to ask a further question: what responsibility does an artist have for ensuring that the function and artistry of an artwork is not misunderstood? Moreover, if contemporary art requires co-production in order to actually yield cognitive value, we also have reason to ask a corresponding question: what responsibilities do audiences have for ensuring that they respond to considerations offered by the work in apt ways? If these responsibilities are clear, then allotting blame for audience misunderstanding to either artworks or audiences is a fairly straightforward task. In co-productions, artists and audiences have a responsibility to try to improve their cognitive standing on a crisis. We could say that artistic value is lost when one of these parties acts in ways that block the realisation of cognitive value, thus failing to fulfil their responsibilities. However, there are many reasons to think that, in contemporary art, the responsibilities of members of co-productions are not so clearly delineated. As such, it is not always clear how to judge when a co-production has or has not realised artistic value.

To see this, let us consider an example. A further aspect of the divisiveness of contemporaneity that artists have regularly attempted to grapple with is the persistence of racial prejudice and xenophobia. Such issues are, of course, not new. Instead, the crisis that contemporary artists regularly deal with is how, in parts of the world that have, in principle, thrown off colonial rule or legislature that enshrined discrimination, societies are still fractured by prejudices that carry over from the bad old world to the supposedly better new one. Here I will focus on Adrian Piper's *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems* (1980). In this work the audience are invited to enter a small, enclosed structure built within the exhibition space (Fig. 25.). The interior is lit by four lightboxes, each screen printed with a different image of an anonymous black man staring straight at the viewer (Fig. 26.). From a concealed speaker the refrain of the upbeat, satirical funk song 'Night People' by *War* plays on loop, the lyrics listing a series of stereotypes of black men. Below each image is a set of headphones, each of which play one of four monologues, written and read by Piper, reporting a fictional audience member's reaction to the artwork. One wearily states:

[I]t seems as though this piece is meant to shock me out of my composure, and it just

doesn't succeed in doing that, because what I'm looking for when I come into a gallery is an art experience. [...] I don't think that it works as art, because I really couldn't care less about racial problems when I come into a gallery.

Another attempts to assert their egalitarian worldview:

I personally don't feel alienated from blacks at all. I feel that I have lots of good friends that are black, and ... and we understand each other very well. [...] Well, of ... of course, I... I wouldn't... I wouldn't advise my daughter to marry one, that's true. But it's not ... it's not because I'm a racist. [...] It's... it's just because society makes it so difficult for an interracial couple.

A third enthuses:

I can really get into this – you know what I mean? I mean 'cause see ... see I know what it's like, you know. [...] I mean, I've been really down and out myself. I mean I can ... I can really understand black anger, because like, I'm angry too.

A final speaker bluntly asserts:

[T]o be quite honest, I ... I don't like this. I've never had a black friend. I've said that blacks are just angry, they're difficult to get along with. [...] They... they start out suspecting you from the very beginning. (Piper, 1996: 183-5)

This work brings attention to the overt and subtle racist and xenophobic attitudes held towards black men in post-Civil Rights America. By 1980, the legal enshrinement of segregation and widespread tolerance of overt racism and anti-black violence had been overturned. However, as contemporary commentators observed, anti-black attitudes persisted amongst the white population. Sociologists Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1988: 71-138) record that through the seventies and early eighties white Americans increasingly looked upon the principles that underly the removal of segregation favourably, but continued to be noncommittal about putting into place many policies to enact these principles and preferred to accept changes that would not affect them personally.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ As many historians and sociologists point out, the issue of racial discrimination over this period cannot be charted by looking at attitudes alone. For a more structural account of racial oppression in this period, see Marable (1984: 168-200).

Piper's work responds to this state of affairs in two ways. First, her work intends to show its audience how racist and xenophobic attitudes are often reliant on stereotypes that distort cognition, even when deployed by otherwise well-meaning white people.⁹⁹ For example, three of the monologues state that the men pictured are angry or directly hostile to the viewer, when this is an emotional state that is hard to attribute based on the men's neutral or ambiguous expressions. A stereotype intervenes to distort their assessment of the perceptual evidence. But the humour in the work arises from the fact that such obvious errors are not only ignored by the monologists but are in fact ballasted with baroque attempts at justification. Their ignorance is not passively sustained, but rather requires a lot of active legwork.¹⁰⁰ By using and justifying stereotypes, the monologists prefer the comforting stability of xenophobia and racism, rather than interrogating the limits of their commitments in order to gain novel empirical and moral knowledge about other people in their society. Using Elgin's terminology, the xenophobe is preferring mere coherence rather than pursuing the challenge of reflectively assessing their worldview against those of their fellow, non-white citizens.

But the constitutive intention of the work went further than this. Piper wanted to do more than just represent the workings of xenophobia in contemporary American attitudes:

It's laudable to depict and analyse issues of racism. But my work really does not function in that way. I actually want to change people. I want my work to help people to stop being racist (whether they ask for that help or not). Just as movies and encounter groups can change people, so, maybe, can my art. (Berger, 1999: 80-81)

The key intent of *Four Intruders* is, at minimum, to change its audience by getting them to feel an uncomfortable distance between themselves and the mainstream xenophobic attitudes that persisted in American society and the artworld in 1980. Whereas they may usually see such xenophobia as unremarkable and may even unknowingly participate in its propagation, the frictions between the images, text, and music in the work push them to see such attitudes as

⁹⁹ As well as being an artist Piper is also a philosopher herself. In her mature philosophical work, she develops a comprehensive theory of xenophobia and the cognitive mechanisms that sustain it, influenced broadly by Kantian epistemology and moral philosophy. The theories put forward there are surprisingly congruent with the perspective of *Four Intruders* (Piper, 2013 – especially ch. VII and ch. XI), but I will leave full elaboration of Piper's later philosophical views to one side here. See Costello (2018) for a full elaboration of the connections between Piper's mature philosophical position and her art practice.

¹⁰⁰ It is worth pointing out that Piper's art and writing from this period are forerunners of many ideas found within social epistemology, developing a precise exemplification of what Charles Mills (2007) later called 'white ignorance' and what José Medina (2013) calls 'active ignorance.'

strange, flawed, and worthy of ridicule. At maximum, Piper hoped that such a feeling of distance would motivate the audience towards a new, anti-racist understanding of their social world, in which they do not try to block what they find uncomfortable and strange in others but become “receptive and vulnerable to its effects on us, to discern its value for us, and indeed to rejoice in its intrinsic character and extrinsic ramifications for us.” (Piper, 1996: 245) It is important to recognize that Piper was clear that she “cannot describe what a correct response to racism would look like” (181). Rather, *Four Intruders* attempted to effect change by offering considerations that pushed its audience to discover for themselves the exact cognitive implications of their discomfort.

However, when *Four Intruders* was first shown, Piper encountered significant audience misunderstanding:

The audience response to this piece was a revelation to me. ... From the perspective of my experience (and, I venture to add, that of most blacks in this country) it was impossible to regard the content of the monologues as anything other than objects of ridicule, scrutiny, and self-examination. ... Wrong. While the black audience, and some members of the white audience, understood the devices immediately, others thanked me for expressing their views so eloquently, because they *did* have many black friends, but of course *wouldn't* recommend that their daughter marry one because society made it so difficult, and so on. (185, emphasis original)¹⁰¹

For a portion of *Four Intruders*' audience the work effected either no change, or the wrong change, making them feel more bolstered in their xenophobia.¹⁰² Rather than fulfil her intentions of moving her audience in the direction of anti-racist thinking, the work seemed to just trigger the very prejudices it was meant to confront and correct. From a functionalist

¹⁰¹ It is important to note that whilst Piper recorded these audience responses in 1980, they were not published till 1995. As far as I can tell, the audience in 1980 were not made aware of what other portions of the audience said to Piper, or what Piper thought of these responses.

¹⁰² Piper is not alone in making anti-racist work that faces this kind of response. Other cases include Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's public performance work *The Couple in a Cage: Two Amerindians Visit the West* (1992-93). This work saw the artists pretending to be primitive indigenous people from a fictional society, presenting themselves in a cage to their audiences as subjects for ethnographic study. Fusco (1994: 145-166) exhaustively records the various racist and xenophobic responses this work received. One could also compare Piper's case to Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014), a monumental sculpture carved from white sugar to depict a sphinx-like form with the head of the stereotypical Mammy figure. Many audiences were distressed by the fact that many white viewers seemed to ignore the serious nature of the work, instead taking silly photos posing beside the sculpture's buttocks and genitalia and posting them to Instagram – see Watts (2014) and Powers (2014). It is interesting to note that, in both cases, the artists arrived at responses that were very similar to Piper: they chose not to alter their works, even in light of such audience misunderstanding.

point of view, we should be on guard. Piper's clear anti-racist intentions and clearly deployed artistry did not succeed in leading part of her audience to the kinds of improvements in understanding the work was aiming towards. As such, it looks like the artistic value of her work is in question.

Piper was so moved by the audience reactions to her work that she decided to reflect upon them. In her writings, the artist directly questions whether the works have failed as art or not. But Piper frames the question not as simply one of whether constitutive functions have or have not been realised, or whether her anti-racist intentions were ultimately valuable, but rather what the responsibilities of artists and audiences are:

This [audience misunderstanding] led me to a consideration of where the artist's responsibility for communicating the intended world view to her audience ends, and whether I should have cast the material even more broadly, so that misunderstanding of its implications would have been impossible I concluded that no artist with political concerns is required by a viewer's ignorance to make simplistic art, and that there is no excuse for the level of ignorance and insensitivity to racist behaviour displayed by these remarks on the part of any adult American. After all, anyone who pleads ignorance of black American mores has only to pick up a copy of *Jet* or *Ebony* at his or her local supermarket check-out counter. Or call your local college's Afro-American Studies Department for a syllabus of introductory readings. (185-6)

One response Piper considers is that blame falls on her shoulders. She has made the work too difficult for her audience, and she should have tried to communicate with greater clarity and simplicity. On such a view, it is her artistry – her deployment of irony, the complex layering of materials, the openness that she allowed in the work – that has led to the constitutive function of her work failing to materialise for some audiences. At first pass, the work has compromised its own pursuit of artistic value, and Piper could have controlled her artistry to avoid this.¹⁰³

However, Piper rejects this assessment of the work. She gives two arguments for this. One is that the audience have brought a blameworthy ignorance of racism and their own implication

¹⁰³ Here I am assuming, along with many other philosophers, that responsibility for action is grounded upon an agent's capacity to control their actions.

in racist ways of thinking to their encounter with this artwork. She points out that for any adult American in 1980 who has easy access to information about black American culture and social life it should be very easy to disabuse oneself of such ignorance. If they had correctly grasped the work's artistry, they would have felt its effects, as some of Piper's audience did, but their ignorance blunted their interpretive and appreciative skills. As such, the charge that the work lacks artistic value has no bite, since the effects of the work's artistry were simply overridden by audience irresponsibility.

I will not try to press Piper on her claims about the grounds of moral and epistemic responsibility in contexts of oppression, as I feel it is both adequately defended within the wider literature on moral and epistemic responsibility, and is not a claim she presents as being particular to engagements with art.¹⁰⁴ What interests me here is Piper's other line of defence: "no artist with political concerns is required by a viewer's ignorance to make simplistic art". Though this claim appears in the same sentence as Piper's point about moral and epistemic responsibility, I take it that this is a wholly distinct point that requires a distinct line of justification. It concerns the specific distribution of responsibility within the artworld. Unfortunately, in the pieces of writing responding to *Four Intruders* Piper gives no argument for this claim. However, I think trying to develop it is central to understanding what is strange about the distribution of responsibility across co-productions in art. More worryingly, it is a claim that quickly appears to be in direct tension with Piper's other line of defence. Let me try to provide a reconstruction of what Piper might mean.

5.4. Artistic Exceptionalism

There are three things to note about the claim "no artist with political concerns is required by a viewer's ignorance to make simplistic art". The first is that the emphasis in this phrase falls upon the term 'artist' rather than 'political.' Political agents often try to mitigate their interlocutors' ignorance through simplification to help them better participate in political life. Since rejecting simplification from political action is implausible, Piper must be trying to make a claim about the role simplification plays in political *art*. As such, she is making a claim about the special, role-relative responsibilities of artists, and the way they differ from those

¹⁰⁴ Defences of the idea that an agent can be responsible for their ignorance of their own prejudices are directly defended in Medina (2013: ch. 4) and Cassam (2019: ch. 6). For a more general defence of persons having responsibility for ignorance, see Fitzpatrick (2008).

exercised by agents in other domains outside of art. However, the second feature to note is that it is not the case that taking up the role of artist or that of political agent are mutually exclusive. One can be a political artist, but this allows one to act in different ways to other political actors. In this hybrid role, allowing a portion of her audience to misunderstand her work without correction is consistent with Piper pursuing the particular line of engagement she is trying to bring forth. The third feature is that Piper thinks that though her audience genuinely failed to grasp her work, this does not necessarily *require* an artist to alter their work to mitigate this failure. Though Piper can see that she could downplay the complexities of her artistry and thus plausibly avoid the problems she faced, *as an artist* she is under no pressure to take up such strategies of mitigating misunderstanding.

What I think Piper is doing here is advertent to a widespread, historically emergent phenomenon, particularly prevalent in contemporary art, that I will call ‘artistic exceptionalism.’¹⁰⁵ I will formulate it in the following way:

Artistic exceptionalism: A privilege offered to artists that allows them to exempt themselves from a set of norms that govern conduct in other domains of life beyond the artworld, and an immunity from censure for such exemptions.

The exact story of how this privilege and immunity emerges across the history of art is a more complex story than I can tell here.¹⁰⁶ This formulation is not an attempt to track an invariant, trans-historical idea.¹⁰⁷ I am only putting forward the way I take this phenomenon to be understood, accepted, and promoted within contemporary art.

¹⁰⁵ The term ‘exceptionalism’ is clearly highly loaded, bringing with it all manner of negative connotations that attend phrases like ‘American exceptionalism’. As will become clear, these negative connotations are not entirely unintended. Artistic exceptionalism is not a neutral or always positive stance to pursue. I also note that my usage of the term in an art context is distinct from similar employments, such as discussion of art’s response to political exceptionalism (De Boever, 2019) or art’s economic exceptionalism (Beech, 2015).

¹⁰⁶ Histories that bear on this narrative can be found in Shiner (2001), who focuses on the way that developments in 18th century philosophical aesthetics shaped conceptions of what an artist was supposed to do, and Barolsky’s (2010) genealogy of the idea of the artist. Three exemplary local studies of the emergence of artistic exceptionalism as a social phenomenon are Chiara Franceschini’s (2021) collection of studies on normativity and norm breaking in Early Modern religious art, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1996) study of the Paris literary world of the late 19th century, and Thomas Crow’s (2023) study of American West-coast counter-cultural art.

¹⁰⁷ For example, at points in history where aesthetic norms are more tightly policed, it is clearly not the case that exempting oneself from these norms could be a privilege and immunity that other parties would offer an artist nor that they would respect and protect these rights. Artists who indulged in exceptionalism would be more likely to be censured and pushed out of the artworld, or would have to seek approval in small, avant-garde enclaves.

Let me clarify the particular way I have formulated this idea. As I frame artistic exceptionalism, I see it as a thoroughly social phenomenon, dependent upon the activities and thoughts of all members of the communities that make, engage with, and support art. This includes not only artists, but also audiences, curators, critics, art educators, and so on. Call this an ‘artworld.’ Within contemporary artworlds, novel experimentation with norms is thus broadly accepted as a key part of artistic practice. This is not to say that particular normative deviations cannot be challenging or transgressive or create resistance from non-artist members of artworlds. The point is simply that, in contrast to artworlds at previous points in history, exceptionalism is common and enjoys a large amount of support.

Artistic exceptionalism is centrally concerned with tracking the way artists exempt themselves from norms that govern activity in other domains – e.g., the norms of scientific practice, historical research, political activism, philosophical argument, or civil social interaction.¹⁰⁸ I intend my formulation to be open concerning exactly what norms artists can target, and I allow artists to exempt themselves from such norms to greater or lesser degrees. Some gestures of exceptionalism – by which I mean any part of an artwork that expresses a normative exemption – will be very minor deviations from peripheral norms of a given social practice, and some will be serious deviations from the central norms that lend a practice coherence.

To see an example of this phenomenon that is particularly germane to Piper’s work and to engaged art at large, consider Vid Simoniti’s (2021) contrast between the way artists attempt to affect democratic life, and the norms of democratic participation articulated in political philosophy. Using the example of the norms of deliberation forwarded by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, Simoniti points out that such views recommend that public discourse should best proceed via the ‘objective style’, in which deliberating agents should aim to act with civility towards each other, striving for impartial, orderly, and serious methods of communication, avoiding insincerity, self-contradiction, and inconsistency. This discursive style promotes democratic political values, helping diverse voices communicate on an even plane and promoting the epistemic clarity vital to collective decision making. Simoniti then

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Neufeld (2014) has argued that it is also often the case that artists exempt themselves from the aesthetic norms developed within art, in acts of what he calls ‘aesthetic disobedience.’ I have chosen to leave art’s challenging of aesthetic norms governing the creation of art to one side because, in conditions of absolute heterogeneity, I find it hard to make out what such norms might be.

observes that, in political art, artists aim to contribute to democratic life whilst completely exempting themselves from the normative pressure of the objective style. Piper, for instance, confronts her audiences with opinions that the artist doesn't agree with, utilizes humour, irony, ambiguity, openness, and intentionally creates confusion and insecurity in her audiences.

However, whilst artistic exceptionalism allows artists to exempt themselves from norms, it is not the case that artists need to also exempt themselves from pursuing the same ends as the domains their exemptions target. Piper distances herself from the objective style, but she is still attempting to have a positive political impact on the lives of those living in a democracy. It is this point that helps to distinguish artistic exceptionalism from strong conceptions of artistic autonomy.¹⁰⁹ This idea commonly arises from views that take art to uniquely aim at producing things that are to be judged aesthetically. As we saw above, aesthetic judgements do not track the achievement of cognitive or moral ends, as scientific, moral, or political judgements might. The aestheticist holds that, as a matter of conceptual necessity, to make art is to be exempted from the expectation that one's work should aspire to such ends or conform to the norms that might be conducive to achieving them. On my conception of artistic exceptionalism, this kind of account of artistic autonomy can be accommodated, but only as a particularly strong variant of the more general phenomenon I am trying to track. Some artists may exempt themselves from all norms and goals that govern other practices. However other artists will exempt themselves from only some norms, and may aim to achieve specific cognitive, moral, or political ends. Both count as gestures of artistic exceptionalism, but not all instances of artistic exceptionalism are quite so extreme as to arrive at a state of artistic autonomy as it is traditionally understood.

It is also not the case that artists only employ gestures of exceptionalism to just *reject* norms. Artists can just as well exempt themselves from a certain set of norms in order to clear ground to make new normative demands on their audience, requiring that they adopt new practices of inquiry, political participation, or art appreciation. Gestures of artistic exceptionalism can

¹⁰⁹ There are less strong views of artistic autonomy that are more closely connected to the idea that art attempts to alter political life, with the two main contenders popular within the discourse around contemporary art being Theodor Adorno (Hulatt, (2013)) and Jacques Rancière (2004). I leave it open as to the exact ways these views overlap with what I am proposing here.

be more or less constructive or destructive insofar as an artist may make greater or lesser attempts at instituting novel norms to replace the ones they are exempting themselves from.

Given these considerations, I have decided to formulate artistic exceptionalism as a ‘privilege’ and an ‘immunity.’ Here I am utilising widely accepted terminology developed by Wesley Hohfeld (1923) to analyse the structure of rights. Hohfeld identified four basic atomic rights, of which I have incorporated two.¹¹⁰ On Hohfeld’s view to have a privilege-right simply means you have no duty to ϕ . In the case of artistic exceptionalism, ϕ simply means act in accordance with some set of normative requirements held within a domain of social life, even though they may pursue the same goals. To have no duty to ϕ does not entail one is forbidden to ϕ , so artists can, should they choose, also accept the norms of another discipline. The privilege simply allows them to make a choice.

To have an immunity-right, one cannot have one’s other privileges and rights altered by another. At first pass, for artists to have an immunity simply means that within artworlds, artists can exempt themselves and expect that they will not be subject to the censure that attends overstepping normative boundaries in other domains. However, I have attempted to state this immunity with some caution. It is implausible to hold that any exemption an artist attempts will be allowed a pass. Contemporary artists sometimes go too far and face censure for their exigencies. Where and how exactly the line gets drawn in such cases is a fraught subject, and I do not think any general principles can be laid down for how the artworld should set the limits of artistic exceptionalism.¹¹¹ Whatever rights there might be in the artworld, they are informal, with no specific, codified criteria for application that might help to adjudicate all specific cases. For my purposes, it is just the case that immunity can come in degrees, depending on exactly which norms artists are pushing against.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ I have chosen not to incorporate the other two basic atomic rights – claims and powers – into my account. When one has a claim-right, one can require another to do something because they have a duty to do it. When one has a power-right, one can alter another party’s rights, imposing new duties upon them. I allow that artists do sometimes take on these rights as well. Religious artists may take upon themselves the duty to help others improve their spiritual standing and see this as a duty that is compelled by their religious community. Artists may get audiences to fulfil certain conditions in order to engage with their art properly. But I do not include claims and powers within my core definition of artistic exceptionalism because, as I will attempt to show in the next section, I think any such rights are far less clearly determined within artworlds.

¹¹¹ On these grounds, artistic exceptionalism may help to explain why moral disagreements in the arts are *so* divisive. Artworlds are more normatively unstable than other domains, and participants in the arts are often torn between upholding the value of normative instability, whilst also trying to marshal some normative stability in order to make moral judgements.

¹¹² One could hold here that though contemporary artworlds are not limitless in the immunities they offer artists; they are perhaps more likely than other domains to give shocking normative exemptions at least some benefit of

In turn, though exceptionalism is accepted within artworlds, it is not a right that artists are compelled to take up. It is entirely possible for there to be wholly conformist art, simply adhering to the *status quo* in a particular artworld or the world beyond it. This work can still legitimately be judged and appreciated as art, and can still legitimately even be held to be contemporary art. Within contemporary art, exceptionalism is a privilege and immunity that artists may freely choose to take up, or not. However, to manipulate a phrase from Arthur Danto, even if not all contemporary art indulges in normative deviation, it is often created and judged in an ‘atmosphere of artistic exceptionalism.’ By this, I mean that much of the canon of contemporary art is made up of works that embody the experimental principles of the historical avant-garde, the work of path-breaking artists working in the sixties, or artists coming from non-Western art traditions whose aesthetic norms unseat the cultural dominance of the traditions of Western art. This has led to critical discourses that focus heavily on artistic exceptionalism, and that are suspicious of conformism and blind traditionalism. This means that even if an artist makes wholly conformist work, it is liable to be noted as *not* exploring the possibilities of exceptionalism, and this will be a relevant point to make in the critical assessment of the work.

We can now see that when Piper claims that “no artist with political concerns is required by a viewer’s ignorance to make simplistic art” she is plausibly appealing to the widely accepted privileges and immunities that allow her to push against the usual norms of political discourse. However, this doesn’t help to explain why Piper might think she is then *justified* in not altering her artwork for an audience that she sees are clearly struggling and that risk continuing to contribute to the very crisis she is trying to move against. The critic of Piper’s work could argue that we now simply have a better view of what has gone wrong with her particular approach to anti-racist activism. Norms of conduct are often thought to be there for good reason, smoothing coordination and more precisely directing agents towards goals. By choosing to forgo such norms, artists actively put themselves at a disadvantage, taking strange and baroque routes to engaging with crises that actively confuse audiences and limit coordinated engagement. If artistic exceptionalism is a common feature of much contemporary art, then it looks like co-producing cognitive value in this domain proceeds in an unnecessarily anarchic and obtuse way.

doubt. Censure may still be appropriate, but contemporary art is not *immediately* censured for normative exemption in the way it might be in more normatively constrained walks of life.

What is needed is a way of justifying a contemporary artist's pursuit of such strange, seemingly anti-social behaviour, especially when they also propose to be tackling a pressing crisis. A promising way to answer this challenge lies in another proposal made by Vid Simoniti. He also observes that, from the point of view of defenders of the objective style of democratic deliberation, it certainly looks extremely unlikely that art that exempts itself from the communicative norms of deliberation should have any chance at being able to make any impact. However, Simoniti proposes a test that such supposedly problematic works can be subjected to: for any gesture of artistic exceptionalism in a work of engaged art, the evaluator can try to "show that precisely *in those cases* where the objective style fails, artistic devices can help overcome epistemic obstacles." (Simoniti, 2021: 568, emphasis original) Moving this proposal to the more general terms of my account of artistic exceptionalism, we can test whether a purportedly engaged artwork exempts itself from norms in order to reveal and overcome limitations inherent to the normative scheme from which they are departing.

I think the U-cognitivist argument provided in the last chapter can be mobilised to show how Piper's work passes this test. The unusual considerations that Piper chooses to offer to her audience allow the work approaches to cognitive engagement with the crisis of persistent anti-black racism and xenophobia that would be lost were the work to be simplified. First, giving into demands for broadness and simplicity when addressing political issues is not necessarily epistemically or politically beneficial if the crisis one is dealing with is genuinely complex and nuanced. Plainly describing the phenomenon the artwork is trying to capture and instructing audiences how to achieve a solution to racism and xenophobia through a series of clear assertions may miss out the cognitive benefits of less direct, ambiguous forms of communication. As Zoë Cunliffe argues in narrative fictions the presence of provocative consideration such as live and open ambiguities "might attack our trust in the dominant stereotypes in the social imagination, or our certainty in seeing ourselves as dependable judges." (Cunliffe, 2019: 172) Whilst the latter statement might sound like quite a negative outcome, Cunliffe argues that it is nothing of the sort, for "ambiguity in fiction can nurture traits or virtues such as open-mindedness and reflectiveness that act as correctives to epistemic injustice." (172) By getting her audience to come to be unsure whether or not they agree with sentiments in the monologues and the song, Piper demands that they employ their own intellectual skills autonomously, weighing up different takes on the work for themselves and actively considering more possible ways of objectually understanding their social world than

they previously experienced. Plainly telling her audience what is wrong with xenophobia and racism would not afford her audiences such intellectual autonomy.

Second, refusing explicit description of the problems of racism and xenophobia helps to put the audience in the position to experience the detrimental nature of xenophobia in a first-hand way, emphasising their own experiences as being central to understanding their implication within a crisis. An audience who both empathises with one or more of the monologues whilst also taking seriously the way other parts of the work push against the monologues' content learns first-hand what it is like to go through the cognitive dissonance and awkwardness of having their convictions pulled in multiple directions. They directly feel the emotional distress and embarrassment of realising the details of their own complicity in creating such dissonance. Removing difficulty or humour from the work in favour of a more easily digestible and clear statement of Piper's position risks meaning that the audience does not need to go through the process of self-reflective inquiry for themselves, thus depriving them of autonomous experience of what it is like to actually become cognisant of the detrimental effects of their own xenophobia.

Third, by leaving the implications of the work open for her audience to explore, rather than instructing them on the best outcome, Piper avoids the epistemic vice of didacticism.¹¹³ In the case of fiction, Charles Repp points out that "An author who tells her readers too explicitly what lessons to draw from her story, as if the reader is too obtuse to draw the lesson for himself, may also come across as intellectually condescending." (Repp, 2012: 273) Though Piper's rejection of instructing her failing audience may seem arrogant, one could claim that refusing to make the work overly didactic is actually a virtuous gesture of magnanimity. She places a high level of trust in her audience's level of maturity and cognitive skill that she hopes an adult American will be able to meet, rather than belittling or patronising them. Were Piper to make the work less open, there is again a risk she would leave no space for them to take charge of their own navigation away from racism and xenophobia.

¹¹³ Those familiar with Piper's wider practice will note that the artist is not unwelcome to making openly didactic art. Works such as *Funk Lessons* (1972-74) and *Shiva Dances* (2004) use a lecture format to communicate to their audiences. However, I think there is room to see that these works are not viciously didactic, closing off audience autonomy. Both ultimately end in encouraging the audience to dance, proposing that the experiences the work is trying to convey can't solely be conveyed through lecturing.

These are just three of the many ways the cognivist can show that Piper's work answers Simoniti's test. More specifically, each of these three approaches focuses on how Piper's exceptionalist artistry explains the cognitive value of her work. They help to generate clear claims that the work is artistically valuable *as* contemporary art in virtue of its cognitive value. When it comes to engaged art that is attempting to make progress on worldly issues, exempting itself from the normal ways of engaging with the crisis can both critically show up limitations in standard modes of engagement and can productively put in place new strategies for intervening in crises. Piper's gestures of exceptionalism tested her audience, and some were not up to the test. But this is simply the cost of finding novel and subtle ways to push against deeply held and cognitively flawed expectations. Were Piper to not have made her work as challenging and subtle as it is, she risks giving in to substandard strategies of engagement and thereby limiting her own project of combatting xenophobia. The benefits outweigh the costs.

Focussing on how artists have mobilised artistic exceptionalism in these ways directly contributes to the functionalist account I am developing. To understand how an artist has broken from the normative standards of other domains helps the audience to understand exactly what the artist intends their work to do and helps to draw attention to the features of their artistry that manifest their exceptionalist attitude. But it also helps to draw attention to how artists have pursued value in ways that are distinctly artistic. We have seen that some views attempt to capture what makes art distinct by focussing on its pursuit of aesthetic value, or its usage of distinctly artistic media. My proposal is that much of the way art marks itself as a distinct cultural practice does not necessarily emerge from the values it pursues or the distinct tools it uses, but rather from *the normative challenge it introduces into its audiences' lives and into the society in which it occurs*. The relatively high level of tolerance of normative experimentation within artworlds – especially within contemporary artworlds – allows artists to pursue modes of engagement that are not possible in more normatively constrained domains of life. To focus appreciation on how an artist has mobilised their privilege and immunity is to offer one clear route to focus on aspects of the work that arise from it *being art*.

Of course, artists may well mobilise artistic exceptionalism and find that this completely gets in the way of their purposes. An artist could make a work that pushes against so many norms of communication that it simply can't be understood by anyone. Or they could make a work that pushes against so many moral norms that it is extremely difficult for any audience to

actually stomach the work. When such works can't be convincingly redeemed using the kind of test proposed by Simoniti, we have reason to think that artistic exceptionalism has conflicted with the artist's intentions. But this is as it should be. Focussing on how artistic exceptionalism is simply a route to evaluating whether it is good *or bad* as art.

We can now make full sense of Piper's defence of her work, how it can be justified, and how it can be shown that audience failure doesn't necessarily block the achievement of cognitive or artistic value. Artists working in artworlds where artistic exceptionalism is widely accepted are under no responsibility to make things easy for their audiences. In such artworlds, audiences have to try and meet the challenges that artists face them with, the motivation for accepting this unusual asymmetrical distribution of responsibility being that it helps artworlds coordinate to their activities on appreciating artistic value.¹¹⁴

5.5. Normative Opacity and Risk

The normative terrain of contemporary art is now better mapped. But, for audiences, it may now look like it is a serious uphill climb to realising value through co-production. Just as contemporary artists explore infinitely heterogenous materials, forms, genres, and styles, so too they can set to work infinite different custom normative exemptions. We saw in §1.3. how Sherri Irvin (2021) observed that appreciation and interpretation of contemporary artworks required close attention to the custom sanctions that artists lay down to determine the metaphysical constitution of their works. There was thus no one-sized fits all account of the ontological conditions of contemporary art. I argue that audiences have to observe a similarly high degree of particularity in grasping the normative exemptions a contemporary artwork is experimenting with. Each contemporary artwork has the potential to alter our normative landscape in completely unique ways. Understanding the normative exemptions of one contemporary artwork may not set you up for dealing with the normative exemptions of the next one.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ A similar view to this has been put forward by C. Thi Nguyen (2021). He argues that audiences trust artists to pursue their own 'aesthetic sincerity', following their own artistic sensibility rather than simply trying to fit their work to the tastes of their audiences (what Nguyen calls 'selling out'). This explains why artists often make work that is highly challenging for audiences, and why such work is widely praised. It is often evidence that an artist has acted with aesthetic sincerity.

¹¹⁵ This is not just a problem for neophytes to contemporary art. I think this is also a difficulty that even expert critics face. Though they may become more ready to work through the demands of strange artworks and may develop some short cuts to identifying common strategies, it is always possible that they will encounter a work that requires them to do something new and strange that baffles their expertise.

However, there is a further problem with this dazzlingly varied normative landscape. Piper proposes not just that artists may exempt themselves, but that works of contemporary art require audiences to walk a normative line between acknowledging and responding to the specific exemptions an artist is putting into play, and the worldly expectations the artist is expecting an audience to hold firm when engaging with the work. Piper might be requiring her audience to be more sensitive to irony, openness, and difficulty than they would be in other forms of political discourse, but she also clearly thinks it is inappropriate for her audience to also suspend the moral demands made on citizens in post-Civil Rights America. For her, the ideal audience appears to be one who both feels the force of her gestures of artistic exceptionalism *and* does not block this by bringing wholly inappropriate xenophobic commitments to the work. The audience's further autonomous exploration of how this shifts their own understanding of the crisis at hand must be conducted in light of correctly walking this line. Stated more strongly, Piper's audience have a responsibility to try to also work out what other norms the work is *not* exempting itself from and to appropriately incorporate this into their response to the work.

The problem with this is that Piper doesn't make it at all easy for her audience to work out how to walk the line between exemption and expectation. She is not unique in this. I propose that this is in fact a convention within contemporary art. As with many contemporary artworks, Piper does not explicitly tell their audience exactly what exemptions the artwork puts in place or how their audience should cognitively respond to it. There is no clear statement of what commitments audiences are expected to bring to the work, and no entry test to make sure audiences aren't bringing the wrong ones. The artist is not on hand in the gallery to answer questions and does not invite audiences to a forum where they can discuss their responses and see where they are going wrong.¹¹⁶ This much is to be expected from contemporary art, and I do not raise these observations to defend Piper's audiences' blameworthy xenophobic ignorance. I only hold that no matter the audience's prior blameworthy moral and cognitive limitations, given the opacity that attends artistic exceptionalism there is still a high risk that even a well-meaning audience may not be able to

¹¹⁶ It could be argued that Piper actually has overridden this idea in many of her lecture-based works that followed *Four Intruders*, especially *Funk Lessons*. Yet the fact still remains that these are often considered isolated performance events, and that it is the case that, for gallery-based works both in general and within Piper's practice, the artist is not present every day is usually prohibitively demanding, and extremely unconventional when it does happen.

work out what responsibilities they must undertake to correctly grasp what the artist is conveying them.

Here we can draw a contrast with other domains that exhibit far less normative opacity. Just as insight arrives through co-production in the arts, the natural sciences give clear evidence of advancement of understanding achieved by many different researchers from different sub-disciplines working together to progress a single line of inquiry. Any full explanation of the epistemic achievements of the natural sciences requires scrutiny of the norms that contribute to success in inquiry and aid the coordination of these diverse teams. For instance, success can, in part, be attributed to the observance of certain epistemic norms – the necessity of sufficient empirical evidence for justifying any assertion, working under the assumption that science makes epistemic advances whilst being fallible, putting trust in theories and evidence produced by accredited experts rather than laypeople, etc. Likewise, institutional structures have emerged to keep scientists in check: scientists are trained and examined in accepted methods performed to accepted standards, peer review ensures that scientific investigations are cross-examined by other independent experts, ethics committees and declarations of conflicts of interest attempt to make transparent the ways in which non-scientific interests might be guiding inquiry or when scientific inquiry has to respect certain moral boundaries in wider society, etc.¹¹⁷ When researchers fail to show reasonable respect for these normative bounds, they let down not only themselves *qua* scientific inquirer, but also the community of other scientists who might be relying on their work. By making these norms transparent, scientists communicating with other scientists can ensure that what they are saying will be properly understood by their epistemic community.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that art does not have a monopoly on normative innovation. Scientists make shocking discoveries that shake their epistemic communities and upend the usual way inquiry proceeds. But where these normative deviations differ from those in art is that when a scientist wishes to introduce a new normative standard into scientific practice, they are expected to offer explicit, publicly available justification for why they have to deviate from the norms of the reigning paradigm, and to show how their deviations lead to better explanations of the natural world. Though the justifications may themselves be challenging

¹¹⁷ See Elgin (2017: ch. 6).

and subject to debate, their actions and their reasons for drawing normative lines are usually transparent.

Contemporary artworlds lack any coherent, domain-wide institutional codes of conduct for how artists should communicate their normative expectations and exemptions.¹¹⁸ Audiences must discover the normative structure and cognitive value of contemporary artworks with a far greater degree of autonomy than those working in the natural sciences. But, due to normative opacity, they often do this in the dark, making coordination and success a far more fragile achievement. Engagement through co-production is a risky endeavour, insofar as it can be unclear, upon first encounter with an artwork, how one is going to find one's way through its obscurity and challenge, if one will know if one is going in the right direction, whether one is up to the task of the work's demands, and if the effort is even going to be worth it. If your goal, as an audience of contemporary art, is to improve your cognitive engagement with crises, then contemporary artworks make the risk of failure extremely high. Prior to actually attempting to go through this process, it is difficult to know how it will go and what the outcomes might be.¹¹⁹

It is possible to argue here that the difficulty of grasping a contemporary artwork's cognitive and artistic value is not necessarily a problem. No defender of art needs to argue that the artistic values need to be widely accessible. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is regarded as a great work of art, even if few readers are able to fully grasp its difficulty and experimentation. If it can be established that contemporary artworks do have value and that there are some audiences somewhere who manage to grasp it, however small, then this is usually enough for the philosopher of art. Concerns about accessibility are concerns for others to deal with.

Though contemporary art institutions rarely place restrictions on who can enter the gallery and view the work, it is broadly permissible that contemporary artists don't need to make sure every possible audience should be able to make use of their work. Perhaps dyed-in-the-wool racists are just not the kind of audience Piper thinks her work could or should ever try to

¹¹⁸ A similar observation has been reached by Gregory Currie (2020: 184-191).

¹¹⁹ It seems to me that many of our interactions with contemporary art are like 'transformative experiences' (Paul, 2014) or other kinds of unexpected, unplanned changes in our values (Callard, 2018). In these cases, an agent significantly changes who they are and how they look at the world but cannot rationally plan for such transformations. This may be another reason that the normative structure of contemporary art is so strange. It tries to cultivate normative insecurity in order to lead its audiences to unexpected transformations rather than easily paths of action that can be rationally assessed.

reach, and it is inappropriate to think these audience's misunderstandings affect her work in any way. The defender of contemporary art only needs to show that it is possible for a suitably positioned audience to actually find certain works to have value even if getting into this position is very hard for audiences.

5.6. Mediation

Concluding in this way is perhaps realistic, but I can't help but feel disappointed if this is all that can be said. It is no secret that audiences are regularly perplexed by contemporary art, and often reject it for its supposed esotericism and pretentiousness. Though its cognitive value is regularly praised by artworld insiders, contemporary art is ultimately a fairly marginal cultural practice. The critic could argue that the uneven normative landscape I have identified is to blame for this sad state of affairs. Widespread artistic exceptionalism and its attendant normative opacity has led both to art becoming more diverse, but also less attractive to those struggling for clear and direct ways to engage with pressing crises.

However, I think that the situation is not as dire as it might seem. Contemporary artworlds are shot through with moments of opacity and risk, but there are many ways to keep audiences from getting *completely* lost. Let me try for a more optimistic conclusion. I argued in the last chapter that it is best to describe the improvements in objectual understanding that art creates as arriving through co-production between artists and audiences. Following cognitivist convention, I only focussed on these two parties. But, as has been hinted at many points, within contemporary artworld practice there are a number of third parties that intercede in the process of understanding *through* art whom I will call 'mediators.' Consider, for instance, curators. Curators have many jobs, but one key one is to ensure that artworks are correctly displayed in ways that both respect artist's intentions, and that help to make the properties of the work that are important for appreciation fully available for audiences. This often involves not just installing works correctly but also involves carefully crafting all manner of extra-artistic aids, such as wall texts or handouts that list the materials the work is made from, their provenance, the processes the artist has engaged in to make the work, contextual information about the artist's biography, the general theme the artist is engaging with, etc. They may even produce publications, commission pieces of writing from scholars and critics, program artist's talks and symposia, and make videos and social media content both to further contextualise and promote the artwork.

All of this material aids audiences in grasping exactly what considerations an artwork is offering them such that the process of equilibrating can get up and running. For example, for an audience to begin to make use of the considerations offered by Slavs and Tartar's banners audiences may need more than just the artwork. They require some additional information on exactly what all the sources for the various quotations and images in the work are, and information about how the works were made. Without being aware of these aspects of the work's context and provenance, an audience who is ill-informed about the crisis the work is dealing with may be unable to improve their understanding. The list of mediators who have a share in shaping audiences understanding in this way can be extended to many others: gallery technicians, conservators, museum educators, and even parties like art critics and gallery press departments.

Mediators stand as a bulwark against a solipsism that can attend artistic experimentation, artists experimenting without a care for how it might challenge their audience. They also stand against audience confusion and failure. Indeed, the increasingly prevalent role mediation plays in artworld practice is another distinct development of contemporary art, increasing in parallel to the increased diversification and proliferation of artistic exceptionalism. Plausibly, art has never had quite so much supporting material available to help audiences grasp relevant background details, the processes that go into making works, the custom sanctions and normative exemptions laid down by artists, and relevant biographical information.

No doubt, mediation is sometimes something that can be voluntarily engaged with as part of an audience's encounter with a contemporary artwork. Audiences can choose whether or not to engage with forms of mediation such wall texts or press releases.¹²⁰ Likewise, it is important to note that contemporary artworks often vary as to how necessary reference to mediation is to correctly interpret and appreciate the work – some may welcome it, others may try to get it out of the way as much as possible to increase the immediacy or mystery of their work. There is also a risk that audiences who are not so well educated in the convention that engaging with contemporary art requires reference to these materials may fail because they don't appeal to

¹²⁰ These can be contrasted with forms of mediation that are not optional when encountering a work, such as the height the work is hung, the lighting conditions in the gallery, the soundproofing of a room, etc. The audience has no choice about whether or not they engage with these aspects of mediation when they encounter the work.

these supports. But it is usually the case that, as part of improving one's grasp of contemporary art, one becomes more attentive to the importance of this support as a means to achieving understanding *through* contemporary art.

Introducing mediators as a third party in co-production allows us to also understand that some failures to realise artistic and cognitive value may have nothing to do with failures of the artwork or the audience. As Sherri Irvin (2019) has argued, mediators can fail their responsibilities to correctly convey an artwork's considerations to an audience. A video might be installed so that it plays out of focus, a conservator may have stored an artwork incorrectly leading to parts of it decaying, a curator may write a press release in excruciatingly obscure, theory-laden 'International Art English' (Rule and Levine: 2013), adding further layers of opacity to a challenging artwork. In all these ways, a mediator can block an artist's intentions from being realised and can block an audience from being able to grasp what considerations the work is offering. But here the blame falls on the shoulders of the mediators. They have blocked an artwork from achieving its constitutive functions and have deprived an audience of the chance to engage with crises.

Mediators act responsibly when they help to mitigate the more extreme reaches of opacity, difficulty, and riskiness of contemporary art, and, in doing so, minimise the potential for misunderstanding created by contemporary art's opacities, difficulties, and risks. They do this by helping to identify functions, artistry, normative tensions, priming audience expectations, or filling in details that might direct audiences' interpretation, appreciation, and further thinking. Yet it is important to note that the practice of mediators does not eliminate normative tension, nor does it completely remove opacity, difficulty, and risk. Mediators have to be careful to still leave space open for the audience to exert their own autonomy, and to try to wield their own commitments and considerations drawn from art for themselves.

Mediation, both in the wild and in my theory, works well when it stops short of telling an audience exactly what understanding they are supposed to end up with.¹²¹ For example, a significant handbook on gallery education argues that educators working within arts institutions should try to teach not just "how to look," or "what to look for" but, ultimately, the

¹²¹ Here an instructive distinction could be drawn between what I have called 'normative opacity' and what Amy King (2017) has called the virtue of subtlety and the vice of a heavy hand. King argues that subtle art promotes active engagement in its audience, whereas heavy-handedness – being too obvious, or too closed – does not. Normative opacity could be understood as the vice of being *too* subtle. As such, mediators need to act virtuously, being careful to mitigate opacity without falling into heavy handedness.

possibilities of what the experience of art may be.” (Burnham and Kai-Kee, 2011: 17) The authors of this guide propose that audiences should be offered questions and prompts for discussion rather than facts, information, or packaged interpretations, in order to allow audiences to “make discoveries, think freely and inventively ... [and] leave [the museum] with the afterglow of an investigation that has brought observations, thoughts, and feelings together into a whole (even if only a temporary, provisional whole)” (9-10).¹²² Mediation must thus proceed with a deft touch, leaving space for audiences to value the autonomy and productive risks that gestures of artistic exceptionalism can create, whilst also providing enough guidance to help to make sure audiences from different backgrounds don’t fall into easily avoidable appreciative pitfalls. This does not eradicate audience failure from contemporary art. But it does at least suggest that the normative situation is not quite as chaotic as it first appears. Accounting for the success or failure of co-productions in contemporary art requires close scrutiny of the work of mediators.

5.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that it is possible to show when and how contemporary art’s realisation of cognitive value also realises artistic value. To do so, I have mobilised a functionalist conception of artistic value, which I think is adequately sensitive to the absolute heterogeneity of contemporary art and its emphasis on engagement. It helps us see not only how a work of contemporary art is valuable *as art*, but also how it is distinctly valuable as *contemporary art*. I then introduced a feature of co-production that affects this picture – the widespread acceptance and support of artistic exceptionalism. Using *Four Intruders* I have reflected on different ways to understand both the dangers and potentials of artistic exceptionalism. On the one hand, artistic exceptionalism allows artists and audiences to see the limitations of extant ways of dealing with crises and to find new strategies for engagement. On the other hand, artistic exceptionalism is often attended by a normative opacity that can make it hard for ill-informed audiences grasp how it is appropriate to respond to a contemporary artwork. I finished the chapter by rounding out my account of co-production to make space for mediators who help try to accurately convey the considerations offered by

¹²² Similar proposals are made in educational guides specifically aimed at those unfamiliar with difficulty contemporary art: see An and Cerasi (2017: 110-113) and Ward (2014: 17). For an intriguing empirical study of the benefits of contemporary arts institutions encouraging autonomy and enjoyment in new audiences by telling them that it was ‘okay not to like it’, see Pitts and Price (2021: ch. 7).

artworks to audiences. Though mediation does not completely remove the openness and mystery of contemporary art, when successful it helps to significantly reduce but outright not eliminate the risks that come with artistic exceptionalism. In putting forward these arguments, I hope to have made a novel case that understanding the distribution of responsibilities in an artworld is crucial for grasping the ways in which audience autonomy is shaped, and the ways artistic value is realised.

Conclusion

6.1. Where We Have Been

Over the second half of the twentieth century, ‘contemporary art’ has become the go-to term to categorise recently produced art within the gallery-based artworld. However, though the term is widely used, its historical, conceptual, and critical dimensions are often very unclear. It is hard to say what makes art contemporary, why it only seems apt to apply the term to art produced since the middle of the twentieth century, and what makes any of the art that falls within the category good or bad as art.

In this thesis, I have responded to these puzzles by developing a philosophical theory of contemporary art. I have developed this across three main lines of argument. First, I have argued that philosophers, historians, and critics must pay attention to two characteristic features of contemporary art: its absolute heterogeneity *and* its engagement with crises of contemporaneity. The former is well studied within philosophy, but the latter is not. However, I have shown that the latter is crucial to understanding what makes art contemporary, rather than art *as such*. I have proposed that philosophers of contemporary art should pay closer attention to understanding what it means for an artwork to respond to the historical period of contemporaneity. I have argued that this can best be done by understanding the ways in which crisis-claims are a natural way to express one’s response to the present, and understanding the way in which engagement is the particular attitude crises demand.

Second, I have developed my account of engagement by showing the ways in which contemporary art improves or impairs our cognitive standing. I have argued that, due to the complex nature of crises of contemporaneity and the open-ended ways in which contemporary artworks often communicate to their audiences, it is better to articulate shifts in cognitive standing not solely in terms of knowledge gained or lost by audiences, but rather by charting shifts in their degrees of objectual understanding. Central to my own brand of U-cognitivism is the emphasis on the view that cognitive engagement takes place *through* art, improvements in cognitive standing the result of co-production between artists, audiences, and mediators. Contemporary art strives to actively involve all who encounter it in making

autonomous contributions to the project of understanding the present.

Finally, I have argued that this cognitivist argument helps us to clarify what it means to critically assess an artwork *as* contemporary art. To do this, I proposed that we adopt a functionalist view of artistic value, which helps to incorporate the key features of contemporary art into evaluation. I have urged that this account can be augmented by paying close attention to real cases of audience misunderstanding – a prevalent feature of much challenging contemporary art. In order to judge how this affects artistic value, I have claimed that we need to pay close attention to the normative structure of the artworld in which the work is shown. Within contemporary art, close attention must be paid to the distribution of responsibility across a co-production, to the way artists have deployed the liberties of artistic exceptionalism, the degree of normative opacity under which audiences labour, and the degree of clarity mediators can offer. Contemporary art is a field in which we should expect many risks to be taken, but also a field in which we should expect many innovative strategies for engagement to emerge.

Together, these arguments cut through the vagueness that often surrounds the concept of contemporary art and the artworld practices that have become associated with it. In doing so, I believe I have made several novel contributions to the study of contemporary art. The main innovation I have introduced is to lay out the problems that a distinct philosophy *of* contemporary art needs to reckon with. I believe that central question of this research project is ‘what makes art contemporary?’ I have attempted to provide ways to bring contemporary art’s engagement with crises in better view, which I have argued is just as important to answering this question as grappling with absolute heterogeneity is. I have mobilised this to introduce a much-needed account of what it means to value a work of art *as* contemporary art into aesthetics.

In unfolding my attempt to make sense of the way in which art engages with crises, I have also introduced several other ideas that I take also be novel. I have introduced rarely discussed aspects of the philosophy of history into aesthetics, showing how it is possible for art to enter into its maker’s and audiences’ attempts to articulate the historical meaning of their own time, and how different works made at the same point in chronological time may have very different conceptions of historical time. I have made explicit an often-implicit distinction between cognitive engagement *in* and *through* art, which has in turn brought attention to the

importance of grasping the collaborative way in which we learn from our encounters with art and the importance of audience autonomy in the realisation of cognitive and artistic value. Finally, I have shown that reflection on non-idealised, real-world receptions of artworks can bring novel focus to the task of understanding the distribution of responsibilities across artists, mediators, and audiences, and the ways in which artistic exceptionalism has become central to our judgement of artistic value. Scrutinising these aspects of art helps to illuminate not only cognitivism, but also our wider understanding of the way artistic value can and cannot be realised.

In light of these arguments, the scattered yet compelling philosophical approaches to contemporary art can be brought together into a more unified and directed research project. My thesis has not attempted to exhaust the possible lines of inquiry that could be taken in the philosophy of contemporary art. But it has attempted to bring attention to the fundamental question the field must reflect upon. If my own answers are mistaken, I believe that at least clarifying the importance of this question is a big step to delineating the possibility space of a dedicated philosophy of contemporary art. If my answers are not mistaken, then I have mapped out some of the main routes through this new territory.

The philosophy of contemporary art is a nascent field, but it is one that I hope to see grow. I will conclude by laying out some specific future directions of travel that my study helps to illumine and some broader problems that this thesis has not yet answered.

6.2. The Devil in the Details

One limitation of this study is the number of examples it has engaged with. It cannot be stressed enough just how vast and diverse contemporary art is. The handful of cases I have focussed on doesn't even get close to scratching the surface. One crucial future project is thus to simply continue to bring my theory into contact with more and more cases. The task of filling out the details will be as endless as contemporary art's variety. However, I at least hope I can make some recommendations for how this can proceed.

As we have seen, when looking at contemporary artworks, there are so many details to grasp. We need to know what custom sanctions were put in place for a work's construction, display, conservation, and audience participation, how the artist dealt with their host institution, what

were the actual audience reactions, what specific crises were they dealing with, what is the history of these crises and what are the positions taken on the crises beyond the artworld. Grasping all of this together is necessary to make substantive statements on an artwork *as* contemporary art, insofar as it all helps us to see how an artist's artistry has been brought to bear upon the task of engaging with a particular crisis within particular institutional contexts. There are already philosophers of contemporary art that are exemplars of this method. Sherri Irvin (2019; 2022) has demonstrated that much philosophical insight into contemporary art emerges from actually talking directly to curators and conservators and going into archives to understand the exact details of specific works. Diarmuid Costello (2020; forthcoming; Costello and Flikschuh, forthcoming) has shown that focussing on the specific investigation of the way a contemporary artwork turns its artistry to respond to its particular political and cultural context is central to unfolding the novel philosophical insights they can produce. Vid Simoniti (2019) has shown that philosophy of contemporary art is progressed by bridging the gap between philosophy and the detailed, empirical study conducted in art history. Philosophy of contemporary art looks set to represent a vanguard against the tendency within philosophy to deal with examples in a more cursory way, simply namechecking canonical classic artworks in the process of developing a theory, rather than thoroughly analysing them as a key part of arriving at any theory. In order to achieve a broadness that is apt to yield an adequate picture of contemporary art, the field benefits from the regular introduction of new, detailed studies of particular cases that represent bespoke approaches to form, medium, genre, and style, from specific cultural and political context around the world.

This means that we should expect philosophy of contemporary art to be a project that requires many hands, since it is well beyond the scope of any one philosopher to do justice to this detail. However, I hope to have also shown that it is also incumbent upon philosophers of contemporary art to attempt to make broader claims about the field as a whole. Investigating the details will help to clarify the broader concepts we work with, but the details alone are not enough. As such, I urge that the goal of philosophy of contemporary art is to make concerted efforts not just to work on the big picture or just the details, but to work out how to achieve reflective equilibrium (in the broad sense, rather than the specifically epistemic one developed by Elgin) between the two. One way to do this is to keep in mind the key question: what makes this artwork *contemporary*?

One promising alternative way to split the difference between generality and specificity which

I have not attempted here to make use of extant philosophical work to study specific sub-categories of contemporary art. For instance, one could make use of philosophical accounts of painting or horror to develop fruitful philosophical accounts of *contemporary* painting or of *contemporary* horror.¹²³ I think this is a promising way to link up diverse works of art within the same subcategory and to link contemporary art to wider debates in aesthetics. However, again, what I hope the argument of this thesis has helped to bring into view is that those who wish to pursue this approach as a project within philosophy of contemporary art have to distinguish the question ‘What do contemporary works tell us about the nature of painting or horror?’ from ‘What do the resources of philosophy of painting and philosophy of horror help to illuminate about the particular ways in which an artist has attempted to investigate the historical meaning of a crisis-filled present?’ The former path uses contemporary art to tell us about philosophical problems of painting or horror *as such*. The latter looks at how philosophical accounts of a particular medium and its puzzles can help to illuminate and understand what makes the work contemporary in ever more detailed ways. The latter path thus represents a greater contribution to the philosophy of contemporary art.

Finally, I have proposed that another key future project is to explore other forms of engagement with crises that are not best understood using the tools of epistemology. In §3.2. I listed two – practical engagement and aesthetic engagement. Plausibly there are more.¹²⁴ And plausibly there will be many overlaps between different kinds of engagement. For my own part, this is the direction I feel most compelled to travel. I have made steps towards understanding practical engagement by considering what it means to value an artwork as a work of activist art (Earley, forthcoming), arguing that we have reason to be especially worried about the artistic value of works that fail to actually change the world in any measurable way. Continued reflection in this area would, I imagine, take one further into the study of the field of social engaged art, further into concerns about the way institutions can limit and facilitate art activism, and further into concerns about the way art can and cannot make genuine differences to political and social life at large. It is less clear to me exactly where reflection upon aesthetic engagement might lead, but, as I have pointed out in chapter 5,

¹²³ For an interesting attempt at the former, albeit one that is more focussed on the diversification of the media of painting rather than its engagement with crises, see Gaiger (2022: 145-175).

¹²⁴ For instance, one may want to distinguish the practice of critique from the broad practice of engagement – a well-worn approach to contemporary art. Or one may want to explore the domain of ethical engagement, or art’s attempts to marshal forms of engagement found in more specific domains of inquiry, looking at how contemporary art involves itself in legal engagement or scientific engagement.

there are many reasons to think that it will have to seriously negotiate with the idea that aesthetic life should be detached from worldly, end-directed endeavours. I am certain that further elaborating these two aspects of engagement will help to build a richer, more complete picture of contemporary art.

6.3. The Broader Significance of Contemporary Art

Though my main project has been to understand what makes contemporary art distinct and how to answer the specific historical, philosophical, and critical challenges it poses, I agree with the optimistic proposal that contemporary art expands “the philosophical horizons of philosophers of art, enabling them to see that hitherto uncharted theoretical moves are possible.” (Irvin and Dodd, 2017: 375) Though I have only provided glimpses of the wider application of my views, I am convinced that various ideas I have put forward have implications for the study of art of other periods, and to art made in the present that does not fall in the category of contemporary art. Contemporary art has not sprung from nowhere. It is one stage along a developmental path. Moreover, as Danto argued, it is a stage where artists seem to feel particular freedom to revive and explore historical media, techniques, styles, and genres. As such, we should expect much of what we say about contemporary art to have continuities with our understanding of features of the art of the past. A further reason to continue to develop a distinct philosophical study of contemporary art is that there may be more philosophical ideas with broader application that it can bring into focus.

In this thesis, it is the reflection on the construction of historical meaning, the account of the coproduction of cognitive value, the emphasis on audience autonomy, and the idea of artistic exceptionalism that I see having the broadest application. Plausibly, art made at many different times can be illuminated using these various ideas. For instance, throughout chapter 5 I hinted that I have already found that artistic exceptionalism is a concept with a rich genealogy that has not yet been fully sketched. One philosophical project that I find particularly urgent is to unfold this genealogy, to see how far it extends into the past and how far across the world it is felt, to see how it interacts with concepts like artistic autonomy and transgression, all of which has the potential to produce illuminating insights within the broader history of art and aesthetics.

Again, I am uncertain what these broader reflections might yield. But what I want to stress is

that, for me, this is a line of inquiry that has come into view from looking closely at contemporary art. Plausibly this is not the only way it could have happened, but looking closely at contemporary art may help to bring into sharp relief more general features of art. Philosophy of contemporary art should see this as one of the major contributions it can make to aesthetics as a whole.

6.4. Armchair Cognitivism

There is still one residual worry that can be raised for the particular methodology I have taken in this thesis. Looking at the study of literature, Gregory Currie has claimed that cognitivists almost universally hold that “The philosophically interesting question about fiction [or any artwork] is not whether people do learn from it but ‘What is there to be learned?’” (Currie, 2020: 96) The novel worry Currie has introduced into cognitivism is that cognitivists make all kinds of claims about the cognitive value of art, without engaging in any serious empirical inquiry to support their claims. Looking at the available empirical studies of learning from literature, Currie proposes that results are simply too meagre to substantiate cognitivist optimism. Though he is clear that he does not endorse outright anti-cognitivism, Currie does think that if cognitivists actually want to track how people respond to literature, then we should expect to see them seriously change their highly optimistic views in light of these limited empirical findings.

The kind of project I have engaged with looks like it falls directly in Currie’s crosshairs. I appear to have asserted that audiences can learn from contemporary art by improving their objectual understanding of crises but have not undertaken any serious empirical study to support these claims or provide any reference to other studies that could provide support. As such, my project is, at best, only a prelude to the real cognitivist work of getting out of the armchair and into the laboratory.

One weak defence of my lack of scrutiny of the empirical evidence is that the kinds of psychological studies that Currie refers to are simply hard to find for the specific field of contemporary art. For the advocate of Currie’s view, I can propose that, in lieu of any clear empirical study of the cognitive effects of contemporary art, I have at least provided preparatory proposals that should help empirical researchers to see aspects of cognitive response to art that would help to focus their studies. I have helped to both determine what

makes an artwork contemporary, and I have highlighted what I take to be the most apt kinds of cognitive improvement to measure – shifts in degrees of objectual understanding. If changes in breadth, depth, and significance of understanding can be quantified, the empiricist has a clear project they could undertake. Moreover, I also have been cautious throughout this thesis to avoid any strong claims that any particular contemporary artwork *does* improve our cognition in a certain way. Rather, I have attempted to say that my account shows both how we can make out the cognitive achievements of contemporary art, but also its cognitive failings. This framework for understanding criteria for failure and success in audience engagements with contemporary art should help the impartial empirical inquirer and should be able to incorporate any empirical results without any serious change to my position.

One uncomfortable outcome for this weak line of defence is that it allows that only a tiny number of audiences actually do make the kind of cognitive improvements I have outlined. Indeed, once the empirical evidence is in, it may turn out that very little highly praised contemporary art is actually of much cognitive value or much value *as* contemporary art to many people. This would substantiate popular worries that contemporary art is a culturally marginal, rarefied pursuit, and that attempts to make it more public are genuinely misguided. This would be a disappointing conclusion, but it is not something I have attempted to ward off in this thesis.

However, I think my project licences stronger opposition to Currie's critique. I believe that the proposals I have made about the complex process of co-production in circumstances where artistic exceptionalism flourishes provide grounds to think that the cognitive value of contemporary art will be hard to boil down to the kinds of clear, quantifiable, empirical assessment that Currie privileges. For instance, I am moved by Elisabeth Schellekens and Guy Dammann's (2021) proposals that we should be wary of attempts to abstract away the fact that what we learn from art is deeply influenced by the prior cognitive standing we have when we first encounter works and the subsequent research we do afterwards. This makes it unclear at what point in an audience's encounter with an artwork an empirical test should occur. It seems strange to simply test an audience's improved understanding after they have just seen a work of complex contemporary art. The work requires the audience to spend much more time reflecting upon it, doing more research, and connecting it to other works in order to begin to unfold the shifts in understanding it might elicit. Indeed, the process of unfolding the exact cognitive impacts of an artwork is often a lifelong endeavour. What

Hamlet reveals about the nature of mortality will be very different when I am teenager to when I am in middle age. It is not the case that we go to a complex work of art to keep confirming the same insights over and over again. Rather, we keep on engaging with works of art to see how they reorganise our commitments in entirely new ways at different points in time. As such, empirically studying the cognitive impact of contemporary art will need to be conducted through extended (possibly over the course of a lifetime!), qualitatively rich study.¹²⁵

However, I think one promising avenue I hope to open up for empirical approaches to cognitivism comes from my emphasis, in chapter 5, on looking at the way the social norms of particular artworlds are structured, and how these contribute to bringing about successful learning *through* art or not. The empiricist cognitivist has reason to study how learning occurs in actual artworlds, rather than study works in isolated laboratory conditions. However, I also hope to have shown, in my consideration of artistic exceptionalism, that recorded occurrences of audience misunderstanding are sometimes not enough to explain the cognitive value of works of art. Understanding the way the social norms of artworlds and the appreciative practices they support have been shaped by respecting exceptionalism gives us a far more complex picture of what success or failure actually mean in our responses to art. Empirical cognitivism can increase its richness by integrating this into its interpretations of evidence.

Therefore, I do not think there is yet reason to think that Currie's line of critique casts deep scepticism on my approach on contemporary art. In fact, I hope to have sketched some ways in which the arguments in this thesis might in fact be useful to further deepening our understanding of how learning from art could be empirically studied.

6.5. The Future of Contemporary Art

A different worry that could be raised for my account concerns the future value of contemporary art. One might worry that, for all I have said about how valuable a work art might be *as* contemporary art, this is ultimately only a fleeting kind of value. This is because an artwork can only facilitate engagement with a crisis whilst the crisis it addresses is a live

¹²⁵ See Mikkonen (2021: 102-112) for a proposal for how this could be done by looking closely at criticism rather than laboratory studies that might attempt to screen out the ways in which an audience's personal commitments and personal history bear upon the insights they acquire from art.

concern. Some crises of contemporaneity seem to persist, deepen, or morph into new crises with family resemblances to the old ones. But other crises come and go, either because they are solved, or because the concern they cause simply fizzles out. Suppose we somehow get to a utopian world in which every crisis of contemporaneity is in some manner overcome. Or suppose we reach a situation where conditions change in other ways such that contemporaneity no longer seems an apt way to articulate people's struggles over articulating historical meaning.¹²⁶ At either point, though it is unclear what new historical condition we might be in, it may plausibly be inappropriate to call any art that reflects upon it 'contemporary art.' If this is right, then in either future scenario what becomes of actual contemporary art and how should we value it?

If, in the future, there is no one left who feels the force of the crises of contemporaneity and can use the work to engage with these crises, it seems that contemporary art can only be valuable *as* contemporary art within a certain time frame. In our current circumstances, it can be hard actually feel and act upon the exact kinds of revolutionary, utopian zeal that early works of Soviet Russian art were supposed to elicit. Their progressive modernist visions seem too naïve, or too overturned by the actual historical course the Soviet Union took, or simply too inapplicable to the world we live in today. So too, contemporary art will also be likely to fail to present apt ways to engage with future circumstances that are radically changed from the ones it currently engages with.

Peter Lamarque (2010; 2013) has raised the worry that artworks that are only topical cannot ultimately be great art. Only the art that can appeal across generations can be truly valuable as art. As such, we may have reason to worry that, by being so concerned with the period of contemporaneity, contemporary art is dooming itself to only topical interest. There are two ways to respond to this worry. At such a point where it becomes inappropriate to value a work *as* contemporary art, these artworks might just switch over to being valued in other ways. They can have historical value, telling future generations about the lives, hopes, fears, and senses of possibility open to agents at a particular time in the past. Just because many do

¹²⁶ Trying to work out changes might lead to this are hard to fathom and are the work of science fiction. One could imagine that devastating climate change that wrecks the infrastructure of globalism, or human's becoming exoplanetary leading to transformations in transnational governance, or an increased rise in AI-human interaction could all lead to new historical conditions that can't be adequately described using the analytical frameworks of contemporaneity. But I shouldn't wish to speculate on which of these futures might be a possibility.

not feel compelled to try and create the particular forms of utopia envisioned by early Soviet artists doesn't mean that we don't still see these works as compelling windows onto a person's view of the world at a particular time. Indeed, it is plausible that this is something that artists can intend, making works that intentionally strive to act as a record of a particular moment of struggle and insecurity and possibility that may never arise again, but which it is useful to chronicle for those in the future to better understand the past. Philosophy of contemporary art will still be helpful in the future to help historians understand the art of this period, even if it ceases to have full, direct application to new art.

Another possibility is that works of contemporary art may shift to be regarded less for their engagement with crises, and more for their engagement with perennial themes relevant to people living at any time. Haacke's work will continue to resonate for those concerned about the abuses of wealth, Slavs and Tatars work will continue to exemplify the ideals of cosmopolitanism, Piper's work will continue to reflect upon the harms of the cognitive errors of even well-meaning people in circumstances where prejudice persists. Though the specific circumstances that motivated these reflections on the part of the artists might no longer be active, they can still provide interesting frameworks to think about perennial concerns, whatever those might be. In these cases, we may no longer value these works for the way they bear upon specific crises *of contemporaneity*. But all this tells us that valuing an artwork as contemporary art is only one way amongst many to value an artwork.

*

My first serious experiences of generative philosophical, aesthetic, and political thought came from my encounters with contemporary art. Training as an artist, making and exhibiting contemporary art, and teaching it to students at various art schools has further developed my deep love of this particular mode of art making. But it has also brought me face to face with serious difficulties within the domain. I see doing philosophy as not just an attempt to unfold interesting intellectual puzzles, but as a natural extension of the practical struggles of being a maker, teacher, and audience of contemporary art. I hope to have used the distance of philosophical study to overcome some of the limitations of immersion in the field. The thoughts elaborated in thesis are a sincere attempt to share, in some measure, the excitement that I continue to feel when viewing, discussing, and making contemporary art. They are an attempt to show how art in this category routinely attempts to pave open roads of inquiry and

invite its audience to feel the urgency of real-world problems and the pleasures of intellectual autonomy. But they are also an attempt to look at the real problems, failures, and risks that come from making and engaging with difficult, experimental art. Producing a philosophy of contemporary art is an attempt to make a large step forward in capturing both the struggles and achievements of the art that tries to shape our present. There are many more questions that this thesis raises. The only way to find more of them is to keep doing more philosophy of contemporary art. I hope that this thesis provides many tools for myself and others to keep on exploring this nascent domain of philosophy.

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Illustrations

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Fig. 1 - Nicole Eisenman, The Darkward Trail, 2018, oil on canvas. (Tate, London).

Fig. 2 - Cildo Miereles, Babel, 2001, radios, lighting and sound. (Tate, London).

Fig. 3 - Doris Salcedo, Untitled, 1987, steel, wood, paint, plastic and dust. (Tate, London).

Fig. 4 - Doris Salcedo, Shibboleth, 2007, installation documentation. (Tate, London).

*Fig. 5 - Tate Modern Natalie Bell Building, 2022, photograph,
(<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/10/01/tania-bruguera-renames-tate-modern-after-local-london-activist-as-part-of-turbine-hall-commission> [accessed 23/01/23]).*

*Fig. 6 - Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Half-length Figure of Saskia in a Red Hat, 1633, oil on canvas
(Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel).*

Fig. 7 - Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'Untitled' (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991, candies in variously coloured wrappers, endless supply. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mark6mauno/10788507753/> [accessed 13/07/21]).

Fig. 8 - Andy Warhol, Brillo Box, 1964, synthetic polymer paint and screenprint on wood. (Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton).

Fig. 9 - Wilhelm Sansnal, Gaddafi 1, 2011, oil on canvas. (Tate, London).

Fig. 10 - Wilhelm Sansnal, Gaddafi 2, 2011, oil on canvas. (Tate, London).

Fig. 11 - Wilhelm Sansnal, Gaddafi 3, 2011, oil on canvas. (Tate, London).

Fig. 12 - Anish Kapoor, At the Edge of the World, 1998, fibreglass and pigment. (Anish Kapoor Archive).

Fig. 13 - Hans Haacke, Sol Goldman and Alex DiLorenzo Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971, 31 works on paper, maps, and typescript with gelatin silver contact prints. (Tate, London).

Fig. 14 - Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971, gelatin silver print and typed ink on paper. (MACBA, Barcelona).

Fig. 15 - Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971, typed ink on paper. (MACBA, Barcelona).

Fig. 16 - Santiago Sierra, Space Closed by Corrugated Metal, 2002, installation documentation. (The Lisson Gallery, London).

Fig. 17 - Doh Suh, The Perfect Home. Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home, 1999-ongoing, silk and stainless-steel tubes (21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan).

Fig. 18 - Thomas Hirschhorn, Musée Precaire Albinet, 2004, installation documentation (Thomas Hirschhorn Archive).

*Fig. 19 - Slavs and Tatars, Friendship of Nations – Polish Shi'ite Showbiz, 2011, installation view
(Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).*

Fig. 20 - Slavs and Tatars, Friendship of Nations – Polish Shi'ite Showbiz, 2011, installation view
(<https://www.frieze.com/article/sharjah-biennial-10-%E2%80%82> [accessed 2/03/22]).

Fig. 21 - Slavs and Tatars, Simorgh Solidarność, 2011, fabric needlework, leather, synthetic velvet, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).

Fig. 22 - Slavs and Tatars, Beware the Anti-Imperialist Imperialist, 2011, digital print, polyester, plastic beads, string crochet, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).

Fig. 23 - Slavs and Tatars, Men of Iran, 2011, needlework, silk, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).

Fig. 24 - Slavs and Tatars, Only Solidarity and Patience Will Secure Our Victory, 2011, faux leather, synthetic velvet, cotton. (Christian Kaspar Schwarm Collection, Berlin).

Fig. 25 - Adrian Piper, Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems, 1981, installation view (Hammer Museum, Los Angeles).

Fig. 26 - Adrian Piper, Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems, 1981, installation view (Hammer Museum, Los Angeles).