

Boris Groys
**Comrades of
Time**

01/11

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Boris Groys
Comrades of Time

1. The Present

Contemporary art deserves its name insofar as it manifests its own contemporaneity – and this is not simply a matter of being recently made or displayed. Thus, the question “What is contemporary art?” implicates the question “What is the contemporary?” How could the contemporary as such be shown?

Being contemporary can be understood as being immediately present, as being here-and-now. In this sense, art seems to be truly contemporary if it is authentic, if for instance it captures and expresses the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted by past traditions or strategies aiming at success in the future. Meanwhile, however, we are familiar with the critique of presence, especially as formulated by Jacques Derrida, who has shown – convincingly enough – that the present is originally corrupted by past and future, that there is always absence at the heart of presence, and that history, including art history, cannot be interpreted, to use Derrida’s expression, as “a procession of presences.”¹

But rather than further analyze the workings of Derrida’s deconstruction, I would like to take a step back, and to ask: What is it about the present – the here-and-now – that so interests us? Already Wittgenstein was highly ironical about his philosophical colleagues who from time to time suddenly turned to contemplation of the present, instead of simply minding their own business and going about their everyday lives. For Wittgenstein, the passive contemplation of the present, of the immediately given, is an unnatural occupation dictated by the metaphysical tradition, which ignores the flow of everyday life – the flow that always overflows the present without privileging it in any way. According to Wittgenstein, the interest in the present is simply a philosophical – and maybe also artistic – *déformation professionnelle*, a metaphysical sickness that should be cured by philosophical critique.²

That is why I find the following question especially relevant for our present discussion: How does the present manifest itself in our everyday experience – before it begins to be a matter of metaphysical speculation or philosophical critique?

Now, it seems to me that the present is initially something that hinders us in our realization of everyday (or non-everyday) projects, something that prevents our smooth transition from the past to the future, something that obstructs us, makes our hopes and plans become not opportune, not up-to-date, or simply impossible to realize. Time and again, we are obliged to say: Yes, it is a good project but at the moment we have no money, no time, no energy,

and so forth, to realize it. Or: This tradition is a wonderful one, but at the moment there is no interest in it and nobody wants to continue it. Or: This utopia is beautiful but, unfortunately, today no one believes in utopias, and so on. The present is a moment in time when we decide to lower our expectations of the future or to abandon some of the dear traditions of the past in order to pass through the narrow gate of the here-and-now.

Ernst Jünger famously said that modernity – the time of projects and plans, par excellence – taught us to travel with light luggage (*mit leichtem Gepäck*). In order to move further down the narrow path of the present, modernity shed all that seemed too heavy, too loaded with meaning, mimesis, traditional criteria of mastery, inherited ethical and aesthetic conventions, and so forth. Modern reductionism is a strategy for surviving the difficult journey through the present. Art, literature, music, and philosophy have survived the twentieth century because they threw out all unnecessary baggage. At the same time, these lightened loads also reveal a kind of hidden truth that transcends their immediate effectiveness. They show that one can give up a great deal – traditions, hopes, skills, and thoughts – and still continue one’s project in

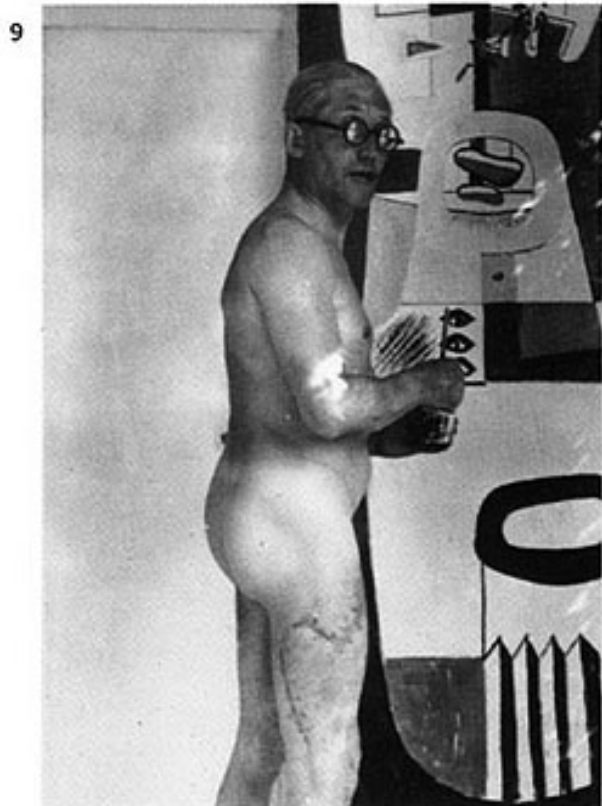
02/11

this reduced form. This truth also made the modernist reductions transculturally efficient – crossing a cultural border is in many ways like crossing the limit of the present.

Thus, during the period of modernity the power of the present could be detected only indirectly, through the traces of reduction left on the body of art and, more generally, on the body of culture. The present as such was mostly seen in the context of modernity as something negative, as something that should be overcome in the name of the future, something that slows down the realization of our projects, something that delays the coming of the future. One of the slogans of the Soviet era was “Time, forward!” Ilf and Petrov, two Soviet novelists of the 1920s, aptly parodied this modern feeling with the slogan “Comrades, sleep faster!” Indeed, in those times one actually would have preferred to sleep through the present – to fall asleep in the past and to wake up at the endpoint of progress, after the arrival of the radiant future.

2. Disbelief

But when we begin to question our projects, to doubt or reformulate them, the present, the contemporary, becomes important, even central for us. This is because the contemporary is



Le Corbusier painting on the white walls of Eileen Gray's E-1027.

actually constituted by doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision – by the need for prolonged reflection, for a delay. We want to postpone our decisions and actions in order to have more time for analysis, reflection, and consideration. And that is precisely what the contemporary is – a prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay. Søren Kierkegaard famously asked what it would mean to be a contemporary of Christ, to which his answer was: It would mean to hesitate in accepting Christ as Savior.³ The acceptance of Christianity necessarily leaves Christ in the past. In fact, Descartes already defined the present as a time of doubt – of doubt that is expected to eventually open a future full of clear and distinct, evident thoughts.

Now, one can argue that we are at this historical moment in precisely such a situation, because ours is a time in which we reconsider – not abandon, not reject, but analyze and reconsider – the modern projects. The most immediate reason for this reconsideration is, of course, the abandonment of the Communist project in Russia and Eastern Europe. Politically and culturally, the Communist project dominated the twentieth century. There was the Cold War, there were Communist parties in the West,

03/11

dissident movements in the East, progressive revolutions, conservative revolutions, discussions about pure and engaged art – in most cases these projects, programs, and movements were interconnected by their opposition to each other. But now they can and should be reconsidered in their entirety. Thus, contemporary art can be seen as art that is involved in the reconsideration of the modern projects. One can say that we now live in a time of indecision, of delay – a boring time. Martin Heidegger has explained boredom precisely as a precondition for our ability to experience the presence of the present – to experience the world as a whole by being bored equally by all its aspects, by not being captivated by this specific goal or that one, such as was the case in the context of the modern projects.⁴

Hesitation with regard to the modern projects mainly has to do with a growing disbelief in their promises. Classical modernity believed the future to be infinite – even after the death of God, even after the loss of faith in the immortality of the soul. The notion of a permanent art collection says it all: archive, library, and museum promised secular permanency, an infinitude that substituted the religious promise of resurrection and eternal life.



Lenin's embalmed/mummified body, permanently exhibited in the Lenin Mausoleum, Moscow, since 1924.

During the period of modernity, the “body of work” replaced the soul as the potentially immortal part of the Self. Foucault famously called such modern sites in which time was accumulated rather than simply being lost, heterotopias.⁵ Politically, we can speak about modern utopias as post-historical spaces of accumulated time, in which the finiteness of the present was seen as being potentially compensated for by the infinite time of the realized project: that of an artwork, or a political utopia. Of course, this perceived compensation obliterates time invested in the production of a certain product – when the final product is realized, the time that was used for its production disappears. However, the time lost in realizing the product was compensated for in modernity by a historical narrative that somehow restored it, using a narrative that glorified the lives of the artists, scientists, or revolutionaries that worked for the future.

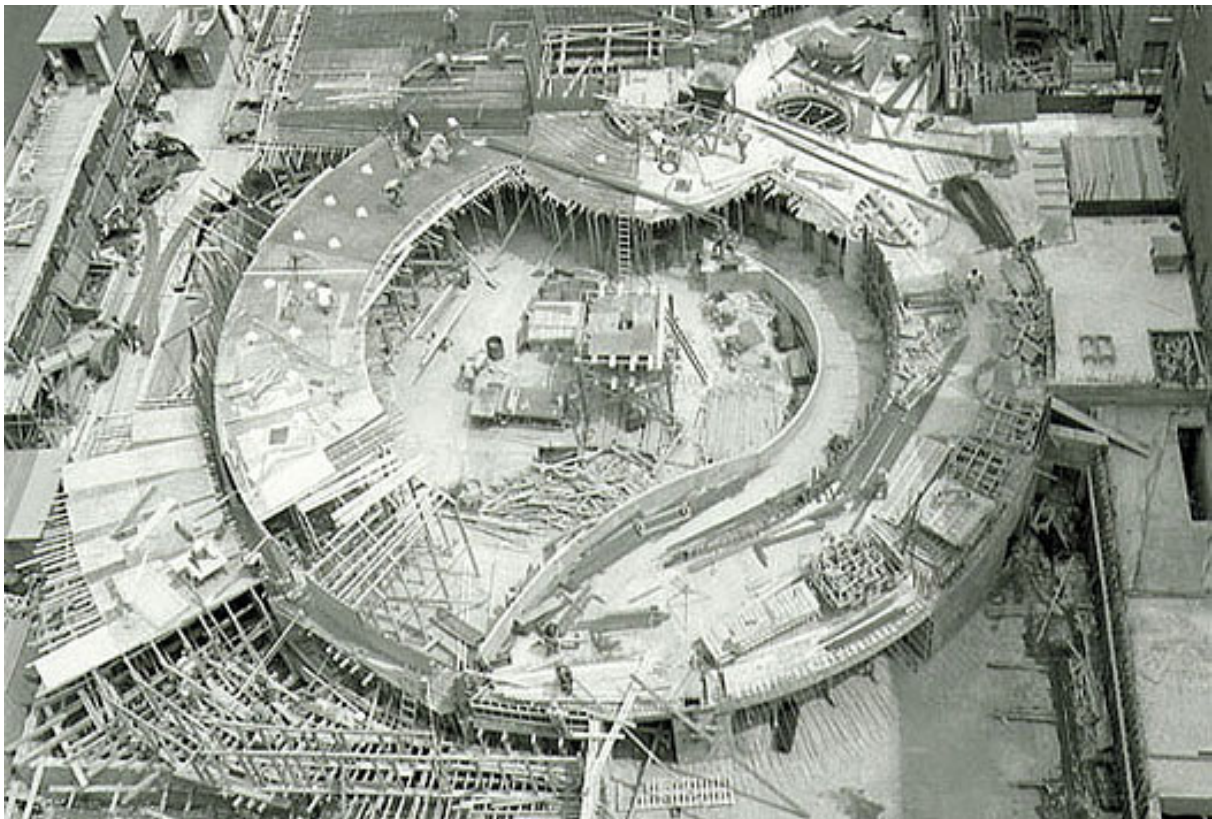
But today, this promise of an infinite future holding the results of our work has lost its plausibility. Museums have become the sites of temporary exhibitions rather than spaces for permanent collections. The future is ever newly planned – the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a

04/11

stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten – names and events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control. The only thing that we can be certain about in our present is that these historical narratives will proliferate tomorrow as they are proliferating now – and that we will react to them with the same sense of disbelief. Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future. We simply lose our time, without being able to invest it securely, to accumulate it, whether utopically or heterotopically. The loss of the infinite historical perspective generates the phenomenon of unproductive, wasted time. However, one can also approach this wasted time more positively, as excessive time – as time that attests to our life as pure being-in-time, beyond its value within the framework of modern economic and political projections.

3. Excess Time

Now, if we look at the current art scene, it seems



Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral ramp for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum under construction in New York in 1958. Photography: William H. Short/Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.



Francis Alys, *Song for Lupita*, 1998, detail. Pencil on tracing paper.

to me that a certain kind of so-called time-based art best reflects this contemporary condition. It does so because it thematizes the non-productive, wasted, non-historical, excessive time – a suspended time, “stehende Zeit,” to use a Heideggerian notion. It captures and demonstrates activities that take place in time, but do not lead to the creation of any definite product. Even if these activities do lead to such a product, they are presented as being separated from their result, as not completely invested in the product, absorbed by it. We find exemplifications of excessive time, that which is not completely absorbed by the historical process.

As an example let us consider the animation by Francis Alÿs, *Song for Lupita* (1998). In this work, we find an activity with no beginning and no end, no definite result or product: a woman pouring water from one glass to another, and then back. We are confronted with a pure and repetitive ritual of wasting time – a secular ritual beyond any claim of magical power, beyond any religious tradition or cultural convention.

One is reminded here of Camus’ Sisyphus, a proto-contemporary-artist whose aimless, senseless task of repeatedly rolling a boulder up a hill can be seen as a prototype for contemporary time-based art. This non-productive practice, this excess of time caught in a non-historical pattern of eternal repetition constitutes for Camus the true image of what we call “lifetime” – a period irreducible to any “meaning of life,” any “life achievement,” any historical relevance. The notion of repetition here becomes central. The inherent repetitiveness of contemporary time-based art distinguishes it sharply from happenings and performances of the 1960s. Now, a documented activity is not a unique, isolated performance – an individual, authentic, original event that takes place in the here-and-now. Rather, this activity is itself repetitive – even before it was documented by, let us say, a video running in a loop. Thus, the repetitive gesture designed by Alÿs functions as a programmatically impersonal one – it can be repeated by anyone, recorded, then repeated again. Here, the living human being loses its difference from its media image. The opposition between living organism and dead mechanism is obscured by the originally mechanical, repetitive, and purposeless character of the documented gesture.

Francis Alÿs has also spoken about the time of rehearsal as a similarly wasted, non-teleological time that does not lead to any result, any endpoint, any climax. An example he offers – his video *Politics of Rehearsal* (2007), which centers on a striptease rehearsal – is in some sense a rehearsal of a rehearsal, insofar as the

sexual desire provoked by the striptease is itself unfulfilled. In the video, the rehearsal is accompanied by a commentary by the artist, who interprets the scenario as the model of modernity, always leaving its promise unfulfilled. For the artist, the time of modernity is the time of permanent modernization, never really achieving its goals of becoming truly modern and never satisfying the desire that it has provoked. In this sense, the process of modernization begins to be seen as wasted, excessive time that can and should be documented – precisely because it never led to any real result. In another work, Alÿs presents the labor of a shoe cleaner as an example of a kind of work that does not produce any value in the Marxist sense of the term, because the time spent cleaning shoes cannot result in any kind of final product required by Marx’s theory of value.

But it is precisely because such a wasted, suspended, non-historical time cannot be accumulated and absorbed by its product that it can be repeated – impersonally and potentially infinitely. Already Nietzsche has stated that the only possibility for imagining the infinite after the death of God, after the end of transcendence, is to be found in the eternal return of the same. And Georges Bataille thematized the repetitive excess of time, the unproductive waste of time, as the only possibility of escape from the modern ideology of progress. Certainly, both Nietzsche and Bataille perceived repetition as something naturally given. But in his book *Difference and Repetition* (1968) Gilles Deleuze speaks of literal repetition as being radically artificial and, in this sense, in conflict with everything natural, living, changing, and developing, including natural law and moral law.⁶ Hence, practicing literal repetition can be seen as initiating a rupture in the continuity of life by creating a non-historical excess of time through art. And this is the point at which art can indeed become truly contemporary.

4. Vita Activa

Here I would like to mobilize a different meaning of the word “contemporary.” To be con-temporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be “with time” rather than “in time.” “Con-temporary” in German is “zeitgenössisch.” As *Genosse* means “comrade,” to be con-temporary – *zeitgenössisch* – can thus be understood as being a “comrade of time” – as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has difficulties. And under the conditions of our contemporary product-oriented civilization, time does indeed have problems when it is perceived as being unproductive, wasted, meaningless. Such unproductive time is excluded from historical narratives, endangered

06/11

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Boris Groys
Comrades of Time

by the prospect of complete erasure. This is precisely the moment when time-based art can help time, to collaborate, become a comrade of time – because time-based art is, in fact, art-based time.

Of course, traditional artworks (paintings, statues, and so forth) are time-based as well, because they are made with the expectation that they will have time – even a lot of time, if they are to be included in museums or in important private collections. But time-based art is not based on time as a solid foundation, as a guaranteed perspective; rather, time-based art documents time that is in danger of being lost as a result of its unproductive character – a character of pure life, or, as Giorgio Agamben would put it, “bare life.”⁷ But this change in the relationship between art and time also changes the temporality of art itself. Art ceases to be present, to create the effect of presence – but it also ceases to be “in the present,” understood as the uniqueness of the here-and-now. Rather, art begins to document a repetitive, indefinite, maybe even infinite present – a present that was always, already there, and can be prolonged into the indefinite future.

A work of art is traditionally understood as something that wholly embodies art, lending it

07/11

an immediately visible presence. When we go to an art exhibition we generally assume that whatever is there on display – paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, readymades, or installations – must be art. The individual artworks can of course in one way or another make reference to things that they are not, maybe to real-world objects or to certain political issues, but they are not thought to refer to art itself, because they themselves are art. However, this traditional assumption has proven to be increasingly misleading. Besides finding works of art, present-day art spaces also confront us with the documentation of art. We see pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations – in other words, the same forms and media in which art is commonly presented. But when it comes to art documentation, art is no longer presented through these media, but is simply stored within them. For art documentation is *per definitionem* not art. Precisely by merely referring to art, art documentation makes it quite clear that art itself is no longer available, but is absent and hidden. Thus, it is interesting to compare traditional film and contemporary time-based art – which has its roots in film – to better understand what has happened to our life.



Francis Alÿs, Still from *The Politics of Rehearsal*, 2005. DVD documentary, 29.54 min.

From its beginnings, film pretended to be able to document and represent life in a way that was inaccessible to the traditional arts. Indeed, as a medium of motion, film has frequently displayed its superiority over other media, whose greatest accomplishments are preserved in the form of immobile cultural treasures and monuments, by staging and celebrating the destruction of these monuments. This tendency also demonstrates film's adherence to the typically modern faith in the superiority of *vita activa* over *vita contemplativa*. In this respect, film manifests its complicity with the philosophies of *praxis*, of *Lebensdrang*, of *élan vital*, and of desire; it demonstrates its collusion with ideas that, in the footsteps of Marx and Nietzsche, fired the imagination of European humanity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries – in other words, during the very period that gave birth to film as a medium. This was the era when the hitherto prevailing attitude of passive contemplation was discredited and displaced by celebration of the potent movements of material forces. While the *vita contemplativa* was for a very long time perceived as an ideal form of human existence, it came to be despised and rejected throughout the period of modernity as a

08/11

manifestation of the weakness of life, a lack of energy. And playing a central role in the new worship of *vita activa* was film. From its very inception, film has celebrated all that moves at high speeds – trains, cars, airplanes – but also all that goes beneath the surface – blades, bombs, bullets.

However, while film as such is a celebration of movement, in comparison to traditional art forms, it paradoxically drives the audience to new extremes of physical immobility. While it is possible to move one's body with relative freedom while reading or viewing an exhibition, the viewer in a movie theater is put in the dark and glued to a seat. The moviegoer's peculiar situation in fact resembles a grandiose parody of the very *vita contemplativa* that film itself denounces, because cinema embodies precisely the *vita contemplativa* as it would appear from the perspective of its most radical critic – an uncompromising Nietzschean, let us say – namely as the product of frustrated desire, lack of personal initiative, a token of compensatory consolation and a sign of an individual's inadequacy in real life. This is the starting point of many modern critiques of film. Sergei Eisenstein, for instance, was exemplary in the way he combined aesthetic shock with political



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991. Clocks, paint on wall. overall 14 x 28 x 2 3/4" (35.6 x 71.2 x 7 cm).

propaganda in an attempt to mobilize the viewer and liberate him from his passive, contemplative condition.

The ideology of modernity – in all of its forms – was directed against contemplation, against spectatorship, against the passivity of the masses paralyzed by the spectacle of modern life. Throughout modernity we can identify this opposition between passive consumption of mass culture and an activist opposition to it – political, aesthetic, or a mixture of the two. Progressive, modern art has constituted itself during the period of modernity in opposition to such passive consumption, whether of political propaganda or commercial kitsch. We know these activist reactions – from the different avant-gardes of the early twentieth century to Clement Greenberg (Avant-Garde and Kitsch), Adorno (Cultural Industry), or Guy Debord (Society of the Spectacle), whose themes and rhetorical figures continue to resound throughout the current debate on our culture.⁸ For Debord, the entire world has become a movie theater in which people are completely isolated from one another and from real life, and consequently condemned to an existence of utter passivity.

However, at the turn of the twenty-first

century, art entered a new era – one of mass artistic production, and not only mass art consumption. To make a video and put it on display via the Internet became an easy operation, accessible to almost everyone. The practice of self-documentation has today become a mass practice and even a mass obsession. Contemporary means of communications and networks like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Second Life, and Twitter give global populations the possibility to present their photos, videos, and texts in a way that cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptual artwork, including time-based artworks. And that means that contemporary art has today become a mass-cultural practice. So the question arises: How can a contemporary artist survive this popular success of contemporary art? Or, how can the artist survive in a world in which everyone can, after all, become an artist?

One may further speak about our contemporary society as a society of the spectacle. However, we are now living not among the masses of passive spectators, as described by Guy Debord, but among the masses of artists. In order to recognize himself or herself in the contemporary context of mass production, the

09/11



Ma Yuan (active 1190-1225), *On a Mountain Path in Spring*, Ink and color on silk. Southern Sung.

artist needs a spectator who can overlook the immeasurable quantity of artistic production and formulate an aesthetic judgment that would single out this particular artist from the mass of other artists. But it is obvious that such a spectator does not exist – while it could be God, we have already been informed of the fact that God is dead. If contemporary society is, therefore, still a society of spectacle, then it seems to be a spectacle without spectators.

On the other hand, spectatorship today – *vita contemplativa* – has also become quite different from what it was before. Here again the subject of contemplation can no longer rely on having infinite time resources, infinite time perspectives – the expectation that was constitutive for Platonic, Christian, or Buddhist traditions of contemplation. Contemporary spectators are spectators on the move; primarily, they are travelers. Contemporary *vita contemplativa* coincides with permanent active circulation. The act of contemplation itself functions today as a repetitive gesture that can not and does not lead to any result – to any conclusive and well-founded aesthetic judgment, for example.

Traditionally, in our culture we had two fundamentally different modes of contemplation at our disposal to give us control over the time we spent looking at images: the immobilization of the image in the exhibition space, and the immobilization of the viewer in the movie theater. Yet both modes collapse when moving images are transferred to museums or exhibition spaces. The images will continue to move – but so too will the viewer. As a rule, under the conditions of a regular exhibition visit, it is impossible to watch a video or film from beginning to end if the film or video is relatively long – especially if there are many such time-based works in the same exhibition space. And in fact such an endeavor would be misplaced. To see a film or a video in its entirety, one has to go to a cinema or to remain in front of his or her personal computer. The whole point of visiting an exhibition of time-based art is to take a look at it and then another look and another look – but not to see it in its entirety. Here, one can say that the act of contemplation itself is put in a loop.

Time-based art as shown in exhibition spaces is a cool medium, to use the notion introduced by Marshall McLuhan.⁹ According to McLuhan, hot media lead to social fragmentation: when reading a book, you are alone and in a focused state of mind. And in a conventional exhibition, you wander alone from one object to the next, equally focused – separated from the outside reality, in inner isolation. McLuhan thought that only electronic media such as television are able to overcome

the isolation of the individual spectator. But this analysis of McLuhan's cannot be applied to the most important electronic medium of today – the Internet. At first sight, the Internet seems to be as cool, if not cooler, than television, because it activates users, seducing, or even forcing them into active participation. However, sitting in front of the computer and using the Internet, you are alone – and extremely focused. If the Internet is participatory, it is so in the same sense that literary space is. Here and there, anything that enters these spaces is noticed by other participants, provoking reactions from them, which in turn provoke further reactions, and so forth. However, this active participation takes place solely within the user's imagination, leaving his or her body unmoved.

By contrast, the exhibition space that includes time-based art is cool because it makes focusing on individual exhibits unnecessary or even impossible. This is why such a space is also capable of including all sorts of hot media – text, music, individual images – thus making them cool off. Cool contemplation has no goal of producing an aesthetic judgment or choice. Cool contemplation is simply the permanent repetition of the gesture of looking, an awareness of the lack of time necessary to make an informed judgment through comprehensive contemplation. Here, time-based art negatively demonstrates the infinity of wasted, excessive time that cannot be absorbed by the spectator. However, at the same time, it removes from *vita contemplativa* the modern stigma of passivity. In this sense one can say that the documentation of time-based art erases the difference between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Here again time-based art turns a scarcity of time into an excess of time – and demonstrates itself to be a collaborator, a comrade of time, its true contemporary.

10/11

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Boris Groys
Comrades of Time

Boris Groys (1947, East Berlin) is Professor of Aesthetics, Art History, and Media Theory at the Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe and Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. He is the author of many books, including *The Total Art of Stalinism*, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, and, most recently, *Art Power*.

11/11

1

Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), 377.

2

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), 6.45.

3

See Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

4

See Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Existence and Being*, ed. W. Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co, 1949), 325–349.

5

See <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>.

6

See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, [1968] 2004)

7

See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1st ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

8

See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Oakland: AKPress, 2005).

9

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Boris Groys
Comrades of Time