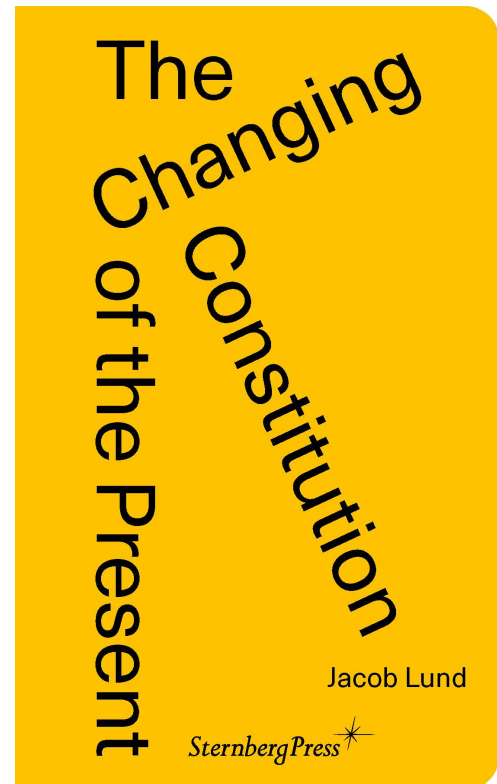


BOOK REVIEW

Jacob Lund, *The Changing Constitution of the Present: Essays on the Work of Art in Times of Contemporaneity*

This is Not a Period Book

Mieke Bal



If anyone was still inclined to consider ‘the contemporary’ a period term, comparable to modernism and postmodernism, Jacob Lund’s book, *The Changing Constitution of the Present*, would immediately remove that idea, undermining it forcefully. Instead, as the book not only argues but convincingly demonstrates, the idea of ‘con-temporary’, as being together (‘con-’) in the present time, is a concept that can only be understood as in constant movement, transformation and multiplicity. The chapters each present both a new view of the present, or a new aspect of it, and the way art deals with that, as well as an analysis of very different artworks. This is my kind of approach: theoretically savvy and analytically illuminating, keeping the readers eager to learn and constantly on their toes.

The multiplicity of the concept – which turns it into a theory – is immediately clear from the titles of the chapters, which all set up different takes on art in the present. ‘Artistic Reappropriation and Reconfiguration’, to take the title of the first chapter, already suggests that there is not a single aesthetic principle at stake. And indeed, in spite of the preposition ‘re-’ that the two nouns have in common, these are two quite different modes of artmaking: the former taking on and up some aesthetic principle from earlier art or representation; the latter explicitly programming the modification of it. Between Alfredo Jaar and Thomas Hirschhorn, these two approaches go back and forth, and thus enable what Jaar would call the aesthetic of resistance. Between the two concepts denoting aesthetic approaches to reality, and the work of these two

artists, a live, multi-tentacled present comes to the fore. I use the qualifier ‘multi-tentacled’ in line with my view of temporality as I have laid it out in my own recent book *Image-Thinking* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), where the octopus is my emblem image for time.

What seems so haunting about the different ways in which Lund tackles the idea of the present is the impossibility, the futility even, of attempting to pin down the contemporary to a singular definition. Instead, the various concepts that come up and help us grasp what is ‘present’ about the present, all help to ‘get it’ – to get the way the artworks the author discusses approach, and touch, the reality out of which they emerge and which they address. In the end, what emerges is a constellation of different points, or stars, that unwittingly form an image, not a picture as an object but an appearance that inspires the imagination to *image* – to bring in my favourite verb, something that looks in a certain way, alerting us, as Lund writes, to the ‘changes in our relation to time itself’ (p 99) that makes the present both multiple and expanding. Of the many important statements, I wish to quote just this one: ‘We seem, therefore, to live in an expanded present in which several temporalities, histories, and times take part in what is perceived as present and as presence’ (still on p 99). The heterogeneity of times is, as per this statement, part of the condition of contemporaneity. This firmly precludes any attempt to stultify it into a period term.

This book is not an overview, nor a collection of the recent art that matters according to the judging author. Lund is not ‘charting the contemporary’, as art historian Peter Kalb called it in the subtitle of his monumental periodising book from 2013, *Art Since 1980: Charting the Contemporary*. Kalb’s book can be considered an excellent collection, useful for those who wish or need to grasp what kind of art stands out in the past four decades. In contrast, as we go through Lund’s book we must do so slowly, according to Australian philosopher Michelle Boulous Walker’s plea for ‘slow philosophy’. Then we encounter many different ‘thinking forms’, as Jean-Luc Godard called them, but these do not congeal into a movement, period or compilation. The ‘thinking forms’ are the different modes in which the artists discussed give shape to issues in one or more of the different presents, issues that share presence. In the end, what comes forward is the potential to connect art to the constantly changing political reality of the present. For what matters is *political art*, not or not only as activist but, with Godard’s phrase in mind, *activating*. Making forms that think; more importantly, that compel viewers to think.

Political art, as the artists discussed in the final chapter state, is not engaged with commenting on, as in the standard view of critique, but with intervening in political realities. This final chapter broaches the practice of exhibiting, which for me is the most typical form of contemporaneity, as I argued in my short book *The Contemporary Condition, Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness* (Sternberg Press, 2020).

Exhibiting makes things present, thereby setting in motion a process of reflecting, in which the artworks and the viewer-participants are together (‘con-’), constituting a heterotemporal moment

of forming thought. For Walter Benjamin, this coming together happens quickly: ‘What has been comes together in a flash to form a constellation’.¹ In the same passage from *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin denies temporality to this, in his terminology, ‘dialectical image’, in which the relation between past and present is not temporal but figural (*‘bildlich’*), as Lund quotes on page 138 (in footnote 20). This use of the word *bildlich*, matching Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of the figural, implies, for Benjamin, a temporal standstill. But while Benjamin explicitly denies such images temporality, his commitment to the dialectics of those images undermines that stillness. Lyotard would counter that idea of stillness.

Lyotard’s concept of the figural makes it appealing to connect all the fascinating aspects of Lund’s ‘changing constitution of the present’ – both the theoretical musings and the presentations of artworks, together in a move ‘beyond’ the word–image opposition (if I may invoke the subtitle of my own book on Rembrandt, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word–Image Opposition*, Cambridge University Press, 1991). Lyotard’s concept of the figural argues for language as more dynamic, turning it into a force, a movement, closer to the Freudian unconscious as laid out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* than to any Saussure-derived structuralist conception of it. Including, especially, *force* in his concept of language, Lyotard describes meaning as sense, in terms that include affect, sensation, intuition and spatiality. Force, for Lyotard, is inherent in language, and it is

... nothing other than the energy that folds and wrinkles the text and makes of it an aesthetic work, a difference, that is, a form... And if it expresses, it is because movement resides within it as a force that overturns the table of significations with a seism that makes sense...²

These words affiliate language with, specifically, cinematic language, based on the etymological sense of ‘movement’ rather than any technical specificity. They also connect to Benjamin’s ‘in a flash’ as well as recalling that term *‘bildlich’*, through which he attempted to ‘still’ the image, to take it out of time.

But, of course, with the movement implied in the dialectic, that remains a hopeless endeavour. The ‘untimeliness’ discussed in chapter 4 of *The Changing Constitution of the Present*, and the anachronic thinking in chapter 6, present other attempts – not so much to get rid of time but to revise the obsessive chronological linearity that pushes the contemporary back into period-thinking. What Jacob Lund has done, with his merging of theorising and analysing,

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, p 262

² I quote from D N Rodowick’s rendering of Lyotard’s concept; see the first chapter, ‘Presenting the Figural’, in D N Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina and London, 2001, pp 1–44; the quote is from pp 9–10

is precisely to exercise that important rescue movement: keeping the contemporary safe from linearity. Linearity, with its arrogant implications of progress and the contempt for earlier achievements, is not, as it tends to be seen, the primary tool of historical thinking. This book is not a- or anti-historical. Resolutely probing what the present and its different presences mean and make, Lund manages here to think historically outside of the linearity fallacy.



Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images*, 2002, courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co, New York, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the artist

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