

What is to be done with the contemporary?

Seminar

Talk by Peter Osborne

Tuesday, June 9 2026, 7 pm

Peter Osborne (1958) is Professor of Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University (London), where he directs the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP). He was an editor of the journal *Radical Philosophy* from 1983 to 2016. His research interests include the philosophy of time, history, and experience; the philosophy of art, with a particular focus on the historical ontology of the artwork, philosophical criticism, postconceptual art, and global comparativism; transdisciplinarity in the arts and humanities; Frankfurt Critical Theory, especially the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno; and modern European philosophy, with particular attention to Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger. His publications include *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (Verso, 1995), *Anywhere Or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (Verso, 2013), *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (Verso, 2018), and *Crisis as Form* (Verso, 2022). His essays have been published in *Artforum*, *October*, and *New Left Review*, and he has also written for major art institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt and the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid.

di volta in volta

18 Rue Volta, 75003 Paris

Transcript

Peter Osborne: Thank you for the invitation to inaugurate di volta in volta as a discursive space rather than just a space for art projects themselves.

I'm going to address this question that you have posed for your seminar with some critical remarks about the framework of the question. This will lead in to some attempts to clarify the critical problematic of contemporaneity that underlies my work on contemporary art¹. And then hopefully we can have some discussion, because it often leads to some misunderstandings.

So, I'm going to begin with a direct response to what I take to be this rhetorical—and, in a way strange—question: 'What is to be done with the contemporary?'. And to this image of the 1972 map by Boetti which accompanies it (Figure 1).

It's quite important that the two are connected, because the map is the clue, in some way, to how you're trying to rethink, or return to an older thinking of, global interconnectedness.

It's a strange question for me because it obviously evokes Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, which suggests that this is a question of immediate practical political urgency, in some way. We can recall that the subtitle to Lenin's pamphlet is *Burning Questions of Our Movement*². But of course, 'What is to be done with the contemporary?', in my view at least, is not an immediate practical, politically urgent question. It's not an immediately practical politically urgent question because its object is not a political conjuncture. And its addressee is not a particular political group, or tendency, or a party in the very general sense in which Marx himself used that term. Its object is an abstract concept: the contemporary. What is to be done with this abstract concept, the contemporary? And its addressee is the anonymous receiver of cultural messages. This is a general cultural space: the discourse on contemporaneity. In this respect, the question takes us back to the Chernyshevsky novel from 1863³, the utopian novel from which Lenin stole his title.

So, if it's not such an urgent political question in a Leninist sense, then what is to be done with the contemporary?



Figure 1: *Mappa*, Alighiero Boetti, 1972, embroidery on canvas. Courtesy Archivio Alighiero Boetti. Featured in the flyer for the seminar *What Is to Be Done with the Contemporary?*, di volta in volta, Paris, 9-10 June 2026.

The obvious answer, I think, is quite simple—but not thereby straightforward: it is simply to understand it. We must understand what this concept means, understand the sense in which, if we critically comprehend this concept and its varying applications, we might try to understand that dimension of social experience to which it refers—that dimension of our own social experience to which it refers today, in our historical present.

But of course, the durational extent and the character of the historical present are highly variable and quite intensely contested, depending on where that question is being asked from. Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote a famous article entitled *Where Is the Now?*⁴. The problem, from this point of view, with all kinds of discourses of modern and contemporary art is that they fail to locate themselves in a specific geopolitical place. They are located in a specific geopolitical place, of course, but they are largely in denial of their own geopolitical particularity.

So, this question of the historical present is multivalent. It's not the same question, depending on where you're living and what you're doing. Now, the Boetti map might seem to address that, but I want to suggest that it doesn't really address that. In fact it conceals it.

In part, in my view, the problem is that the contemporary, *as such*, is not a possible object of experience or of direct transformation by the social practice of politics, since it's essentially a temporal structure of historical time, grounded in social interconnectedness and dependencies that are determined at the level of the global whole. And the global whole, as such, cannot be taken as a direct object of action, nor a direct object of experience.

The question is how one can intervene, in a mediated way, from a particular position internal to that whole, never being able to grasp that whole, qua whole, other than from a particular spatio-temporal standpoint.

So, the Boetti map from 1972, this particular map—there are many Boetti maps—presents us with a map of the flags of nation-states at a particular moment in the post-Second World War process of decolonization, at the outset of the 1970s.

Now, obviously, there are a number of historically problematic aspects to the Boetti maps. At this early point in the series, it still uses the Mercator projection from 1569, for example, which inflates the size of territories the farther they are from the equator. So, it's not spatially adequate in a literal sense. And its visual commitment to nation-states—which is intense in the African context of decolonization, where the new states are represented—collapses completely as we move eastward. It gives us what is very much a Western Cold War amalgamation of all the Soviet and People's Republics into this single sea of red. There isn't even a border between China and Russia on this map. So, from the point of view of the geopolitical imaginary, it has various obvious limitations.

For me, this is a picture of the Western ideological imaginary of a world which effectively ended at the close of the 1980s—more than thirty-five years ago. This is a picture of how the world looked from the standpoint of Europe prior to the 1980s.

And the maps change a great deal after 1990, of course, because then all the new Eastern European states start to appear on the maps. The Boetti map series runs from 1971 through to 1994, so this is just the second in the series.

Then there is the *Arte Povera* element of the works, and the way critical appreciators of Boetti try to redeem his work through its relation to the Afghan women who embroidered the maps in the series. All of the maps were embroidered by Afghan women in Kabul. Much is made of this by those who appreciate the series, who claim—slightly tenuously, in my view—that this relativizes, and thereby acts against, the Eurocentrism of the cartography. This is a claim made on Boetti's behalf.

It's also claimed that the visual diversity of the flags has some kind of utopian cultural function; that it involves some kind of acceptance of differences and a celebration of—and this is a quotation—'the infinite colours and numbers and languages of Babel'. That's the concluding sentence of a book on the Boetti map series by the Italian art critic Luca Cerizza⁵.

I'm a little skeptical of this optimistic critical reading of Boetti. For me, this map is a UNESCO cultural fantasy of liberal nationalism masquerading as cultural radicalism.

For me, it is a profoundly conservative work, artistically and politically. It celebrates the craft skills of the Afghan women embroiderers, but it does nothing to alleviate or transform their conditions of labour. It doesn't address itself to them as labouring women. And its relation to nationalism is ambiguous, I think, at best. It's trading on the moment of the immediate post-war imaginary of national liberation, whereby the process of decolonization allowed for certain investments in nationalism at the moment of liberation. But by the 1970s, obviously, that had already become a much more complicated situation; postcolonial nationalism had become a much more internally complicated political situation.

So, if we were going to choose a map work from the early 1970s—and there are lots of map works from the 1960s and 1970s, it's a genre—I would maybe choose something more like this: a work called *An Upside-Down Map of the World* (1974) by the South Korean artist Sung Neung Kyung (Figure 2).

This is an installation shot from an exhibition a few years ago at the Guggenheim of experimental art in Korea in the 1960s and early 1970s⁶.



Figure 2: *An Upside-Down Map of the World*, Sung Neung Kyun, 1974, worldmap, panel. Installation view. Photo: Peter Osborne.

This map of the world is cut out into three hundred pieces, and then a random selection of these pieces is mounted onto a horizontal board the same size as the original map, creating an illegible cartography, which forms the lower part of the new production.

It's one of a series of cut-out works from this moment in Korean experimental art. There were a lot of cut-out works in relation to newspapers, for example, where the artists

removed all the journalism from the newspapers. These are essentially works about censorship and about the power dynamics of representation: here, cartography.

And if it's flags you're after, to represent some aspect of current political—or post-1970s—imaginaries of the nationalization of cultural difference (because what's at stake here is the nationalization of cultural difference, and the question whether that is in any way an adequate representation of forms of cultural difference), you would be better, in this kind of Euro-American conversation, to look at flags like these: the one on the left is David Hammons's 1990 *African-American Flag* (Figure 3); the one on the right is Chris Ofili's *Union Black*, made for the British Pavilion in the Giardini at Venice in 2003⁷ (Figure 4).

As the events of the past month have shown—if we think about this year's Venice Biennale and what's been going on over the last month, with the whole issue of the refusal of the prize jury to consider pavilions representing states whose leaders are charged with crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court, and the jury's subsequent resignation because of some details about that row⁸—affirmative identifications of art with nation-states in international exhibitions has been increasingly problematic for a very long time now. In fact, in the context of the Giardini itself, it's been problematic since the beginning of the post-war period because of the fascist character, most famously, of the German Pavilion, but also, of course, because of the whole restructuring of the Venice Biennale and the system of national pavilions in 1932 by the Italian Fascists. So, there's a lot of history here.



Figure 3: African American Flag, David Hammons, 1990, fabric et grommets. Installation view. Photo: Peter Osborne.



Figure 4: *Union Black*, Chris Ofili, 2003, polyester. Installation view. Photo: Peter Osborne.

Artists in Venice have tended, for at least a couple of decades now, to feel obliged to work against the politics carried by the architecture of the pavilions. There's a sense in which national nihilism is almost a prerequisite of being artistically serious in a national pavilion.

If we go back to Boetti, a more appropriate Boetti might be this Boetti, which is an earlier map work, a work from 1967 with twelve panels (Figure 5). This image only shows only half of them. Each panel is a cartographical cut-out of a war that was taking place in 1967. So, it's a representation of twelve simultaneous wars, which reduces the world cartographically to those twelve wars. It extracts them and blanks out the rest of the world. It's a much more critical work by Boetti than the later embroidered map works .

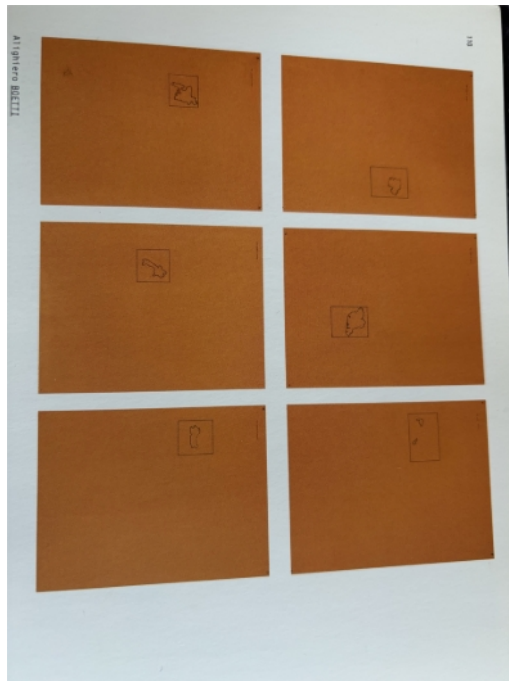


Figure 5: *Dodici forme dal 10 giugno 1967* (*Twelve Forms from June 10, 1967*), Alighiero Boetti, 1971, Saturday, June 10, 1967: territories occupied by Israel; Sunday, February 4, 1968: Vietnam; Thursday, August 22, 1968: Czechoslovakia; Tuesday, April 1, 1969: China-USSR border; Thursday, May 15, 1969: Biafra; Friday, August 15, 1969: Northern Ireland; Tuesday, September 2, 1969: Libya; Thursday, March 19, 1970: Cambodia; Friday, September 18, 1970: Jordan;

Thursday, December 10, 1970: Basque Country; Thursday, February 4, 1971: Laos; Sunday, March 28, 1971: Pakistan ; engraving on copper, 12 parts. Photo: Peter Osborne.

Alternatively, if you want another example—one that's currently showing just down the road here in Paris; I don't know if you're familiar with this one: this is Chéri Samba's *The True Map of the World* (Figure 6). It's another upside-down map. You can orient yourself using this map of the world, to how it feels to be in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It's currently showing in the exhibition at the Fondation Cartier, the general exhibition they recently opened to inaugurate the new building⁹. The cultural geopolitics of that show require an entire evening of its own [laugh] to reconstruct and discuss. There's a lot of interesting work in it. But what's interesting to me about that show is the way that, by re-showing works from forty years of the Fondation Cartier, they've completely re-curated the collection and imposed a single narrative—a single cultural-political narrative—upon the whole thing, finding a way within the current discourse to critically affirm all of a group of very different works. And what's most striking about the experience—and I recommend that people go to the show—is the gap between the works and the curatorial discourse. Most of the time, the curatorial discourse is either flatly in contradiction with the work that it's allegedly redeeming, or it's simply placed beside it. It doesn't engage with the work itself in hardly any way.



Figure 6: *La Vraie Carte du monde*, Chéri Samba, 2011, acrylic and glitter on canvas. Installation view: *Exposition Générale*, Fondation Cartier, October 2025 – August 2026. Photo: Peter Osborne.

So, there are really two things going on. You have to relate to the works themselves, many of which are very interesting, and then you have to relate to this constant disjuncture between the works and the curatorial discourse with which you're being confronted, in order to understand the way in which this material is currently being recoded, ideologically, in order to recommend it to you.

And if it's still flags you're after—there are also works like this: this is Faith Ringgold. I'm sure people are familiar with this one too. It's another work from the early 1990s, called *The Flag Is Bleeding #2*, from her *American Collection* (Figure 7).



Figure 7: *The American Collection # 6: The Flag is Bleeding #2*, Faith Ringgold, 1997, acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced border. Installation view. Photo: Peter Osborne.

Flags have been bleeding in the USA and elsewhere for a long time now, at least since the Vietnam war. Jasper Johns gave rise to this entire genre, which became a critique of Jasper Johns and a critique of the illusions of unity of national flags¹⁰. So, in a way, we have to thank Jasper Johns for that. By 1970 in the USA there were already enough flag works in New York alone to curate an entire exhibition. This is the poster for the *People's Flag Show* from 1970 at Judson Memorial Church in New York¹¹ (Figure 8).

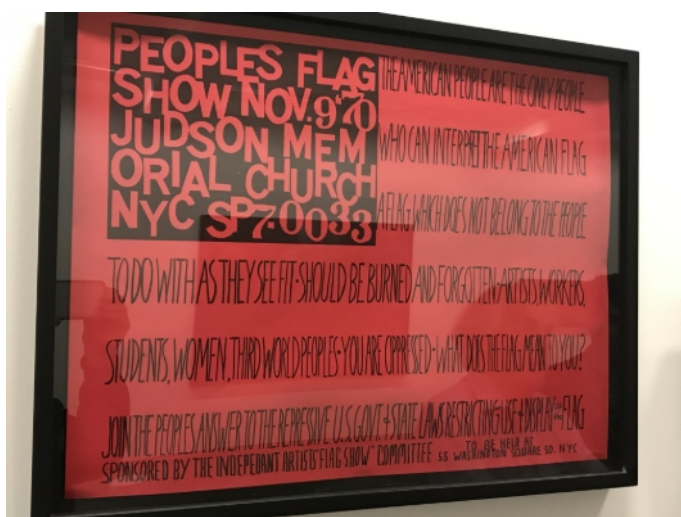


Figure 8: Faith Ringgold, *People's Flag Show*, 1970, offset lithograph on paper, 46 × 61 cm. Poster for *The People's Flag Show*, Judson Memorial Church, New York, 9–14 November 1970. Photo: Peter Osborne.

Okay. So, that's a summary of some of my problems with the Boetti map.

So, if we return from there to the question, 'What is to be done with the contemporary?', it seems to me that one thing to be done with the contemporary is to free it from its reduction to a geopolitical imaginary of relations between nation-states. Nation-states are my problem. This is not to free it from the geopolitical imaginary of relations between nation-states *per se*, but to free it from its *reduction* to that imaginary.

And my point, I guess, in relation to the narrative that 'it's time to return to theories of imperialism', is that the unstated background to that idea is probably a reaction to post-1989 liberal-progressivist imaginaries of globalization as a kind of benign capitalist modernization.

But the desire to hold on to a globalizing imaginary doesn't need to have anything to do with that neo-liberal imaginary belonging to the period from the late 1980s onwards up to the 2008-09 financial crisis. Rather, it has everything to do with the globalization of capital markets, the new technological basis for that globalization, the communication technologies that made financialization possible, and the transformations in the structure of social space that resulted.

That is to say, it has everything to do with the inauguration of a dialectic of 'spaces of places' and 'spaces of flows', to use the terminology of Manuel Castells, who opposes these two forms of spatial dynamics¹².

If we go back to the presentation of the seminar, it sets up a dialogue between two opposed positions. One is the concept of the global contemporary that I posit as the historical condition for understanding the state of contemporary art (remember, it's contemporary art I'm trying to understand here by filling-in its historical conditions). And the second is the recent renewal of theories of imperialism, associated here with Benjamin Bürbaumer. And the proposition seems to be that something has happened in the world that requires us to consider shifting from the former perspective back towards the latter. And the word 'back' is explicitly stated there.

So, I'm going to quote the seminar presentation. The thing we're going back to is:

'[...] the intensification of conflicts across the world, and the crisis of American hegemony, especially as it is challenged by the rival power of China, giving rise to increasingly aggressive forms of imperialism.'¹³

Let me say a few things about that sentence.

The first thing, I think—and this is the problem, this is the sort of disjunction that is at stake in this seminar, and which we need to talk about—is that these two perspectives are not

perspectives on the same object. They're not part of comparable problematics. This is part of the general problem of the way theoretical work is sometimes used in art contexts. There's a disjuncture between its intelligibility at the level of theory and its relevance as an interpretive device in an art context.

The second point is that this striving for some kind of straightforward opposition between these two positions distorts what commonality there actually is between them.

And the third thing is that the underlying dynamics of the current geopolitical situation don't appear to me to be particularly new. They are part of the general process of capitalist globalization, or the globalization of capital markets. In my view, they do not represent a return to a previous system of nation-states—a kind of economic version of the UN, if you like—overdetermined by a single primary ideological opposition, that is to say, centre/periphery, imperial/subaltern.

Rather, I take all of the current conflicts to be the immanent working-out and consequence of the globalization of capital markets. So, let me just say something more about these three problems.

The first is that the two perspectives aren't perspectives on the same object.

The concept of the global contemporary that I've been trying to develop is part of a discourse in the philosophy of historical time which, in the twentieth century, followed from the critique of broadly Hegelian narratives of universal history or world history. After the critique of Hegel, the philosophy of history essentially turned into the philosophy of historical time, at the point at which the universalist pretension of the narrative form of the philosophy of history was no longer tenable. That's the point at which Ricoeur says that 'difference turned against development'¹⁴. Social difference immanently destroyed the possibility of narratives of universal history.

What I tried to do, some time ago now—indeed, in some respects, nearly thirty years ago—was to bring these philosophical debates about historical time into cultural and art-theoretical discourse by pointing out that the basic concepts around which those discourses were structured at the time, namely 'modernity' and 'avant-garde', are essentially purely temporal concepts¹⁵.

They're often used sociologically, in a descriptive way, at particular times, but in terms of their historical semantics and their conceptual dynamics, these are purely temporal concepts.

The concepts of contemporaneity and the contemporary subsequently emerged within that discourse as a result of a further reflection on the debates about the multiplication of so-called 'alternative modernities' consequent upon the globalization of these cultural-theoretical debates about the temporality of modernity.

That happened largely in America, in Area Studies, Postcolonial Studies and particularly within Southeast Asian Studies. It happened at the point at which the concept of postmodernism—which had grown rapidly in popularity from about 1983 through to around 1990, becoming massively inflated as the principal interpretive concept of cultural theory—suddenly collapsed, suddenly became, if you like, untenable and obviously incoherent.

Thinking through these categories as purely temporal concepts led me to the proposition that the series avant-garde, modern, postmodern actually folded back upon itself. Postmodern was really always just a temporal recoding of the category of post-formalism, in which the logic of the 'post' was classically modern.

The artistic category of the 1960s was post-formalism. Nobody talked about postmodernism in the art world during the 1960s—they talked about post-formalism.

That series—avant-garde, modern, postmodern—actually, as Lyotard himself saw from the beginning, even while propounding the concept¹⁶, folds back into the modern, because the logic of the post is itself the logic of the modern: the affirmation of the value of the new thing that comes after what we currently have. The concept of the postmodern was a kind of archetypically modern concept. It was just a paradoxical terminological problem that the modern posed for itself.

And that's the point at which people started to talk instead, critically, about contemporary art.

Although the term contemporary, in an artistic context, had existed since the early twentieth century, before the Second World War it was used mainly in relation to design rather than art. People talked much more about contemporary design in the 1920s and 1930s than about contemporary art, although the latter expression did exist—interestingly, more in the French context than elsewhere in Europe.

Contemporaneity was proposed by myself as the more appropriate name for the temporal logic of globalized systems of modernities and traditions. Because when you say modernity, you also always say tradition. Modernity and tradition are, if you like, codependent, dialectically connected concepts. They are the two temporal categories through which the discipline of sociology constituted and legitimated itself. Sociology separates itself from history and anthropology by virtue of this opposition between the

modern and tradition, attempting to make the socially modern the object-domain of sociology while delegating tradition back to either history or anthropology—or some combination of the two.

So, the innovation was to insist that, in temporal terms, the contemporary is indeed the theoretically appropriate context, because its historical semantics emphasize the temporal conjunction or the coming together of different times, grounded in new social-spatial relations.

The core meaning of contemporary is essentially someone who has shared the same time-space as you, someone whose life has shared the same social space and social time as your own. But the point is that once the logic of modernity becomes globalized, those forms of conjunction are no longer a coming together within a pre-given common medium or a shared time. People used to think of contemporaries as people who shared the same time. Time itself was a given, as a kind of container, and contemporaries were simply people occupying that container together.

Rather, under conditions of a globalized distribution of differences, the contemporary is no longer the name for a shared time. It is the name for the production of a new temporal relation, which remains disjunctive in various respects, despite the moment of common time that is produced by the power of specific relations of dependency.

So, rather than saying that there is a common time and that everyone who has social relations of dependency shares that time—and all your relations of social dependency are now massively globally distributed, because everything you consume has components coming from twenty-seven different countries, so you're completely embedded in these global capitalist value-chains—you're not actually sharing the same time.

Rather, the time that appears to be shared is itself produced by those relations. And that relation, or synchrony, or simultaneity, is only relative to the social aspect of the dependency that creates the relation. It doesn't overcome all the cultural disjunctions between the times of the lives that you're involved with.

So, at the level of your economic dependency, you have, if you like, invisible social relations with people across many continents: workers labouring under different conditions, wage labourers, home workers, people working under conditions of forced labour, and so on—everybody who is producing components for the products that you consume every day. You have these relations with them by virtue of your exchange relations. But your contemporaneity with them is only produced by those specific economic relations. They

have other, multiple modes of social temporality, multiple social times that they live that have no relation to the forms of social time that you live.

So, these relations of contemporaneity produce conjunctions on the basis of massive social disjunctions. And the social disjunctions (or unequal relations of power) are actually the conditions of possibility of the social conjunctions. Because if the components of your iPhone were not being produced under certain extreme conditions—conditions of low-wage labour in China—they would not be produced in China. You would have no invisible social relation with those workers in the iPhone factories.

So, the disjunctions between social times and the disjunctions between lives are not in any way overcome by these new conjunctions. They're actually reproduced by them. Because the fact that you're going to buy the iPhone is precisely what keeps those workers living the way they're living. You're reproducing those differences, the differences of social conditions and power relations.

I wanted to think the term contemporaneity through Deleuze's concept of conjunctive disjunction: a disjunction that is brought into existence by a conjunction. A disjunction that, if you like, isn't visible or socially actual until a particular conjunction between the social actors in question takes place. So, the conjunction between the actors produces the disjunction, because previously there was no relation.

This is a term that people may be familiar with, because Deleuze himself takes it from Godard—from a discussion about the use of the word 'and', about the way the word 'and' functions serially in relation to montage, and the way montage is itself a form of conjunction that produces disjunction¹⁷. This is the structure of the classical concept of montage.

What I'm suggesting is that what appears as the spatial logic of montage and conjunctive disjunction has a parallel structure as the temporal logic of the contemporary.

The argument is that it defines the broadest spatio-temporal parameters within which a globalized system of contemporary art institutions develops, quantitatively expanding very rapidly from the early 1990s onwards.

But the point is : this is simply not the conceptual terrain of theories of imperialism.

So, if the question assumes that there are two perspectives on one problem—the contemporary and theories of imperialism—that doesn't really make sense, because theories of imperialism do not occupy the same conceptual space as contemporaneity.

They may obviously depend upon various complicated temporal relations, but they are not articulated within the philosophy of historical time. So, these are not directly comparable problematics.

To speak—as it does, and I'm quoting the presentation again—of 'reversing the perspective of the national over the contemporary [...]'¹⁸ doesn't make any conceptual sense to me. Because the national does not occupy the conceptual space of the contemporary. It's not primarily a temporal concept. When thinking about the national, we can say that it relates to the international, the transnational, the multinational, the supranational, the regional, the global, and so on. It's a distributed field of related spatial concepts. The contemporary, by contrast, shares a conceptual field with the modern, the traditional, the postmodern, the conservative, the reactionary, the avant-garde. All of these are temporal concepts—including political concepts like reactionary and avant-garde. They are temporal terms.

But the national is not semantically a temporal term in that same way.

This doesn't mean that these concepts don't impinge upon one another by virtue of overlaps in their empirical referents. If one places them in indirect relation through these areas of common reference—through their ultimate empirical objects—then one would expect a new or additional emphasis on temporal differences and temporal dynamics internal to theories of imperialism. One would need not to return to theories of imperialism but to rewrite theories of imperialism from the standpoint of the experience of the postcolony, for example, which is a concept that, for many people, succeeds those theories¹⁹.

At the same time, one would also expect a renewed emphasis on the effects of power relations between states, and ultimately on military power—because that is one of the things currently at stake—in the analysis in situations of contemporaneity.

To repeat: these perspectives are not comparable because they are not competing over a common object. On the other hand, insofar as there is an overlap in their references, in their empirical objects, there is not necessarily any conflict between them either, precisely because they belong to different problematics. You do not have to reject theories of imperialism in order to believe that the temporal structure of these developing historical relations across the globe is best grasped through the concept of contemporaneity. They are, in a way, two different topics.

So, from my point of view, the dialectical structure of relations between elements in the development of particular totalities will always make these oppositions relative, even where they overlap.

What's important to me is that the rise of reactionary nationalisms is not external or oppositional to the global structures of contemporary capitalism. They are the playing out of relations between the internal constitutive elements of global capitalism at a particular historical moment. It's not that there is a withdrawal from the global; it's that the form of oppositional relation has taken on a newly conflictual intensity because of the deepening inequalities produced by deepening dependencies.

The logic of global capitalism is always one that produces deepening dependencies, and deepening dependencies produce deepening inequalities, and deepening inequalities generate reactive oppositional movements.

So, from my point of view, the intensification of conflicts across the globe and the crisis of American hegemony—especially as it is challenged by the rival power of China and gives rise to increasingly aggressive forms of imperialism—are the relatively predictable current state of an ongoing process that began some fifteen years ago: the globalization of capital markets.

That process has intensified geopolitically in two ways. One is in relation to 9/11, which was, if you like, the symbolic moment of the visibility of the decline of American hegemony, in its aftermath in Afghanistan. The other is the financial crisis of 2008–09, which has a different logic and is mediated by the exposure of the limits of U.S. power in the Middle East, and its economic and geopolitical withdrawal from Europe.

These new forms of imperialist aggression are not signs of newly imperial relations. They are symptoms of the limits of hegemonic power. In a general philosophical sense, you can only draw a limit by exceeding it and discovering that you have gone beyond it. Essentially, what's been happening with America for the last twenty years is that every time it attempts to shore up its hegemonic power, it does something that exceeds the limits of its own power and reveals the fact that it does not have that hegemonic power

So, from my point of view, we have moved from a declining hegemony of U.S. power to what is actually a post-hegemonic situation. About twenty years ago, the Subaltern Studies Group within Latin American Studies in the USA wrote extensively about the concept of post-hegemony²⁰. Post-hegemony describes the situation in which a previously hegemonic power loses its ideological dominance and increasingly has to regress to force, either at the level of internal policing or, ultimately, through the exercise of military power at home

and abroad. From my point of view, what's going on in Iran is a demonstration of the post-hegemonic position of American imperialism.

Anyone who studies the history of empires will tell us that it is at the moment of their decline that imperial powers become most dangerous and destructive, because they are constantly trying to reassert a power that they no longer possess. The only way they can do that is by moving toward increasingly violent forms of reassertion. That's one of the things that is happening now.

All of this is partly because the financial crisis of 2008–09 was globally managed but never actually resolved. In other words, no new regime of accumulation emerged to resolve that crisis. Instead, there were technical measures designed to alleviate it—things like quantitative easing—but no new regime of accumulation.

What the American state is trying to do is impose a new regime of accumulation based on the dominance of new American technology companies. But that is not something that is happening just through the market itself. It is something that they are increasingly trying to achieve through coercive economics relations and military power. It is a sign of the collapse of the self-sufficiency of the relation between economics and ideology in establishing a new regime of accumulation.

I think that's long enough, so I'll stop here. Thank you.

- 1 See Osborne, Peter, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London, Verso, 2013; *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays*, London, Verso, 2018; *Crisis as Form*, London, Verso, 2022.
- 2 Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1902); English trans. in *Collected Works*, vol. 5, Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961, pp. 347–530.
- 3 Chernyshevsky, Nikolai, *What Is to Be Done? (1863)*, trans. Michael R. Katz, annotated by William G. Wagner, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989.
- 4 Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 'Where Is the Now?', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2, Winter 2004, pp. 458–462.
- 5 Cerizza, Luca, *Alighiero e Boetti: Mappa*, London, Afterall Books, 2008.
- 6 *Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s–1970s*, exhibition co-organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Korea, presented at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 1, 2023–January 7, 2024, co-curated by Kyung An and Kang Soojung.
- 7 *Chris Ofili: Within Reach*, exhibition at the British Pavilion, 50th Venice Biennale, Venice, 15 June–2 November 2003, curated by Colin Ledwith.
- 8 The entire international jury of the 61st Venice Biennale, chaired by Solange Oliveira Farkas, resigned on 30 April 2026. The resignation followed an initial statement, dated 22 April, in which the jury announced that it would exclude from consideration for the awards countries whose leaders were subject to arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court, notably for war crimes and crimes against humanity, namely Russia and Israel. This position was taken in the context of the decision by the Biennale's president, Pietrangelo Buttafuoco, to reinstate Russia, which had been absent since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and of threats by the European Commission to suspend or terminate its funding for the event if Russia remained included (the Commission ultimately formalized this sanction on 22 July 2026). The Biennale's organizers subsequently announced that the jury would be replaced by a public vote. On the eve of the opening, 9 May 2026, 3,000 demonstrators gathered in Venice to protest against the presence of the Israeli Pavilion at the event.
- 9 *Exposition Générale*, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 25 October 2025–23 August 2026, curated by Béatrice Grenier and Grazia Quaroni.
- 10 See Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954–55, encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, three panels, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 11 *The People's Flag Show*, Judson Memorial Church, New York, 9–14 November 1970, organized by Faith Ringgold, Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche.
- 12 See Castells, Manuel, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, 3 vols., Oxford, Blackwell, 1996–98: vol. I, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 1996; vol. II, *The Power of Identity*, 1997; vol. III, *End of Millennium*, 1998.
- 13 The complete sentence reads: 'Whilst Peter Osborne defined the "global contemporary" as the fiction of the disjunctive unity of a multiplicity of temporalities projected onto a single matrix across the planet, through the institution of a globally transnational capitalism after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, it now

appears necessary to interrogate this theoretical and historical construction in light of debates prompted by the intensification of conflicts across the world and the crisis of American hegemony — particularly as it is challenged by the rival power of China and gives rise to increasingly aggressive forms of imperialism.’, in *What Is to Be Done with the Contemporary?*, seminar presentation, *di volta in volta*, Paris, 2026, p. 4.

- 14 See Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- 15 See Osborne, Peter, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London, Verso, 1995.
- 16 See Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- 17 Deleuze, Gilles, ‘Three Questions on Six Times Two’, in *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 37–45.
- 18 The complete sentence reads: ‘A reversal of the perspective of the national over the contemporary, or rather, the manifestation of a structure that has never ceased to determine social space, as much as its representation?’, in *What Is to Be Done with the Contemporary?*, p. 6.
- 19 See Mbembe, Achille, *On the The Postcolony*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 2001.
- 20 See for example Beasley-Murray, Jon, *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*, Minneapolis, Univeresity of Minnessota Press, 2011.