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Summary

In the first half of the 2010s, three major global exhibitions - dOCUMENTA 13, Il Palazzo Encyclopedia and The Great Acceleration - performed a peculiarly nonmodern dalliance with materialities and polytemporality. Their critical reception embroidered the Great Schism that non-representational and post-anthropocentric materialisms opened in the foundational discourses of contemporary art.

In so far as these biennale mobilised materialities “after” and “before” contemporary art, they elected affinities with techne and knowledges associated with the premodern. This introduced epistemological, geopolitical and untimely dimensions to recent art’s materialities that align with contemporaneous medievalisms debates. Medievalisms Studies deepens our understanding of the material and temporal debates in global contemporary art, a polymorphous and polyglot category that accommodates a wide array of emerging nonmoderns ‘in the middle’ (Latour and Porter 1993, 47).

Medievalisms studies’ challenge to the ‘simplified binarization of premodern acts and modern identities’ (Fradenburg 1997, 213) invites deep scrutiny of contemporary art’s chronopolitics. The biennale that form my exempla attempted to (dis)place the practices they curated through a polytemporality in which now-and-then and here-and-there are intertwined. In developing anachronic materialist narratives, a nonmodern sensibility promises to liberate emerging art from the temporal and social constructivist paradigms that still dominate contemporary art.

On the Nature of Things

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s dOCUMENTA 13 (Kassel, 9 June - 16 September, 2012) and Massimiliano Gioni’s Il Palazzo Encyclopedia (La Biennale di Venezia, 1 June - 24 November, 2013) overflowed with works that speculated on how things are material, relational, entangled, porous, coaffective, embodied and vibrant. Nicolas Bourriaud’s biennial The Great Acceleration: Art in the Anthropocene (Taipei, 13 September – 4 January, 2015) intimated comparable revisions of contemporary art’s social constructivism, the supposition that knowledges are actively socially constructed rather than unearthed from a mind-independent universe. Social constructivism’s frameworks of contingent knowledges do not disappear from
contemporary art discourse, they are, rather, reformed through consideration of non-social and/or more-than-social constructions.

If anything, what might have united these biennale was their nonmodern attempt to disrupt the anthropocentrism of the cultural turn and present a world-view in which all things are actants with agentic possibilities. It might seem surprising, then, that a recurring trope in reviews was that a focus on things was merely a byproduct of a lack of attention to agents, one related directly to the decline of the human subject in neoliberalism. Hostile critics proposed that curators and artists were privileging objects over subjects.

Writing in Mute, Svenja Bromberg argued that ‘the solutions we’re confronted with from the diverse strands of the “new materialisms” no longer lie in the critique of these [oppressive, exploitative and reified capitalist social] relations, but rather in a nonrelational and un-dialectical gesture that posits the world of matter against the man-made disaster of a neoliberal existence.’ (Bromberg 2013) In Art Review, JJ Charlesworth lamented that the ‘rise of objects in artworld debate, as mysterious, animistic, autonomous or whatever, is the flipside of a declining belief in the human capacity for knowledge, historical understanding and subjective action. As subjects become more passive, objects become more active.’ (Charlesworth 2013) What, wrote the artist Laura McLean-Ferris in Art Monthly, ‘...has happened to agency? Where can we step in and change things or protest in a system of objects? Here is what I think: objects don’t care.’ (McLean-Ferris 2013) These critics presented us with a stark choice of siding with subjects or objects. Artists and curators are either involved in a serious critique of oppressive, exploitative and reified capitalist social relations, or merely indulging in apolitical nonrelational speculation. There are two recurring and related misconceptions worth clarifying here.

Firstly, the issue of agency is overdetermined vis a vis the new materialisms. As Levi Bryant argued contemporaneously, ‘...it is not clear that whether or not one is a coorelationist or a realist is an either/or. It is possible to be a coorelationist about some things, and a realist about others.’ (Bryant 2013, 18) Byrant continued:

Critical Theory tends to proceed from the premise that people tolerate unjust conditions because they have mistaken beliefs and that it is merely a question of revealing the untruth of these beliefs to produce change. While ideology, no doubt, plays a significant role in sustaining unjust social assemblages, this overlooks the role that things themselves play in organising power. (Bryant 2013, 18)
If we want to foreground agency, then, we may only do so by recognising that agency is not limited to humans and engage with what the quantum physicist Karen Barad calls ‘the mutual constitution of entangled agencies.’ (Barad 2007, 33)

Such materialisms, then, can, and do, embrace politics as one set of relations among others. To paraphrase human geographer Tim Cresswell, where social constructivism held that the social constructs everything (including neoliberalism and the world of matter’), the inverse axiom is that the social is one thing equal among many other things. (Cresswell 2012) From the superordinate perspective of the new materialisms then, social relations such as ‘the made-made disaster of a neoliberal existence’ are an active part of the world of matter, not something passively set against it. In their different ways, materialisms such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), non-representational theory, eco-criticism and mangle realism have argued that social constructivism fails to grasp the heterogeneity and non-oppositionality of material relations. In their embrace of the non-human and post-human, recent biennale have been similarly critical of the binarism beating deep in the heart of contemporary art.

Secondly, the issue of agency is overdetermined vis a vis the intentions of the biennale curators. The biennale in question did not, as their detractors claimed, posit the objectification of people, rather they, somewhat guardedly, attempted to present artistic and non-artistic, biotic and abiotic things as agents within heterogeneous networks. This, in itself, can be regarded as an operational bias in relation to the broader debates within the new materialisms. For example, rather than foreground the way in which things withdraw, the biennale emphasised the way in which they are entangled.

Given that contemporary art is a field dedicated to promoting human exceptionalism, it proved difficult for biennale to become actors of no fixed ontology, explicitly foregrounding a mutually constitutive network of humans and non-human actors. The humanist baggage of art prevented such broad materialist perspectives from fully emerging. Thus, while purporting to expand the Esthétique Relationnelleii of The Long Nineties (Larsen 2012) beyond limited human constraints to embrace artefacts and living organisms, contemporary art’s humanist confirmation bias held that ‘Anthropocentrism is not the problem. It might be the solution.’ (Frazier 2014, 92)

That social relationalism should, reluctantly, extend into a linear material relationalism epochally preoccupied with the Anthropocene is evident in the 2014 Taipei biennial The Great Acceleration curated by, Nicolas Bourriaud who argued
that: ‘...the main political agenda for art consists in rehumanising those spheres from which the human has withdrawn – from the economy to ecology.’  
(Charlesworth 2014) Writing in *Artforum*, the curator Daniel Birnbaum pointed out that Christov-Bakargiev’s psychoanalytic language jarred with the ‘object-oriented philosophy that wants to liberate once and for all from anthropocentrism and consider instead what the catalogue calls the “inanimate makers of the world”’.  
(Birnbaum 2012)

The extent to which the critical reception of these *biennale* was circumscribed by long-established curatorial loyalties to the anthropocentric limits of the Cultural Turn is, unwittingly, raised in McLean-Ferris’ aforementioned feature in *Art Monthly*.  
Having swiftly rebuked Speculative Realism and OOO, McLean-Ferris continued to advocate an object-biography approach. Ironically, a number of reviewers of the *biennale* disparaged by McLean-Ferris attributed this approach to the very same *biennale*. Writing in *frieze*, Alex Farquharson and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie viewed dOCUMENTA 13 as *extending* object-biography approaches to material culture:

> The most compelling theme the “brain” introduces is what could be described as the biography of objects, biographies that allow the artists and curators to establish affinities and correspondences between different cultural, historical and disciplinary spaces and temporalities. (Farquharson 2012)

Most certainly, the gamut of critical reviews confirm that object-biography - extending to ‘the careful consideration of a venue’s history’ (Masters 2012, 128) - was viewed as *the* research method employed by dOCUMENTA 13 artists. In identifying object-biography as statutory, reviewers here drew attention to the anthropocentrism that has dominated both cultural studies and contemporary art since the behavioural archeologist Michael Schiffer established the concept of object history in 1972 (Schiffer 1972). Part of a broader material cultural turn against processual archaeology, object-biography focuses not only on the technological processes of fabrication, but on the use, servicing, and disposal of things. The persistence of object-biography as a method certainly testifies to a particular artefactual or abiotic trope widely practiced by artists and curators when making, selecting or commissioning works of art.

In spite of this consensus, the anthropocentrism of object-biography by no means went unchecked. For example, Song Dong’s *Doing Nothing Garden* (2010-12) in dOCUMENTA 13 explicitly challenged the human-centred flow of object-biography by incorporating the biotic and non-artefactual into the artistic process:
When an artwork is looked at closely, [...] the phenomenology of that viscous experience allows the mind to merge with matter, and slowly, possibly, to see the world not from the point of view of the discerning subject, the detached subject, but from within so-called objects and outward. (Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke 2012)

Christov-Bakargiev here suggests that while we still tend to read objects as repositories of (human) narratives, we should also regard them as narrative participants. This could be interpreted as sitting on the fence, and that might lead us to conclude that events such as dOCUMENTA 13 and Il Palazzo Encyclopedia presented a mixed application of new materialisms. Acknowledging the wide range of perspectives profiled as the new materialisms, and given the curatorial scale and ambition of such exhibitions, such inconsistencies are unsurprising. But, in another sense, they are entirely appropriate, because, ‘It is possible to be a coorelationist about some things, and a realist about others.’ (Bryant 2013, 18)

The Middle

Rather than being synonymous with the representational medievalisms that surfaced in Romantic and Modern Art, contemporary art is attuned to opaque ‘residual’ (Matthews 2015, 19) medievalisms, recurring nonmodern events that structure social relations. Since they are vestigal, and older than modernism, such medievalisms ‘are as resistant to change as we know other mentalities and collective memories to be.’ (Utz 2017: 50) For example, through their increasing incorporation of the biotic and non-artefactual to voice overtly ethical concerns, contemporary art exhibitions are often alluded to as “compendia”. Indeed, dOCUMENTA 13 and Il Palazzo Encyclopedia and The Great Acceleration significantly expanded the universal reach of the biennale by boldly offering a macrocosmic discourse on everything through specific qualities of microcosmic things (be they art works, plants, animals or stones....)

Il Palazzo Encyclopedia was explicitly motivated by self-taught Italian-American artist Marino Auriti’s desire to display the corpus of knowledge in its entirety in his Palazzo Enciclopedico del Mondo (1955), an imaginary museum ‘bringing together the greatest discoveries of the human race, from the wheel to the satellite.’ (Massimiliano 2013) Gleaning an overtly ethical and metaphorical discourse on other/worldly matter, such biennale establish their continuities with ‘circular’ medieval compendia - such as Hrabanus Maurus’ De rerum naturis (842-47) - rather than with the proto-scientific taxonomies of early modern encyclopaedia. The
allegorical impulse (Owens 1980) of contemporary art - especially its object-biographical habit of chronicling the whole through the part - in this sense, encompasses (rather than merely resembles) pre-modern exempla.

Paraphrasing Latour, might contemporary art curators claim that they have never been museological? Of course, in this nonmodern turn, curators are continuing to develop institutionkritik and the ‘new museology’ of the 1980s and ‘90s, building a broader perspective on the long-now of the exhibitionary complex. Medieval compendiousness offers remarkable insight into the morphological trends surfacing in biennale in the 2010s. But where the compendia has long performed the sine qua non aesthetic of smaller scale exhibition curating, in biennale this is allied with a much broader hybrid assemblage of social relationships, tools and things. Whether tasked with programming dOCUMENTA 13’s gargantuan 100 day curriculum of ancillary events and the publication of 100 books of miscellany or confronting “the impossibility of knowing everything” (Massimiliano Gioni in Bonami 2013) - biennale confront organisational challenges comparable to those of the premodern university.

**Studium Biennale**

The early phase of the European universitas is marked by a comprehensive, polymathic understanding of the seven artes liberales as ‘preparatory to divine contemplation.’ (Barnish 1998) Since the corpus from which scholars could work was believed to be finite, compendia could ‘include everything known about a subject by compressing it into smaller, discrete, and ostensibly more manageable units.’ (Steiner 2015, 76) The hulking scale of biennale, however, draws attention to the paradox of such compendiousness: “the compendium makes information accessible by repackaging it into smaller units, but, in so doing, often becomes unwieldy, imbalanced, or redundant.” (Steiner 2015, 75)

The challenge for the universitas was greatly enhanced as the European corpus dilated with the addition of translations of Arabic scholarship in the 12th century. “There is no doubt that after these translations appeared, the collected literature became too copious for any single teacher to cope with.” (Pedersen 1998, 122). The studium generale was the European universitas’ institutional response to a corpus that, in learning from the madrasa of the muslim world, expanded very rapidly, threatening to engulf the artes liberales canon and its academic practices (Platonism, the Scholastic method). The universitas’ corporate survivalism led it to specialise.
The *studium generale* has a number of affinities with current *biennale*. As the practices, knowledges and technologies developed by today’s artists have exploded globally, it has become impossible to devise curatorial apparatus that can support their copiousness. A corollary of contemporary art universalising its repertoire, is that, like the *studium generale*, it endlessly multiplies into a myriad of specialist artistic intermedia. (Higgins 1997) *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* - in so far as it dramatised the circular comprehension of all knowledge only did so in full recognition that contemporary art’s ever expanding field, like that of the *studium generale*, actually denies the possibility of universalism. *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* was, thus, a deliberate provocation, an imagined palace in which to pretend to witness the whole corpus. Gioni’s recursive application of ‘numerousness’ as a ‘rhetorical device’ (Madoff 2013, 91) thus reflects contemporary art’s incongruent expansionist-specialist aspirations. Moreover, Gioni’s anthropological perspective iii, necessitated the heterogeneous accumulation of unschooled artists, visionaries, mystics, theosophists and idiosyncratic collectors in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni:

...the exhibition becomes a type of anthropological research in which the artwork and other forms of figurative expression are treated in a similar manner, which is frequently done in museums devoted to other periods and fields, but for some reason it's not something we do when it comes to contemporary art. (Massimiliano Gioni in Bonami 2013, 168)

While this superficially resembled European modernism’s invention of the nonmodern ‘primitive’ and *primitif*, (Morowitz 2014) Gioni’s *modus operandi* - to excessively proliferate genres and stretch art's epistemological boundaries to breaking point - is decidedly nonmodern.

**mobilitas loci**

Another way in which dOCUMENTA 13, *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* and *The Great Acceleration* summoned the inception of the European *studium generale* was by forming the temporary locus for ‘peregrinatio academica’ (Ridder-Symoens 1991, 280), a permanently mobile community of scholars. In this sense, *biennale* have conventionally operated as “passion parks”, cultivated *nationes* (Kibre 1948) in which scholars assemble to study the fruits of the world’s artistic fiefdoms. Herein they can (virtually) venerate art works from around the globe - without having to travel to their many sites of production - and engage with likeminded scholars through the *biennale’s* numerous publications and programme events. It is through such a temporary assemblage of art, artists and their audiences that *biennale* incorporate art as a universal compendium. The irony here is, that in gathering together a variety of knowledges, *biennale* inevitably perform a colonial function,
acting to “globalise” the corpus that they represent through a process of canonisation. In this act, again, they perform a geopolitics that echoes that of the studium generale.

In consolidating their temporary status as loci, some global biennale have franchised their brand, playing an ecclesiastical role in international relations through licensing ‘peripheral’ compagnon. While this generally occurs metaphorically, it can also be literal. In contrast to in-situ biennales such as Venice and Taipei, which continue to attract pilgrims to their host cities, dOCUMENTA has long been such a ‘massive, temporally and geographically dispersed event’ [...] that it is ‘far beyond the ability of any one spectator to behold’. (Masters 2012, 128) dOCUMENTA 13, for example, granted its bulla to Alexandria (Egypt), Banff (Canada) and Kabul (Afghanistan) as its sanctioned sites of artistic pilgrimage, anointing them in its mappa mundi as a constituent part of its own domain. In International Relations, such supranational territorialisation is considered a quintessentially neomedieval bid for overlordship. (Friedrichs 2001)

Compagnon ordained by biennale as sites of artistic pilgrimage or “creative cities” grow markedly in global esteem. This, in turn, sanctions art practices that are socially produced (or “relic-ed”) within specific peripheral compagnon in the eyes of all other compagnon (Geary 1986, 177). In this field of International Relations, this is a specifically neomedieval formulation of the world order wherein biennale act as a centripetal conduit through which the art world’s knowledges seek legitimation. As biennale proliferated in cities around the world, risking the dilution of their potency, their curators have consolidated their authority through the establishment of a supranational International Biennale Association. In effect, this ensures that biennale fulfil the neomedieval function of contemporary art’s overlord. A pragmatic, nonmodern, approach to knowledge is here allied with neomedieval theories of International Relations. (Cerny 2004) At a time when cultural geographies and epistemologies are increasingly fractured and dispersed, biennale serve as supranational centres of gravity, offering thematic and methodological fictions through which contemporary art might affect to know itself.

Since travelling to view art in all nations of the world proves impossible, the biennale’s artistic studium generale is essential. Smaller-scale players in contemporary art’s peer-to-peer network face a dilemma. If they do not embrace the biennaleisation of art in their own domain they risk losing access to the capital that enables the flow of artists and their works. By remaining in the margins, they risk becoming globally invisible. However, accepting biennaleisation means losing sovereignty and acquiescing to knowledge narratives that are curated in an echo
chamber of *biennale* feedback. In terms that relate to the crafting and distribution of things, we can consider this sovereignty in relation to the vitalist medieval practice of ‘relic-ing’ (Neoflagellants 2013, 183).

**Relic-ing**

In *dOCUMENTA 13*, *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* and *The Great Acceleration* the competing ecclesiastical power of *biennale* and their role as *studium generale* combined with a *materialism* that is vitalist in outlook. For Bourriaud, ‘human beings are only one element among others in a wide-area network, which is why we need to rethink our relational universe and reconsider the role of art in this new mental landscape.’ (Bourriaud 2014) In *The Great Acceleration*, things are conjoined and co-effective and cannot be considered in isolation. In interviews, Bourriaud repeatedly stressed the newness of this enquiry: ‘Is there still such a thing as a direct interhuman relation?’ (Charlesworth 2014) Contrary to Bourriaud’s curatorial manifesto, this materialism is not a *new* imperative. The medievalist Jeffrey Cohen argued that ‘human identity has always depended upon and been sustained by dispersive networks of actors and objects, meshworks that prevent the human from ever possessing a finite form, an unchanging ontology, a diminutive boundlessness.’ (Cohen 2010, 58) This is echoed by anthropologist Tim Ingold who posits that: ‘...there never has been a time when all sorts of nonhumans have not been enrolled in the tasks of keeping life going. What has changed is the nature of the non-humans.’ (Ingold 2012, 430) Scaling-down Ingold’s related argument that there are no ‘objects’, only ‘material flows and currents of sensory awareness within which both ideas and things reciprocally take shape’ (Ingold 2011, p11) we may note how easily things can fall in and out of arthood. As things tumble and flow through *biennale*, they are enmeshed in, and reveal, the dominant values of allegedly ‘globalised’ contemporary art.

What, then, of things that withdraw, that resist passage through the *biennale*? Does this prevent their temporary transfiguration into arthood? A pertinent example is Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolás Goldberg’s *El Chaco* proposal. This involved moving a 37-ton meteorite from Campo del Cielo in Argentina to *dOCUMENTA 13* in Germany, a quasi-medieval act of *furta sacra*. In the event, this project was abandoned since the aboriginal Chaco communities, who are the meteorite’s custodians, protested its transfer to the *dOCUMENTA 13*. The artists Faivovich and Goldberg were forced to conclude that even temporarily removing contact with Moqoit territory would have rendered it inert. However, the project was not aborted solely out of respect for the Chaco community’s rights. Pressure from the scientific community to preserve the stone for future generations outweighed any
curatorial assurances of custodianship that dOCUMENTA 13 could muster. Beyond the exoticising grasp of the biennale, its ancient extra-terrestrial virtus protected by the Argentinian constitution and the global scientific community, the El Chaco meteorite maintained its animate status as an alien source of abundance and power.

The failure to realise this Duchampian readymade reminds us of the ways in which different agencies compete for a thing’s attention. In this case, the curiosity of a contemporary artistic community was regarded by Argentina’s government and (belatedly) the artists Faivovich and Goldberg to be subservient to the veneration of the Chaco aborigines and the scientific community. In the dOCUMENTA 13 catalogue, Christov-Bakargiev afforded agency to the meteorite by asking if - a cosmological relic (older than the earth) with a unique history - it had ‘rights’. (Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke 2012) While she was widely ridiculed for anthropomorphising the meteorite, Christov-Bakargiev correctly identified her need to appeal to its quasi-subjecthood.

While Faivovich and Goldberg’s El Chaco did not materialise in Germany, the disjecta membra survives as a quasi art work since the metadiscourse generated around the controversy of temporarily relocating the meteorite, part at of its rich object biography, is in itself an object enmeshed within dOCUMENTA 13. The speculative proposal is worthy of further scrutiny than the feedback it generated for itself within dOCUMENTA 13 because it is symptomatic of contemporary art’s hidden social constructivist agenda.

Had it travelled to Europe, the meteorite would have been available simultaneously as evidence of pre-earth lithic matter (a concern of “modern” cosmology/geology) and as the object of veneration among Argentina’s aboriginal Chaco communities (a concern of “non-modern” vitalism). dOCUMENTA 13, seems to play devil’s advocate here, taking neither epistemological side. Certainly, a corollary of globalisation and de-colonisation is that biennales increasingly operate on a meta-level, “im impartially” representing objects that attract the attentions of competing epistemologies. (Karlholm 2016, 41)

Not explicitly foregrounded here is the fact that dOCUMENTA 13 is, equally, a site of veneration, one in which objects such as of El Chaco are received viewed through the meshworks of contemporary art. For one, physically located within dOCUMENTA 13, El Chaco would primarily be viewed as Faivovich and Goldberg’s practice, one sanctified by Christov-Bakargiev’s enveloping curatorial liturgy. To use a medievalist analogy, the El Chaco “relic” would have been substantially re-animated by the
Faivovich-Goldberg-dOCUMENTA 13 “reliquary” (Hahn 2010, 289), (or, more specifically, *lapidary*.) Since this reliquary performs a synthesis of antithetical epistemologies, the freshly entangled *El Chaco* object it would relic would be akin to a merger: *dOCUMENTA 13-Faivovich-Goldberg-El Chaco*. Realising such an amalgamation would have been a performance of contemporary art’s transfigurative powers when coupled with the globalising, homogenising leverage of *biennales*. The failure to realise the project demonstrates that this power is, as yet, far from absolute, that some things may remain outside of representation.

The collapse of the project, inadvertently, draws more to attention to the ways in which extrasomatic lithic matter ‘embedded with networks of agency in which what they can and cannot do - where they may and may not move, what they desire and what they can achieve - is simultaneously constrained and enabled by other actors within that reticulation: humans, rivers, angels, animals, intensities of heat and light...’ (Cohen 2010, 60) To borrow Fowler and Harris’ formulation, the foundering of Faivovich-Goldberg’s project does ‘justice to the way in which certain kinds of relations affect us enduringly through time’ and, crucially important for contemporary art, demonstrates that ‘some aspects of the present may become absent’ (Fowler and Harris 2015, 132)

What allows such proposed *furta sacra* (Geary 1978) to pass off its charged perspective as “neutral”? Perhaps contemporary art has never fully exonerated itself from modernist aestheticism, nor fully dispensed with modernism’s epistemical tendencies? This is deeply contentious since postmodern art was anointed of its late modernist patricide. The European experience of modernity precipitated conscious ideological other-ings of the “premodern”. The European Enlightenment’s othering of the nonmodern was writ large upon European colonialism. Thus, a great deal of postmodern and post-colonial contemporary art practice performed a studious critique of modernist primitivism.

European Modernisms’ other-ing of the *European* nonmodern, however, has received increasing attention since the publication of Leslie Workman’s *Studies in Medievalism* (1979-) and the more advent of *postmedieval* (2010-) For example, Alexander Nagel’s *Medieval Modern* (Nagel 2012) illustrates many of the ways in which ‘the status of the avant-garde’s relationship to historical time ought to considered as an articulation of “afterness”: that is, as a constitutive split between historical continuity and historical rupture.’ (Papaioannou 2017, 12) In practice, modernist artists formed very different relationships with mechanically standardised railway-time; while some embraced *timeliness* (Futurists, Constructivists) others consciously rejected it (“anachronists”). This has consequences for forms of
contemporary art that, in setting their critical sights on deconstructing supercessionist modernist epistemicide (the “avant-garde-as-historical-rupture”) tend to neglect (Nagel’s) “avant-garde-as-historical-continuity”. In so doing, is contemporary art unsuspecting of the nonmodern temporalities it hosts?

**Chronopolitics, presentism and atemporality**

I came to the conclusion that I had to make it [Il Palazzo Encyclopedia] less about being contemporary and more about the coexistence of diverse temporalities, since today being contemporary also means having access to history in a completely different manner. (Massimiliano Gioni in Bonami 2013)

My _biennale exempla_ are, in their different ways, fixated with the chronopolitics of contemporary art, 'the relationship between political behaviour of individuals and groups and their time-perspectives.' (Wallis 1970, 102) For example, what Gioni describes here as ‘the coexistence of diverse temporalities’ aligns his curating with a broad chronologic for structuring time characterised as “presentist”. As a chronologic, presentism is historically relative, it isn’t exclusively practiced in the here-and-now:

Presentism is widely understood to mean the practice of representing, interpreting, and, more importantly, evaluating the past according the values, standards, ambitions, and anxieties of a later “present” It is a core concept for medievalism studies, this being because it is arguably the essence of medievalism itself, unifying the enormously varied ways the Middle Ages has been represented in the postmedieval cultural afterlife. (D'Arcens 2014, 181)

Within the discipline of art history, the chronologic of presentism is treated with suspicion. For Hal Foster, the medievalist correspondences that Nagel’s _Medieval Modern_ (2012) invites are little more than ‘psuedomorphic resemblances’, ‘prefiguring’ or ‘re-entering’ the now. (Foster 2012) Foster, however, confuses the presentism of anachronic history, with naïve anachronism. From an anachronic perspective, the present cannot be easily demarcated from the past or future, for the premodern has remained animate (‘residual’) throughout the postmedieval era. This is partly infrastructural - there are copious political and legal continuities (Utz 2017) - and partly because the modern constantly re-invents, fictions and performs premoderns as its “other”.

Attuned to the residual and cyclical ‘afterlife’ of things, anachronic history ‘opens up a new sensitivity for the project of determining the temporalities of historical works of art’ (Karlholm 2016, 45)
For presentists, the postmedieval stages the premodern. Medievalisms - including, the term ‘medieval’ (Matthews 2011, 695) - are postmedieval concepts of premodern pasts. Thus the premodern cannot “pre-figure” (Foster 2012) or “birth” the postmedieval weald, since “the premodern” is a postmedieval characterisation. A self-consciously presentist perspective, thus, discounts current art from imaging itself as a vantage point from which to revise the (distant) past (Foster 2012), regarding any modern teleology that aims to disentangle “psuedomorphic” medievalia (Utz 2017, 3) from (preposterous) encounters with the “authentic” medieval to be an overly ‘homogenous meta-temporality’ (Osborne 2013, 31).

Today’s artists and curators have not ‘accepted their adversaries’ temporal playing field. Another field - much broader, much less polemical has opened up before us: the field of nonmodern worlds. It is the Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known.’ (Latour and Porter 1993, 48)

An anachronic perspective, a bi- or polychronic situatedness of the work of art, could be used to liberate art from being defined according to its unique descent, and to embrace, instead, a chronologic open to art’s continuous “life” through its successive aesthetic accessions and actualizations in time. (Karlholm 2016, 36)

Certainly, contemporary art projects, such the speculative dOCUMENTA 13-Faivovich-Goldberg-El Chaco, ask us to consider materialities asynchronously as a ‘coming together of different, but equally “present” temporalities’. (Osborne 2013, 44) Such ‘heterotemporal’ (Hutchings 2008, 172) projects may be helpfully considered as nonmodern in parallel with medievalisms. For Carolyn Dinshaw, nonmodern ‘temporal repertoires - okay call them queer’ (Dinshaw 2012, 6) dislocate the forms of linear temporality associated with the modern constitution. In How Soon is Now? Dinshaw demonstrates the many ways that medieval cultures experienced “asynchrony: different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment of now.” (Dinshaw 2012, 5) Dinshaw’s asynchrony, as a form of presentism, cooresponds with the chronopolitics of recent biennale wherein ‘the present is never synchronic, but always anachronic’ (Hutchings 2008, 67) and art works are free to enjoy promiscuous temporal relations. Making the art of all times available in the present, the ‘ transtime’ (Boyle 2010) of biennale is ‘ideally suited to producing temporal incongruities and heterogeneities and observing them in other domains of life’ (Kernbauer 2017, 9).

A comparable presentist asynchrony that has methodological relevance to both medievalisms and contemporary art is developed in Untimely Matter, wherein J. Gill
Harris proposes an untimely, polytemporal continuum, encountering materials as manifestations of ‘palimpsested time’. ‘In its polychronicity, an object can prompt many different understandings and experience of temporality - that is, of the relations between now and then, old and new, before and after.’ (Harris 2009, 4) The technical and material repertoire available to the contemporary artist is untimely in its potential to materialise chrono-diversity. This is due less to the fact that contemporary art’s repertoire is historically expansive - encompassing techne and media emergent over millennia - and more to how this repertoire is practised in ways that refuse to accommodate Romantic temporal alterity. Such untimely matter, however, is not the exclusive preserve of art. The failure to realise the El Chaco project amplifies ways in which contemporary art is still struggling to reconcile itself with the ‘chrono-diversity’ of the nonmodern it harbours within. (Virilio and Rose 2011, 74) Left to its devices as a non-art work, the El Chaco meteorite, generates its own magic circle, drawing other things into its dynamic polytemporal rhythms, making its matter full of future possibilities for ‘supersession, explosion, and conjunction’ (Harris 2009, 146).

Conclusion:

Drifting back and forth between cultural materialism and a vitalist materialism, biennale are diluting support for the paradigm that has sustained contemporary art: the Cultural Turn. In recognition of this, the art historian Katy Siegel located current art periodically after contemporary art. Such supercessionist periodisations, however, are exemplars of modernism’s ‘peculiar propensity for understanding time that passes as if it were really abolishing the past behind it.’ (Latour and Porter 1993, 68) Current art clearly has not abandoned the ‘polychronic remainder’ of the ‘not-now’. (Harris 2009, 29), nor can it, for ‘then is always and forever part of now’. (Karlholm 2016, 38) The medieval Wandergesellen has become a permanent state of being as artisans, scholars, cultural pilgrims, artefacts and many other things drift endlessly betwixt biennale. (Ericson 1984) In this, biennale manage and embody supranational relations with local compagnon that are geopolitically neomedieval. In their agential realism, biennale develop a nonmodern vibrant materialism, a reciprocal ‘object practice’ (Humphries 2014), that draws sustenance from pre-modern vitalisms (relic-ing) in which person-things were mutually enmeshed.

The chronopolitics of current art is drifting from the timely “just-now”, bound by human finitude, towards a “long-now” that outlives and eludes us, a geological scale in which the people of the middle ages ‘are our exact contemporaries’. (Cohen 2010, 59) Art that charts nonhuman waters and embraces chrono-diversity is nonmodern.
In the anachronic present, everything may come to seem contemporary with us. *In medias res*, things are falling in and out of arthood.

**Bibliography**


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ii ... 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.' Bourriaud, N. (1998). Esthétique Relationnelle. Dijon, Dijon : Presses du Réel. p.113
v 'The alterity of the Middle Ages continues to secure, for modernity, its intelligibility to itself…' Fradenburg, L. O. (1997). "So That We May Speak of Them : Enjoying the Middle Ages " New Literary History, 28(2): 205-230., 211.
vi Preposterous in so far as the "authentic" is a decidedly modern form of presentism, for 'there was no conceptual room for forgery in a copy culture'. Nagel, A. (2012). Medieval Modern, Thames & Hudson, Limited., 235.
vii Siegel makes this point in relation to the impact of the new materialisms: 'It's over: the contemporary was a brief period, a moment in the short American century when historical amnesia combined with postwar prosperity to flash like a strobe light on the entire world.' Siegel, K. (2013). "Worlds With Us." The Brooklyn Rail.