

# Notes on Obsolescence

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The ‘built-in’ obsolescence of a car is an example, in providing the necessity for the production line of new models that defines an ideological apparatus. Experienced as the tacit symptom of being modern. Something like, I think, therefore I am, my car. Dizzy Gillespie’s “Swing Low Sweet Cadillac” from LP *Swing Low Sweet Cadillac*, 1967, provides us the mantra of belief, yet belies the eternal spring of the new. The oppressive ‘Chariot’ of the spiritual, translates into ‘Cadillac’. Here Gillespie is making clear, by poetic means, the moral redundancy of both religious and media ‘dreamworlds’.

What if the new, as an actualisation of a dreamworld is not absolutely dependent on the obsolescence of an idea of progress against myth, but that both concepts (new/obsolete, progress/myth) intersect in the worn-out seams of chronological time?

‘Kairos’ (καῖρός) is an ancient Greek word meaning the right or opportune moment (the supreme moment). ‘Chronos’ (χρόνος) in pre-Socratic philosophical works is said to be the personification of time. While the latter refers to chronological or sequential time, the former signifies a time in between, a moment of an undetermined period of time in which something special happens. While ‘chronos’ is quantitative, ‘kairos’ has a qualitative nature. It is the basis of rhetoric as a device in argumentation, as sophists might recognize in the use of logic to defend the endless repositioning of the obsolescence of an avant-garde, yet without progression, to go unchallenged. Certain debates circulate within theory about the redundancy of definitions and positions in time: modernity, modernisation and modernism contribute into a collapsing redefinition of con-

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tingency, as present time (see Alain Touraine's *Critique of Modernity* first published in English, 1995) that in its very attempt to maintain modern disenchantment, is itself vulnerable to a retroactive counterfactuality premised on the demise of the New.

The philosopher Richard Rorty calls these problems contingencies by which we, as liberal ironists, may radically decide our own plural contingencies and fates. However, if recuperated in sophistry, an avant-garde no longer has any new contingent possibility. The new is in place unconditionally as postmodern, a rhetorical mix of old time and new opportune time, better read as the summation of reactionary ideologues that reestablishes the order of things, against the will to seek real contingencies of agents and patients alike. To believe, not in the disordering of time and the revaluation of modernism, but in the contracts exchanged to be in the right time and place, postmodernism makes the acceptable ironically 'unacceptable' again, and vice versa, in speculations upon the obsolete. *Altermodern*, the title of Tate Gallery's fourth Triennial exhibition, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud opened at Tate Britain in February 2009. It attempted to explore a 'new' concept, 'the Altermodern' as a critical progression out of a demoted ideology of postmodernism. The term describes art made in today's global conditions, migrations and hybrid cross-border cultures as moving from the appropriation culture of 1980s and 1990s. He suggests that the postmodern is now 'obsolete'. *The New Obsolete* attempts to delimit this counter-strategy as a purchase with interest in 'epochal' time, of beginnings and endings. The contractual relations of new and obsolete remain oppositions in league, but to

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some purpose of conserving status. It is only at this point in time that a better view of the postmodern might emerge in retrospect, and that an ending has been prematurely judged, just as much as the collapse of modernism has been too eagerly anticipated in regard to the progressions of its avant-gardes. *The New Obsolete* attempts to incorporate the 'retro' phenomenon without cynicism, such as revisiting 80s residual cultural matter and the general remainder of theory of a postmodern condition (e.g. from popular writers such as Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, at that time) by providing a critical view to resurgences that present both positions co-existing in time.

There are some measures against which the obsolete can be read as contingent. What makes the obsolete acceptable? If we consider 'flat' time, theorized by Paul Virilio as a general collapse, or catastrophe of our experience of space/time, what is new *is* the obsolete. The immediacy of the present retreats into the memory of its loss. The constantly dying and reanimating drive crosses out the remainder, what Walter Benjamin indicates in the fragility and urgency of actualising memory from dreamworlds. Dreamworlds are viewed outside the value system embedded in the present tense.

“There is an urgent demand addressed in and to the present, a call for a decision over emergent possibilities. The conservative version, in contrast, involves no such sense of urgency or presence – it is a retrospective justification of a series of events that have already taken place.”

“The notion of a counterfactual only makes sense within the analytic conception of ‘possible worlds’ (cf Kripke),

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where all the possible worlds are ‘realistic’, but only one of them happens to be actual.”<sup>1</sup>

Concerning obsolescence, quoting Jeff Koons from the 80s, a statement such as “I am Frankenstein and I am not angry” makes a kind of ontological leap of a final acceptance, of being obsolete, American, beyond European guilt, humanist self-doubt in ‘angry’ or passionate avant-gardism, and from Marxism and its heroic class struggle. All melts into air. Class Struggle only continues the humanist–historical aspiration of Enlightenment generated from Hegel’s dialectic of Spirit, no longer viable. We are not 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gentlemen, but rather we serve business with acumen in venture capital. We brand the entrepreneurial spirit, religiously, rationally, with money. Here ends time and value, to realign with progress, without need of justification, other than in the sheer excess of liberalism’s accursed share.

However if the final acceptance is to be a golden rule, and dictates how long an artist, including Koons himself, will last, what remainder is guaranteed for his successors? What choices remain outside the misery of drowning in obscurity, in these rivers flowing from Nietzsche’s a-moral well into the utopian seas of benign communities?

‘Most kings get their heads chopped off.’ Painting his own epitaph on canvas, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s self-parodying of the (Black) celebrity’s forced obsolescence is a form of history storytelling. The obsolete is re-inscribed in the return of the martyr, with its Hegelian critique against racialism drawn and rewritten not as Napoleon’s fall from power, but as connotation, in memory of the Black hero, the

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1 Slavoj Žižek, [leninology.blogspot.com/2005/08/zizek-on-counterfactuals.html](http://leninology.blogspot.com/2005/08/zizek-on-counterfactuals.html)

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boxer Joe Louis. (Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) *Napoleonic Stereotype circa '44*, Painting, 1983). Think Michael Jackson, both sanctified and reviled, glory inglorious, as an excellent example of the litany of those who choose, or have no choice but to die young, rather than, in growing old, obsolete. Jackson's remarks on the death of Socrates are very telling in retrospect.

Joseph Beuys also applied the power of self-mythologising, capitalising on the nexus of reaction and romanticism in nation, and disrupting linguistic procedures of analysis in the process of an attraction with his 'occult' near-death, sacrifice and resurrection. The ego becomes the multitude. This is Belief. However, without self-doubt, to contradict such charismatic attraction is tactically to be enabled by subversion, staking a claim for a 'redundant' kind of excellence, in skill, thought, design, beauty, economy, morality. In the postmodern era the transgression of taboos becomes, by stealth, itself the watchword of state sanction, approval, law, or convention. What used to be considered outrage seems to have become an accepted form of contemporary entertainment and 'good' communitarianism – the art 'project' included. (Examples include *Platform* the London Underground art commissions). What really remains to be held in disapproval? Is radical artist Paul McCarthy the 'dark side' of reactionary animator Walt Disney? The triangulated structural necessity of art–life–entertainment — holds absolute sway in the 'dreamworld' Biennale/Art Fair/Gallery realm. Thomas Hirschhorn is on the cover of *Artforum*, advertising Harald Szeeman's edition of the *Venice Biennale*, but the artist's aura apparently departed from the scene, instead offers an opportunity as a radical

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questioner, despised insubordinate or violent revolutionary, to the audience. Can creative and productive subversion still thrive at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when set agendas are regulated and prescriptive by markets and welfare policies for the arts? If aesthetic subversion is now placed back as offensive through willed obsolescence, and if freedom is by its very definition to be impaled upon its necessary, agonist transaction, (symbolic and real) violence, what kind of insipid art is left to be able to bring in the new, if artists turn away from the desire for bureaucratic visibility, to choose abject invisibility, is the hermetic chamber of art to be finally sealed?

If mobile-phone cameras might begin to actualize the banality of virtual objects, what then virtuosity? If, to be inclusive of the moral agency of all, humans and animals alike, the obsolete being, the host, is consigned inevitably by parasites to useless remainder. Unsalvageable, indigestible, it is also an unrecorded, unknowable number that constitutes the multitude.

“The concept of virtuosity has moved away from notions such as excellence and distinction and seems to have become synonymous with craftsmanship and technical prowess. What is the status and place of a notion as virtuosity in an epoch in which the borderline between mastery and ordinary ability has dramatically shifted?” (*The Old Brand New*, Press Release)

What are, in tow, defined crudely above as the ethics of an egalitarian creative production, to be anticipated beyond convenience, adjustment and self-monitoring, when

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commodity and agency are the keywords to be considered in the ethos of the present time? Ethics reverts to self-policing or self-interestedness and management is identified within an unspoken hierarchical submission to the higher power, the species 'Post-Fordism' to the genus 'Fordism'.

Salvage, the rag picker of Baudelaire's metaphor for modernity, might yet offset the post-oedipal disaster. The work of saving otherwise discarded or potentially forgotten representations of the past make time tangible. Representation of decay, leftover from the digested, consumed past, is to be redressed, nostalgia rehearsed in the wounds of time. In anticipation of a world recomposed /decomposed of its repetitions and recollections, we might paraphrase Kierkegaard's aphorism on repetition, as its forward movement and recollection, as the same movement, but backwards. Can thought itself be rethought 'again'? Against perpetual serial endings, we are obliged to move beyond the circulations of thinking.

Since the late 1990s, the practice and mediation of contemporary art manifest another historical loss. Thinking in terms of ruptures has dismissed perspective in a tendency towards approaching culture in terms of regulated continuity/perpetuity. Whether aimed at a revival of forms, preoccupations, or strategies developed by artists in the past or at tracing and articulating 'untapped' potential, artists of today seem more inclined to sharing their territory than to demarcating it. They are thereby always denying the individual's subordination to the system of marketing in terms of obsolescence. Global reality makes thinking in terms of the 'new' problematic because this implies a linear, progressive notion of time, and once again emphasis is placed

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on the need for an alternative approach to the term 'new'. How new can new be, if the obsolete is always first to arrive? One arrives before departure...

### *New Obsolete Markets*

This project is undivided between concepts of new and obsolete. The difficulty, or failure is posed by the condition marked by the temporal horizon of decay, in nostalgic reminiscence, narcissism, the particularities of being 'finite', ageing, and what is lost in retrospection. The success is measured in youth, notoriety and identity branding by markets. If an attitude to consider potentialities of freedom is to be incubated from a negotiated middle-ground—or in a future anterior tense as an imagined actuality, a proposal must be drawn in thinking the 'always-already', that exists in principle *through* the obsolete, i.e. not to be instantly discarded. A future multi-disciplinary or generic practice might initiate, by a strong desire for alternative systems, a resistant strain of thinking the market as an assemblage of contingents. This mutability informs *The New Obsolete*.

Suggested by the same contradiction, *The Old Brand New* complements *The New Obsolete* in some mutual concerns. Initiated at De Appel, Amsterdam this year, the project was advertised with quotations and references which accompanied programme information. The symposia attempted to define the work of an emergent global generation who reflect on this diversification and localisation of information as a form of collaboration, and sought to examine whether or not the field of art and design can truly be a site for generating things in a new form. Are these attempts destined

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as fatal strategies? The sharing of information, aligned to the development of new technology such as the Linux kernel,<sup>2</sup> a free and open source software, might give an indication, with the right to free copyright, of the craft of a collaborative practice centred on how information is to be shared by transmission. “In the arts an ongoing polarising debate is taking place about the position of the artist as a recluse on the one hand and as an idealistic reformer on the other, in which one ‘practitioner’ chooses for idiosyncrasy and autonomy, while the other acts as a ‘mediator’, ‘opiniator’ or ‘activist’ and endeavours to express and act out a social and political commitment in his or her work” (from *The Old Brand New*), is already outmoded, since it is assumed, normalised, and adopts/is adopted as the only acceptable model. The struggle inherent in the negotiations for an institutional acceptance ‘against’ and simultaneously the will ‘for’ the obsolete finds another destination internally conflicted in non-relation, unacceptable enough to support a shared undertaking by the artists / designers / curators who wish to conflict ideas and materials between the idioms of personal language and the institutional axioms generated through struggle. These provide, at the very least, some unreconciled prescriptions of freedom to be seized from the precipice of inertia.

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2 Initially conceived and created by Finnish software engineering student Linus Torvalds in 1991, the Linux kernel has received contributions from thousands of programmers.

## Selected Quotations

## On Luddism

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“The psychoanalytic accounts of cinema that dominate so-called apparatus theory describe spectatorship as a primarily voyeuristic, scopophilic activity. But recent changes in projection technology and theater architecture suggest that the physical and kinesthetic experience of the spectator, immersed in high-fidelity audiovisual technologies, is of paramount importance. This [...] charts the development of ‘immersion cinema’, critiques existing theories of the cinematic apparatus, and uses a spatial analysis influenced by the work of Henri Lefebvre to suggest that recent developments in cinema may be harmful to its artistic quality and social relevance.”

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From Tim Recuber, *Immersion Cinema: The Rationalization and Reenchantment of Cinematic Space*, *Space and Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 315-330 (2007)

## On Moral Redundancy and the turpitude of ideological constructions

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“—such overlapping between various ethical attitudes [...] mentioned at the beginning [...] such overlapping grants surreptitious plausibility to each of them, insofar as the claims of the one draw acceptability from the analogous claims of the other. We see here a sort of redundancy effect. Redundancy occurs when there is ‘more than the minimum.’ Here, the claims about the moral relevance of the favoured characteristics, being apparently supported by various views, offer more than the minimum justification. Redundancy of information affords obvious advantages to the defenders of a view, for it helps to confirm expectations and renders it more difficult to master complex problems. This makes it necessary to disentangle and analytically examine the different elements before it becomes possible to challenge them.”

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From Paola Cavalieri *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue*, Columbia University Press, 2009

## On Obsolescence of Ideology

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“In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Buck-Morss invokes the Benjaminian concept of the ‘dreamworld’ to articulate her ideas, since it refers to a collective mental state inextricably linked to the reenchantment of the world. If these dreamworlds can be redeemed from the structures of power that have seized control of them, then the dialectic of History may be put into motion once more. Ultimately, Buck-Morss’ intention is to argue that the socialist project is so deeply imbricated in Western thinking that its defeat has subverted the entire Western narrative of progress; this necessitates salvaging the fragments of utopian thinking that were employed to justify this narrative in the first place.”

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Liam McNamara on Susan Buck-Morss *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/021/revDreamworld.htm>

## On Agonistic Pluralism

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Chantal Mouffe has said, “I use the concept of agonistic pluralism to present a new way to think about democracy which is different from the traditional liberal conception of democracy as a negotiation among interests and is also different from the model which is currently being developed by people like Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls. While they have many differences, Rawls and Habermas have in common the idea that the aim of the democratic society is the creation of a consensus, and that consensus is possible if people are only able to leave aside their particular interests and think as rational beings. However, while we desire an end to conflict, if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted. The democratic process should supply that arena.”

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From Agonism, Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agonism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agonism)

## On the New

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“Antonio Gramsci said that whenever you think you are at a turning point in history, people always keep on using the word ‘new’ – just like now, everything to do with globalization is new: new economies, new telecommunications, new materials. Gramsci said that whenever you hear this word ‘new’ you have to understand that you stand in a very fragile relation of the past to the present, and that is incubation. It is not as if you stand at the end of something or in the middle of a brave new world. It is a middleness of a different kind. It is, in a way, starting from thinking you are always in the middle of something [...].”

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Homi Bhaba 2007, from *The Old Brand New* press release  
<http://www.theoldbrandnew.nl/programme.html>

## *Other References*

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### Exhibitions

*The Generational: Younger than Jesus*, New Museum, Triennial 2009, New York

*This Crafty Modernity*, Guild and Greyskul, New York, 2009

### Conferences

*Revising/Revisiting the Avant-Garde*, Visual and Material Culture Research Centre, University of Kingston, July 2009. Keynote speakers: Sylvère Lotringer, Franco Berardi, Gerald Raunig