

A Contemporary Observatory for the City

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In the firmament that we observe at night, the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness. Since the number of galaxies and luminous bodies in the universe is almost infinite, the darkness that we see in the sky is something that, according to scientists, demands an explanation. It is precisely the explanation that contemporary astrophysics gives for this darkness that I would now like to discuss. In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though travelling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light. To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot – this is what it means to be contemporary.

–Giorgio Agamben, 'What Is the Contemporary?'¹

In a groundbreaking book on the historical construction of vision in the 19th century, Jonathan Crary, describes how new technical instruments of vision, such as the microscope and the telescope on the one hand, and the stereoscope and wonderfully named phenakistoscope on the other, marked a shift in the relationship to optical apparatuses – and thus to the techniques of the observer – from the metaphoric to the metonymic, by placing both viewers and instruments 'on the same plane of operation, with varying capabilities and features.'² Crary posits this change with the emergence of modernity, and directly compares the changing function of the instruments of vision to Marx's famous definition of the development from mere tool to actual machine, installing a different interrelation between human and instrument, that actually reverses the relation of subjugation and exploitation. Whereas the tool was utilised by humans, and thus at their service, humans are now used by the machine itself, as exemplified by the factory.

The modern gallery space, the white cube, is, of course, contemporaneous to the modern factory, and may also be considered as a metonymic place, rather than as the space of metaphors, as is most commonly the case – but this would require

that we understand as a technique of the observer, as a place from which to view objects in a specific relationship that entangles the viewer with the world, and the classification and ordering of things. Crary does not mention the gallery space in his book, but does stress a shift from the art-historical tradition of being preoccupied with the art object towards a history of the observer, and the instruments of observation. Viewed in this way we can, of course look at the gallery as a technique, as an instrument of viewing that is also put into architectural and discursive form, similarly to the observatory, which would be crucial for any understanding of a contemporary city observatory as an art institution. Now, at first glance, or perhaps even with downcast eyes, the gallery seems to be a space for the proliferation of metaphors, and its contemporary form, the white cube, has itself become a metaphor after the writings on the gallery by Brian O'Doherty.³ Indeed, O'Doherty described the gallery space as no less than an ideology, which implies that much more than merely the display and reification of objects are at stake, namely also the entanglement and edification of the viewing subject. As a discursive space, the gallery too, implicates the spectator's in the work of the artworks, so to say, but with a significant difference: as Hito Steyerl has remarked in a recent essay entitled 'Is a Museum a Factory?', the museum does not make labour visible, but rather conceals the actual labour of installation, cleaning etc., but is nonetheless '...a space for production' and 'a space for exploitation,' going on to conclude that it is 'a factory, which produces affect as effect.'⁴ It thus comes as no surprise that what were once the grand factories of Fordism are now transformed into museums of contemporary art in the post-industrial cities of the west.

If the institution is, then, a machine that produces specific subjects, what can be asked of transforming, not the factory into a gallery, nor the gallery into a space of immaterial labour, but the historical observatory into a contemporary gallery? Which subjects is it for, and which subjects will it potentially produce? Or, more concretely, what type of technique of observation is it going to be? These are, of course, not only aesthetic questions, but also social and political, as the problem, or task if you will, is twofold. On the one hand the gallery must try and identify who its observers are, which may be seen as its public, but indeed also as its

community, and is as such not so much an issue of audience relations, but of a political constituency. On the other hand, publics exist only by being addressed, so an imagined community cannot be separated from the mode of address that is the gallery and its activities (exhibitions, public programs etc.), and a constituency is thus produced through the entanglement with institution – a relationship that is both, if to varying degrees in various times and through various formats, empowering and overpowering. This is, in a word, how the institution *institutes*, and the staging, moulding and moderating of these contradicting, but productive forces is precisely the *public work* of any institution.

For a city observatory engaged in contemporary art, the constituency is thus multiple, with the history of the place being connected to both spectacle and research: watching the skies and discussing the findings and the methods, but exhibition spaces have these features too, and exhibitions themselves can be viewed as constellations – specific assemblages of ideas and forms connected in the darkness, and becoming figure, projection, image. The notion of constellation does not only reside in astronomy, of course, but is also a guiding principle within Walter Benjamin's non-chronological theory of history, and has more recently been employed in the theoretisation of contemporary curating, and in particular the politics of exhibition-making. Here, I am thinking of Okwui Enwezor's description of contemporary art as a 'postcolonial constellation'.⁵ In this essay Enwezor makes a claim for contemporary art as post-colonial and globalised, invoking Glissant's crucial concept of contact zones, and as such undoing the western notions of linear history, cultural hegemony and modernist developmentalism, instead positing a field of permanent transition. It is noteworthy, of course, that the term used is constellation, while the text departs from the postmodern recognition of there being 'no vantage points from which to observe any culture'⁶ – precisely the fixed vantage point the observatory was historically supposed to provide and guarantee! Our current task, then, is to decolonise the observatory, precisely by making its foundations unstable, its production of knowledge a zone of contact. The observatory must engage in uncertainty rather than scientific assessment, or bureaucratic benchmarking.

However, this is not about relativism and all things being equal, but, rather, in the Benjaminian sense of the constellation, as a specific assemblage: 'ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements' being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed.'⁷ Which is to say, in our context, that the curatorial is not only about making constellations, in the sense of putting things together, but importantly about which things are being put together and how: which view is produced? How does the contemporary emerge? At this moment, it is useful to think concretely about the city, and the city of Edinburgh in particular. It is not my point here to analyse the city, its various social stratifications, and political histories, but merely to note how these inevitably make up the fabric of the contemporary city, and, moreover, to point to another simple characteristic, namely that it is a port. Again, this is not to endlessly reiterate notions of the seaways, histories of the maritime, and routes of trade and industry, but merely to recall the original Latin meaning of the word port: that it is the gate to the city, and thus both its zone of contact with the world, but also its mechanism of control, an apparatus of the governance of the flow of bodies and things, subjects and objects. Contemporary galleries are also such apparatuses of governing, and must thus ask themselves how they want to govern in a contemporary rather than historical sense. Only by answering this question can institutions of art become contemporary. The gallery and the observatory are places from which to see the world, and from where it can be imaged and imagined. The question is only, which world? Which world-view?

Returning to the quote from Giorgio Agamben that is used as the epigraph for this essay, we can perhaps ask if the contemporary observatory is a place from which we can see the contemporary itself. But what does it mean to see the contemporary? In Agamben's somewhat bleaker constellation than the ones conjured up by Benjamin, the light and ideas of the past cannot reach, and thus perhaps also not be redeemed. Instead, what we see is the darkness of the present, and indeed, our times are dark times. Furthermore, referencing Nietzsche, Agamben actually goes on to associate contemporariness with disjunction and anachronism: 'Those who are truly contemporary, who truly

belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands.' The contemporaries are thus quite rare in his view, but here we may beg to differ: are our times not filled with those left behind by the post-industrial and post-internet society? Are our times not filled with those struggling, and not coping, with adjusting to the demands of neo-liberal selfhood, precarity, austerity measures and global violence? As such, a contemporary observatory for the city must be for those who are out-of-joint, to become the contemporaries that they truly are.

Notes.

1. Agamben, G. (2009) *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p.46.
2. Crary, J. (1990) *Techniques of the Observer – On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, p.129.
3. O'Doherty, B. (1986) *Inside the White Cube – The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. San Francisco, CA: The Lapis Press
4. Steyerl, H. (2012) *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, p.63.
5. Enwezor, O. (2003) 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition', *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter), pp.57-82.
6. Enwezor, p.57.
7. Benjamin, W. (1925) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso, p.34.
8. Agamben, p.40.

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