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Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art
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Citation

Vekony, D. (2017, April 11). *Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/47798>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art

Issue Date: 2017-04-11

Introduction

“The sky is falling, the globe is warming, the ozone hole persists; people are dying of radiation poisoning and other toxic agents; species are being wiped out, thousands per year... Huge globalized corporations are making bids for the necessities of life from water to health care... What a perfect opportunity to sit back and reflect on ideas of space, subjectivity, environment, and poetics” (Morton 2007:10). This argument is presented by philosopher, Timothy Morton, for addressing how absurd it might seem like to take the time to reflect upon cultural, psychological, environmental and artistic issues in times that seemingly call for urgent solutions for the problems currently threatening our world. Yet, Morton adds that for reflecting upon issues such as “space, subjectivity... poetics” along with art “there could be no better time” (Morton 2007:10).

The starting point of this research is this Morton-ian assumption that although it might sound like a bizarre idea, we need art and reflections on the nature and capacity of art *especially* in these pressing times. Why? How can art in any way help to find possible solutions for current state of things today? What is the relevance of artistic practices for a world that deals with countless matters of emergency in the struggle for its own survival? Arguing that we need art especially in times like this suggests that art has something significant to offer us in such a turbulent era.

The starting hypothesis of this research is that, indeed, art can somehow offer possible ways to deal with the pressing matters of the world today. It is suggested that there is much more to art than simply an engagement with beauty that is reserved as a luxurious activity for times of peace. There is also more to art than social criticism or awareness raising; a role that might be associated with contemporary art in general. These, indeed - one can argue understandably - we might not need at this point as engaging with beauty might really appear to be a luxurious activity at this stage. Furthermore, when it comes to awareness-raising, most communities are becoming fully aware that we are in trouble and there is a need to act and we do not necessarily need art to call our attention to it. What is it

then that art can offer? Can it offer anything other than beauty or conventional awareness-raising?

We are living in times in which we urgently need to start *doing differently*. It is obvious that the old models do not work any more. The question is *how* to act? How to implement change so it saves (or at least expands) the future days of humankind and does not lead to civil war? One solution might be that all of us on the planet start to live a completely different lifestyle. However, one certainly cannot order people to live radically differently and enforce policies onto countries that order the end to a way of life we have been leading for the past few hundred years. This would lead to disorder, given that most people are not ready for radical change. Yet, the troubles that we are now facing are certainly the consequence of our actions and behavior. This implies that, in order for any practical change to take place, there is a need for thorough, in-depth transformation and personal, as well as collective, realization that things have to be done differently. So possible solutions should be sought for in understanding, revealing and changing the *attitude* on an individual level, that very attitude that sustains civilization in a form that most possibly will lead us to hardships we cannot even imagine yet.

In order to implement any change, it is the attitude towards life itself that calls for a re-evaluation. What is this attitude that should be reconsidered? The frame of mind with which our profit-centered rationalism-based civilization has been conducting its life is an ego-centric approach in which we want the best for ourselves in as short of a time as possible. It appears that this mindset is the foundation of our behavior towards the world. This approach to life can be seen as the foundation for the course of life in modernist and industry-based Western societies focused on a goal and production oriented mindset and a problem-solution framework. This comes intertwined with the capitalist self-centered behavior with which we have been conducting our lives in order to obtain larger gain and benefit for ourselves with every act we do. Although one could argue that this is natural human behavior, this kind of thinking has gotten us into the worrying ecological and political situation we are now facing. Is there no other way to think about life and about the things-of-the-world, but purely from a self-centered, anthropocentric viewpoint? Can our approach towards life in general change?

If we overcome this mentality, what can we adopt instead? Should we all start going green, stop using cars and give as many rights to animals as to people? There are many

discourses around ranging from Greenpeace to the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement.¹ Many world-views represented by organizations seem to offer ‘a’ solution. But what if they are wrong? It seems as if there is no time left to start experimenting with possible meta-narratives for creating yet another world-view to find solutions. History proves that meta-narratives are overthrown in the short or long run anyway. If no meta-narrative is adopted, what to do then, which direction to follow?

I suggest that the problems we are now facing result from the ego-centered mentality of our species and it should be caught at its core, namely at the attitude with which we individually and collectively conduct our lives. If there is a way out, it should be through a different frame of mind in which the personal, immediate interest of the ego does not dictate decision-making.

I think it is clear that a new attitude can only be adopted if change takes place on an *individual* level. The approach towards life in general can only change if there is deep, *personal* understanding about life that *emerges* in human beings and is not imposed: change that comes from deep inside. In this arena of challenges, from political crisis to global warming, collective change can only take place if change first happens on an individual, personal level, if every single one of us deeply understands that we simply cannot continue living as we are doing right now. A deep acknowledgement of this fact cannot come from a higher decision imposed or enforced upon us by political parties. It is not even enough to make such decisions rationally and change certain practices just because there is a must. The understanding that the ego-centric attitude – “the best, now, for myself, at all costs” – has to change inside individuals. The matters of the world need to touch us personally.

I am aware that all this might sound like an idealistic spiritual endeavor, but it is not as ‘simplistic’ as that. It might be idealistic, but I think that if we are honest with ourselves we realize that there is no other option for survival. Furthermore, as I am going to argue, the possibility of such change is closer than one would think. Indeed, letting go of immediate self-interest might actually be easier than we imagine. As individuals and as society we might be able to find spaces in which our goal-gain-benefit oriented attitude is – at least for some time – suspended. We might be able to step into states of consciousness in which the ‘things-of-the-world’ in their complexity can ‘arrive to’ us, and the constantly pestering ego that always wants more, wants it now and for itself, can retire at least for a short time. In

¹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm1QoijwGdo>.

these spaces, in the *experience* of thinking and existing outside the confines of our socially constructed ego-boundaries one might have the chance to sense how to be in the world in ways 'other than' coded into us by ego-centric behavior. These states of mind, that will be elaborated in Chapter One, might be the key for adopting a different attitude in decision-making, and can be experienced as a state of 'zero ground', in which the ego boundaries are broken through. In these spaces, the general framework in which we operate can be arrested and alternative ways of being in the world might surface.

How does art fit into all this? Can contemporary art, the subject of this research, take us beyond the hegemonic, production-gain oriented mindset we are conditioned to live with and if so, how is it done? Can art be one of these states of 'ground zero' (see Ch.1) and if so, what does it look like? As will be demonstrated throughout the book, some contemporary artworks can enable a personal deconstruction of those imposed structures according to which we have been conducting our lives and have taken for granted. Contemporary art can be unique in this regard, as it is neither instructive, nor prescriptive. It just simply sheds light on the value-systems which have led us into this extremely dangerous situation. In other words, I argue that some contemporary art can offer a most valuable experience in this 'mission', as it can enable us, individually, to see beyond the constraining ego-boundaries that would otherwise never occur to us to reconsider. Once beyond the ego, new alternatives might emerge.

Away from interpretation

When thinking of art and its ability to contribute towards the pressing matters of the world, one might argue that any artwork, ranging from a pretty looking picture to a disturbing sculpture is not much more than the expression of a particular set of meanings. The observer, in the process of 'getting' the meaning, looks at an artwork, grasps the message, engages with it somehow and under a stronger or milder influence walks out of the gallery/museum and goes on living his or her life. In other words, the everyday observer is trained to engage with any artwork under the assumption that the piece is there to represent something. This way of looking is so powerfully embedded in us, observers, that we no longer realize that it is a learnt and not a 'natural', instinctive way of looking at art. Art, for us in general, is there to illustrate and mirror phenomena particular to those socio-

cultural times, creating a specific visual body of knowledge that can be decoded and mastered through looking.

Along with that, many art historical schools treat the artwork as evidence of 'other than artistic' phenomena. Certainly, in such discourse, the artwork is looked upon with respect and with an acknowledgement that it can show, illustrate, demonstrate or even inspire us to engage with the things of the world through a specific, namely artistic perspective. It appears that such an approach treats the artwork as a messenger, a carrier of a larger than itself issue, taking for granted that the 'meaning' behind an artwork can be found and decoded. What is the problem with this approach towards art? Of course, it is always interesting to engage with cultural evidence (such as and through art) and one can also learn a huge amount from it, but its influence and possible relevance for the matters of the world today is questionable. One can argue that if art is looked upon as a representation, than the engagement with art is really no more than a luxurious pastime in times of peace, security and plentitude, and certainly has no relevance for our times of urgency. From this perspective, the inspiration from the famous last line from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Archaic torso of Apollo*: "Du must dein Leben ändern. / You must change your life" remains empty words for us today, as the artwork itself as cultural evidence does not carry any significant force that might impact our life in the 21st century.

Yet, maybe the reason why art cannot exercise its other than representationalist power on us should not be blamed on art, but on the discourse that enframes art as a carrier of particular, decodable statements of knowledge. In other words, the reason why art is considered a luxury item without a real force that can impact our lives now, today in the 21st century, might not lie in art itself, but in how the institutional framework, including art history, treats art. No matter how powerful the jinn might be, if we keep it locked in the lamp it is not going to fulfill any wishes.

Therefore, I argue that there might be more to art than an expression of a set of meanings within a taken-for-granted social framework. The context of this research is about understanding art beyond the representational aesthetical model. This 'other than interpretive' shift in the approach towards art is introduced in the following paragraphs. I briefly look into how the most commonly used interpretive art history and art theory has been (and still is) treating art in a way that it is reduced to cultural evidence of past (and present) times, and I refer to a few art historians who realize the need for a different

approach that might allow the force of art to manifest. This is done with the idea in mind that in order for art to evoke any change, it has to be let out of the box of representational cultural data.

In his book *Confronting images. The end of a certain history of art* (2005) French philosopher and art historian, Georges Didi-Huberman, puts the blame on art history for limiting the impact of art and therefore its influence on the beholder. He analyses significant stations of the art history canon from Vasari through Kant to Panofsky, and argues that it is in the tradition of reason that today's observer is educated to engage with art. Reason categorizes, boxes, structures and approaches the things of the world with a logical, linear understanding. This attitude fixes and freezes, in other words, objectifies, as something can only become an object of study if its motions and changes are stopped. As Didi-Huberman argues: "Not only does the history of art desire its object to be *past*, the object of a 'simple past,' so to speak, at the limit, it desires its object to be fixed, extinguished, worn out, withered, finished, and finally discolored: in short, an object that has *passed away*. A strange desire, then, and desolate, this work of mourning carried out by reason in the face of its object, having secretly and in advance assassinated it" (2005:44).

In other words, stereotypically speaking, for interpretive art history to examine a work of art, the art already has to be dead, ready to be dissected on the operating table. Didi-Huberman argues that this attitude has been the case in art history for the past hundred years. This approach towards art was brought into full manifestation by one of the greatest scholars of art history whose model – as anticipated previously – has been followed by the everyday observer (often unconsciously). It was art historian Erwin Panofsky who really was aiming to create an empirical science of art writing, and his method has gained international recognition. Panofsky was following the modernist model set out by the most noted philosopher of reason, Immanuel Kant. Didi-Huberman writes:

When art historians were conscious that their work pertained exclusively to the faculty of knowledge, and not to the faculty of judgment, when they decided to produce a discourse of objective universality (*objective Allgemeinheit*, in Kant's words) and no longer a discourse of subjective norms, then the Kantism of pure reason became a necessary way station for all those who sought to reground

their discipline, and to redefine 'art' as an 'object' of knowledge rather than as a subject of academic squabbles (2005:93).

As Didi-Huberman notes, this objectification of art that treats the artwork as a dead body to be grasped by pure reason, serves as basis for interpretive art history. This attitude towards art is not universal, but has nevertheless been widely adopted. Briefly put, the foundations and the model are as follows: the work of art is a visual language that can be decoded according to the linguistic Saussure-ian model. Saussure saw words as signifiers for the signified, and to Panofsky also, the artwork is a signifier of a particular (set of) meaning through which the message can be deduced. The model follows a careful structure. First, when confronting a work of art there is the 'practical experience' which is basically an identification of what is seen. This is followed by iconography, a 'reading' of the image and pairing what is seen with other-than-artistic information, usually cultural data. Finally, iconology follows and it identifies the cultural phenomena emergent in the work of art, therefore enabling an understanding of the artwork as a socio-cultural messenger (Panofsky 1972).

Description, iconography, iconology. This triad has become so natural that it is even difficult to imagine how to think of art in any other way. This model results in the creation of a certain knowledge derived from the art object that is treated as cultural evidence of a particular epoch. Through such a method, no uncertainty is left about the place and meaning of the artwork; there is a scientific mapping of the object. Just what relevance that object has for us today in the 21st century is another question. Many art historians have realized that although this approach might be valuable, it might not do justice to the work of art. Didi-Huberman's critical take on this method is read clearly (2005:3):

Books on the history of art nonetheless know how to give us the impression of an object truly grasped and reconnoitered in its every aspect, like a past elucidated without remainder. Everything here seems visible, discerned. Exit the uncertainty principle. The whole of the visible here seems read, deciphered in accordance with the self assured— apodictic—semiology of a medical diagnosis. And all of this makes, it is said, a *science*, a science based in the last resort on the certainty that the representation functions unitarily, that it is an accurate mirror or a transparent window, and that on the immediate ("natural") or indeed the

transcendental (“symbolic”) level, it is able to translate all concepts into images, all images into concepts.

Didi-Huberman sees the real danger of this approach in the verbalization and conceptualization of the artwork, and it is this direct translation of images into concepts that he clearly opposes on various grounds. Firstly, it is a given that we are looking at a visual phenomenon (an image). The visual is beyond the verbal, cognitive realm of concepts, so putting visual into conceptual is already a limitation of the image. Secondly, equating images with other cultural evidence of the past always takes place through the perspective of the analyst.² In other words, if Panofsky wants to see order and clarity in the image, then he will look for meaning in related texts that are structured and ordered, ignoring aspects of that era that fall *outside* the framework that he is aiming to construct to understand the image.³

The next question that calls for an answer is that if such a thing as an ‘objective apperception’ of the work of art is not possible, and should not even be the goal of art history, how should one look at art? In other words, how to write an art history that can come closer to ‘being true’ to art? How can one *write* the *visual*? Before the actual act of writing, a different type of looking should be exercised. The type of looking Didi-Huberman suggests the beholder should adopt is: “Something like a suspended attention, a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions, where interpretation would have time to deploy itself in several dimensions... . There would also be ... a dialectical moment ... consisting of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of *letting go of one’s knowledge about it*” (2005:26).

This statement is of key importance for this research and also crucial from the viewpoint of the ‘different attitude’ we should adopt for the matters of the world. What is it

² This he demonstrates through an analysis of the Fra Angelico *Annunciation* scene for the full exploration of the image see *Confronting images* (2005:11-52).

³ This is also the critical insight of art history, the art historian, Michael-Ann Holly, presents in her book *Past looking. Historical imagination and the rhetoric of the image* (1996). Holly draws a critical analysis on the work of Jacob Burckhardt entitled *The civilization of the Renaissance* first published in 1860. She points out that the book represents a melancholic nostalgia of lost times of some golden age from the viewpoint of someone who could never fit into his present life. She argues that Burckhardt is “always the melancholic observer on the other side of history, the outsider looking in, the spectator who admires but can never inhabit the sunny vistas from which he is separated in time” (1996:41). What Holly is referring to ties into the argument of Didi-Huberman, namely that it is not enough that the artwork is treated as a dead object, meaning is also projected onto it by the world-view of the interpreter. This methodology does not only take force out of the work of art as entity – meaning it claims it to be dead -, it also distances the artwork from the observer even further as one is taught to understand the artwork from the perspective of the interpreter.

exactly? Didi-Huberman says it is the resistance of giving the image an *a priori* conceptual framework. In other words, it *should not be us*, observers or theorists, *who dictate* on behalf of the image, but we should suspend interpretation and jumping to conclusions. Claims such as what this or that image might mean should come to a halt. Instead, the observer should *let the image work*, initiate communication.

“Our question here is one of method” (2005:26), claims Didi-Huberman. Or as I would put it: our question here is one of *attitude*. Once the beholder lets the artwork come to them rather than them ‘invading’ the image, a very different experience of the artwork arises. Didi-Huberman, while spending time looking at the Fra Angelico work and concentrating on the white surface of the image, suggests: “Already, these few moments of posing our gaze to the whiteness of an image have taken us rather far from the kind of determinism to which the history of art has accustomed us” (2005:26).

What Didi-Huberman suggests, and I agree, is that once the beholder lets art work, it might happen in ways that fall beyond a direct expression of a specific set of meanings, therefore fall beyond knowledge and the usual paved path of a structured understanding of the image. As he puts it: “Such are the stakes: to know, but also to think not-knowledge when it unravels the nets of knowledge. To proceed dialectically. Beyond knowledge itself, to commit ourselves to the paradoxical ordeal not to *know...*, but to *think* the element of not-knowledge that dazzles us whenever we pose our gaze to an art image. Not to think a perimeter, a closure—as in Kant—but to experience a constitutive and central rift: there where self-evidence, breaking apart, empties and goes dark” (2005:7).

This ‘breaking apart of self-evidence’ in grasping the image results in a very different experience of art for us observers. Such engagement with art necessarily calls for a different way of writing art history. Maybe this other type of looking cannot be translated into theoretical language. Or maybe the ‘art speak’ is going to sound very different from a scientific, analytical report. Maybe it is going to become a language that is personal and maybe there will be gaps along with random thoughts, and sentences without an end. However, this is the terrain of the visual that does not simply collide with a rational structure that can be mapped and from which meaning can be extracted, one that represents, instructs and orders.

Art speak

The art historians who necessitate an other-than-interpretive treatment of images do not follow an essentialist tradition; they do not think of the artwork having an ontological status, as some kind of timeless entity that could be touched by the beholder, whilst not reducing it to just meaning. Instead of essentialization on the one hand and interpretation on the other, they suggest that the art historian should 'translate' the work of art. However, what is meant by 'translation' is not that the visual should be put into verbal concepts in the way words from one language are put into another. 'Translation' is an act in flux that keeps up with the lively throbbing of the artwork.⁴

This 'art speak', as one of the prominent thinkers in the field of cultural analysis, Mieke Bal (2002), explains, emerges through translation that is understood in a specific way. Although her point is derived from a post-structuralist approach that I aim to take further, to put it simply she claims meaning is always in flux, always depending on the current state of the observer. I fully embrace her concept of 'translation' as a basic attitude in my research, therefore in the following I will first explain this term more in depth.

In order to do justice to art, as Bal explains, one should not aim to reconstruct, but translate images: "history, including the history of art, is neither a reconstruction of nor an identification with the past; it is a form of translation" (2002:64). By the term 'translation' she – along with philosopher Walter Benjamin - understands "to conduct through, pass beyond, to the other side of a division or difference" (2002:64). This implies that Bal sees translation not as a direct pairing of a specific phenomenon with a given concept, but rather as a grasping of the visual phenomenon and its indirect articulation in floating language. This language of art is in motion, in flux with several un-endings, always with "misreadings" and never a language to the point. The translation of art to her is "best understood as doing – of forming..." (2002:92). In other words, translation would be an act of constant becoming. As opposed to mirroring, decoding and putting the image into meaning through words, the language of art that is translation is an indirect language of – as Bal argues - "approximation". This language should be used in contrast with the linear language often

⁴ Translation studies has developed to become an independent field of study cooperating with cultural studies of various kinds. One of the most significant figures of the field is professor of comparative literature, Susan Bassnett.

adopted by art historians which encloses the artwork itself into a singular, direct and teleological mapping of the art and the experience.⁵

What does this 'other than representational' art history look like? In order to explain the nature of art history as translation, another analogy is presented. This language of 'translational art history', according to Bal, is that of the critic in Benjamin's understanding of the role. He distinguishes between critic and commentator: although the latter freezes art in language and looks for meaning to be decoded and explained in the visual experience; the former, the critic looks at the artwork as 'alive'. Bal quotes Benjamin in order to demonstrate the difference between the two: "while the former (the commentator) is left with wood and ashes as the sole object of his analysis, the latter (the critic) is concerned only with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive. This the critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by" (2002:83).

Hence, as suggested in the previous quotation, she encourages a 'type of looking' and therefore an art history that treats the artwork as alive. One that leaves space for a dialogue with the artwork, that does not aim to freeze it in various discourses or look at the work merely as evidence and carrier of a particular set of meanings, in other words, an art history that *lets art take its course*.

If art is not looked upon merely as evidence or data, how should it be comprehended? Given that this kind of art history attributes 'life' to art, I argue that it does the most justice to art if it treats art as an *agent*. If the artwork is looked upon as a living entity, than consequentially one can argue that it is active and has agency. Although scholars such as Bal and American art historian Michael-Ann Holly already touch upon this nature of the work of art, it is the anthropologist, Alfred Gell (1998), who clarifies this approach towards the artwork and is one of the main pillars of this research.

⁵ This latter is an "atomized" attitude that Benjamin also disagreed with. Therefore, similarly to how art changed, art history should also reconsider itself. It can be argued that just like Celan managed to write poetry after Auschwitz, art history should also catch up with art. Adorno was right in the sense that poetry cannot be written after Auschwitz still, poetry is being written, but not the kind of poetry that would suit the modernist, representational attitude. Just like Celan re-invented poetry to talk about the unspeakable, art history should be re-invented to talk about the visual; the visual that is not verbal, therefore in essence is not to be talked about, but to be seen.

This change in attitude is of crucial importance for this book. The artwork, as a living agent that exercises its force on us, observers, in a dialectical relationship is the basic attitude of this text. It is most important to grant agency to artworks because only if we, beholders, let art work on us, it can exercise its force that might point toward other than representational elements. Once this force is liberated from the constraints of a conceptual state of affairs defined by social order and hegemony, art is given a chance to exercise its force on us, the kind of force that is not anticipated by the interpreter. Only in this case can one start discussing art as ‘force for being in the world’ in terms ‘other than’. “You must change your life”; a change that involves a complete shift in perception might occur only if we grant a non-teleologically defined force to art.

This art history

Having covered these arguments, there is a need to go back to the initial question, namely just what relevance art as an agent might have for us in effectively addressing the issues of the 21st century? It was suggested that practices that draw one into a ‘ground zero’ are needed in order to go beyond the hegemonic structure we are defined by.

The core hypothesis of this research is the following: if art is able to draw the beholder into various states of not-knowing, into a variety of un-endings beyond the grip of the cognitive ego, once beyond this hegemonic self-evident structure, then some contemporary art practices are able to draw the beholder into a state of ‘ground zero’, and therefore provide a platform for yet unknown ways to grasp the world. It is this ability of contemporary art that is the interest of this research and through which an in-depth exploration of specific artworks starts.

Just what kind of art history writing should the reader expect to see in this book? Although the ‘art speaks’ of the above mentioned theorists such as Bal and Holly are most respected and followed, I defer from them in terms of shifting the weight of my focus from the relationship of art and observer to the artwork itself. In other words, I attribute more ontological status to art than Holly or Bal within the context of the specific encounter with art. This means that I try to give as much space as possible for art to work on *me*, the individual, personal beholder. I focus on the artwork as an object of ‘concentrated attention’ in order to see what it can potentially do to me, personally, and how the things that are

done to *me* by the artwork happen. Although at first sight it might seem as if I am going to write a personal account of engaging with art, I am actually going to give an art theory that puts the potential of the personal experience of art engagement into theoretical focus. I feel that I need to stress that attention is given to the individual, as I argue that social change and a shift in collective attitude towards the things-of-the-world can only take place if there is change at a personal, individual level. The idea of the impartial observer who is objectively looking at the artwork as a frozen object has been overthrown. Art, then, has to be talked about as an experience, and the discussion should start (and also end) with one's own, personal encounter.

The steps

The focus point of this research is the exploration of a space that is (created by) the art experience that – as suggested – can serve as some kind of a 'ground zero' for letting the things-of-the-world come to us in other-than presupposed constellations. If contemporary art can do this, the potentials of the space it might draw us, beholders, into are immense. This suggested 'potential space' of contemporary art in the research is called the 'transitional space of contemporary art'. Other than working as 'ground zero', it has various other characteristics. The aspects of this space are explored from Chapter Two to Chapter Five in order to see just what potentials it might have for the beholder, namely for the individual, and consequentially, for society.

First of all, it is suggested that art is a 'creature' with active agency exercised on the viewer. Various agents have different kind of agencies, though. The question is a given: within what might lie the agency of contemporary art? For instance, is it the same agency as that of Renaissance pieces? It is suggested that whereas the agency of many (pre)modern artworks can be seen as an intention to take us to 'a specific' place, some contemporary artworks are taking us to many places, yet to nowhere. Or to be precise, they are taking us to a space of absence, into a space that is not characterized by 'a particular' experience, but rather by a cloud of associations that surface in a disorderly manner, calling us to revisit not necessarily the subject-matter of the artwork, but ourselves. It is argued in Chapter Two that in the case of contemporary art, the agency of some artworks is really unique because, as

opposed to being a particular phenomenon that exists outside of the beholder, it invites the beholder towards themselves and that is the central element of their agency.

How can contemporary art possibly open us up to a space in ourselves? Would we, observers, have the chance to turn into ourselves if we were overpowered by an experience? Hardly so. As suggested in Chapter Three, it might be the case that contemporary art – although it can be an extremely powerful experience – neither comes with a statement, nor exercises active presence on the observer. Instead, it opens up space for us to confront and experiment with various associations and approaches towards the matters of the world, without the imposing of any directions.

The subsequent question is what exactly is this ‘force’, that is able to open up this space of absence for non-teleological associations? Some contemporary artworks might be seen as an active ‘cut’ into the body of the social order, and by going beyond the power-structure we are socially bound by, they might open up space for alternative ways for us to be in the world. It must be noted that although many contemporary artworks have the ability to create ‘a tear’, not all types of rift are radical enough to completely slash through our conceptual state of affairs, to the point of ‘ground zero’, in which nothing remains. Although many artworks can interrogate certain psychological or social frameworks, they stay within the (hegemonic) structure they aim to overcome. I suggest, in Chapter Four, that some artworks have the ability to really take the beholder outside/beyond their inborn value-system and make them ‘fall apart’: I call this force ‘rupture’. Having shattered the ego-boundaries there is the chance for a reevaluation.

The experience of contemporary artworks that takes us beyond representation, that demands personal engagement through rupture can be seen as a transitional, maybe even transformative. Chapter Five explores this transformational element of the experience. I use the term ‘transformational object’ for these artworks in order to pinpoint the transformative nature of the space some contemporary art practices draw us into. Contemporary art as a transformational object is of a specific nature. On the one hand, there might be transformation which tells us how and in which direction we should change. On the other hand, a transformative experience can simply just shed light on the current state of things, and leave us to decide where and how to continue. I argue that some contemporary art experiences can be seen as the latter. If the artwork is understood as some transformative event, it is here that its transformative force lies, namely in its ability to take

the beholder beyond the representation of their personal world, into a place of urges, needs, desires, attachments or repulsions that can and cannot be represented. By spending time confronting our own complexity, in a (relatively safe) place called art, there may be a chance to understand our world *otherwise*.

Overall, the chapters are therefore a guide through the various characteristics of the transitional space of contemporary art. Just what kind of art is going to be discussed? As already anticipated, in the research I am looking at certain contemporary artworks that are able to take the beholder beyond ego-boundaries, possibly asking for re-evaluation of the taken-for-granted hegemonic structures one is born into and continues living in, without even being aware of it. I am conscious of the fact that not all contemporary art is able to or intends to do this, and contrasting examples are presented throughout the book. The sort of contemporary artistic practices explored and are worthy of attention from the viewpoint of the urgency of the research are of a specific kind. They are not distinctive in terms of a particular style or medium; in the research I actually focus on three artworks of varying media, one is a painting, the other a film, the third is a performative piece. What is unique about these works is the character of their force. The artistic practices discussed, as well as others of similar nature, once they can exercise their force on us, are able to pierce through the observer's conceptual state of affairs and demand *complete* reevaluation of the 'things-of-the-world'. They are not merely, for instance, a critique on art itself, they do not simply ignite a politically critical attitude, they do not only concern themselves with environmental problems or they do not merely address biographical, psychological issues or trauma. Actually, they might do all that on the level of surface narrative, but that is not where their force lies. Instead, they all go beyond actual, articulated issues and problems on a phenomenological level, and touch the beholder at their 'core', asking for a change in perception on the totality of how one is settled in the world. This they do beyond the cognitive and representational realm. Critical thinking is not enough to take one beyond one's conceptual state of affairs, one needs to experience things personally. Therefore, although this book is a theoretical journey, it takes *personal experience* as the departing and finishing points. In a sense, although experience might stand in contradiction to theory, in this research it is not only experience that gives rise to theory, but the experience *becomes* the theory, as all chapters invite the reader beyond the usual realm of theory, namely beyond the mind. Throughout the research, and when reading the Epilogue it hopefully

becomes obvious that I treat art as a tacit body of knowledge in which the focus is not on finding meaning, decoding, contextualizing, but on the possibility and potentials of the *personal experience*. It is us, individuals, who have to reach down into ourselves and experience ourselves beyond the imposed hegemonic structures in order to start existing and acting in the world *otherwise*.

In order for this new attitude towards the things-of-the-world to emerge, and therefore for a change in behavior to take place, the first step is to fall apart, to shatter, to touch the very bottom, to reach 'ground zero'. Apart from addressing the pressing issues of the world we are facing, this is the focus point of Chapter One.