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Summary

This book addresses the possible impact of contemporary art on the world’s present and future. It is obvious that we cannot continue living on this planet as we are doing right now, because humanity is running into its own extinction. I argue that the way to change the course of events around cannot come from a usual, dualistic problem-solution framework. In the book, I propose that some contemporary art can show us, people, how to be in the world in an other-than-ego-driven manner.

Consequentially, the departing questions for the research are as follows: Can contemporary art be this significant? Is this not asking too much from contemporary art? Let us suppose that contemporary art can have such significance, but in that case how is contemporary art able to do this?

The research springs from two intertwined, yet distinctive urges that define the discourse of the book. On the one hand, I have deep, personal, transformative experiences when encountering some contemporary art; therefore this is the empirical foundation of the research. It is proposed that some art experiences can be so powerful that the ego-boundaries shatter while in the artwork. It is in this space, beyond the control of the ego that the force of art can reveal itself. On the other hand, there is the urge of a deep concern about the fate of humanity on the planet. The two meet in the book and it is suggested that the force of contemporary art can help us address and become active agents in shaping how humanity conducts its present and future.

The arguments expounded in this book therefore do not originate from a theoretical position, but from personal experiences and concerns. Personal experiences become the groundwork for theory that contextualizes this particular force of art. In the research, personal experience is theorized, and it is suggested that this kind of personal encounter can emerge in any sensitive beholder.

In other words, it is proposed that if we let art work on us, beholders, it is quite possible to get into such transformative space. Therefore, the theoretical field where I position this research is a field in art history that, as opposed to treating art as a passive
object, it comprehends *art as work* or as *agency*. According to thinkers such as Mieke Bal, Alfred Gell, Georges Didi-Hubermann, WJT Mitchell, as opposed to looking at the artwork as evidence or a ground for interpretation, I propose to look at art as an entity, an agent in itself, and see *what art wants from* the beholder.

The field of art as agency is narrowed down by the fact that my interest is about contemporary art. What kind of agency can contemporary art have? Moreover, where does this meet with the need to find a cure for the ills of the planet? Interestingly, while engulfed in the art experience, one senses a different attitude towards the things-of-the-world. As one’s ego-boundaries are interrogated by the art experience, one realizes that there is life beyond the current ego-structure – a profit-gain-ego centred attitude based on dualism and separation – we are living with. In this experience, along with the erasure of the distance between artwork and beholder, the separation between the human being and the matters of the world is also altered.

What is this space where such drastic reconsiderations (cognitive, emotional and even physical) of how we are in the world can take place? The theoretical foundation of this argumentation is New Materialism, Eco Criticism and Slow Science. Although their ideas about acting in the world in other ways than hegemonic vary greatly, there is a concept in their theories that I find recurring and that is the need for the making of empty, non-teleological spaces from which yet unknown alternatives for being in the world might surface. French philosopher Catherine Malabou calls such initiatives ‘zero points’, empty spaces of nothingness with all potentials. For her, ‘zero point’ is a point of force before form, the potential of pure matter without the imposition of any order from above. According to Malabou, new, non-teleological attitude towards the things of the world can spring from points as such, given that these are spaces that are not driven by hegemony responsible for the destruction of the planet. It is this potential of ‘zero point’ that emerges in contemporary art in very particular ways, therefore I adopt this term with alterations and call it ‘ground zero’.

*Ground zero* is a space of force. Much contemporary art theory does not associate this space with the force of art, yet, I think it is crucial for the current discourse. Most theorists, such as French critical philosopher Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, see contemporary art as political and interrogative, yet teleological, where the goal is to make the beholder question hegemony. However, they fail to see that the interrogative artworks
they explore stay within the confines of order precisely because of their conscious mission to interrogate a given regime.

Therefore, in order to find within what lies the force of art that is a real alternative able to generate change, I turn to literary theorist Krzysztof Ziarek’s concept of the force of art. Although I am critical of his use of examples, Ziarek’s take on the force of art as non-teleological, apolitical (and therefore overtly political) is the closest to how I see the force of contemporary art. Ziarek argues that the force of art is without directions, without imposed order and a goal, it is there to unsettle, to question, to interrogate, but also to enable a different kind of imagining the world.

How can one grasp this force of contemporary art? It is my contention that the ‘ground zero’ I am addressing has specific characteristics. It is a given that it invites the beholder beyond representation, namely beyond the narrative of the artwork. Once ‘beyond representation’, there is not much to hold onto. ‘Ground zero’ is a space of absence, as opposed to presence. Starting from the theory of flow and that of presence by philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, I propose that a lot of ground-breaking art works with presence. However, the contemporary art I explore and see as spaces of ground zero, (notably This variation (2012) by Tino Sehgal, Uncle R (2009) by Alexander Tinei and Muster (2012) by Clemens von Wedemeyer) do not offer this almost tangible phenomenon. One is not immersed in ‘truth’ or presence, but instead there is a need to introduce a new term, namely ‘absence’. The beholder finds themselves in an empty space of absence which can allow non-teleological ways of existing in the world to surface. Spaces of absence are torn open by rupture. I specify rupture as an act of cutting that pierces right to the core of how we are in the world, demanding a profound revaluation. At the moment of the ‘cut’, there could well be a falling apart, an interrogation of all that we have taken for granted.

Yet, there is life to come after this annihilation, but the new world imagined cannot be predicted as it springs from a non-teleological ground. The ground zero of contemporary art therefore also works as a ‘transformational object’, a term I introduce coined by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas. It transforms us from something into something else but it is as if through ‘dreaming’, as opposed to ‘telling’, that the ‘ground zero’ of art invites us to re-imagine the world we live in. I argue that this is a most important way of re-imagining the world as it is non-directional. As transformational object, the ground zero of art may cause a
revisiting of the complex layers of one’s personality, and through a non-teleological flow of associations, new alternatives might arise about how one can be with the world.

The aim of this book is to present a non-apologetic theory of the force and impact of contemporary art, and encourage the involvement of the art experience in decision-making about the matters of the world. It is also my hope that it will inspire readers to throw themselves fully into the art experience as there is a great deal in there to learn about themselves.