Our vulnerable position

It is the strength I seek in you
and that you happen to give me time after time.
It is the energy. The optimism.
The belief in myself.
But then to see you age,
break down, fear and care,
turns roles around.
(Which I cannot yet cope with.)

Aura Rosenberg – A problem of time (2003) - Mike Kelley/Carmen
(From the series: Who am I? What am I? Where am I?)
(Doubleblind, 2003: URL)

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Abstract

Today outer–often opposing–influences are endless; varying from contact with group features such as cultural, economical, national distinctions to differences in individual religious beliefs, sexual behavior, political views, ecological consciousness, etc. … Being confronted with this otherness leads to a crumbling, an unsettling notion of the known, the established values which throughout time were thought to have become one’s own; leading to confusion and resulting in the questioning of the self. A learning and growing process which does not become easier with all the changes in our contemporary Western society… How do we, contemporary Western human beings deal with the apparent freedom and insecurity we are confronted with in our society?

The essay starts off by looking at some of the major shifts in our contemporary society. A first important change is the space-time compression. The consequences of this shift, such as the dissolving of nations, hybridizing of national identities, globalization and the uncertainty it brings forth, are explored from different angles. Fast-moving trends have caused a confusion of beliefs and identities and as there is not one principle provided, one has to learn to grasp the contrasts. Today there is a taste for heterogeneity, causing a shift towards openness, inclusion and tolerance. Even though it is on its dispositions that contemporary society thrives, it also means that opposing extremes exist next to one another.

In our ‘information society’ innovation of communication and knowledge occupy a significant role. Besides the confusion caused through the space-time compression, all truly transformative advances in knowledge bring along the downside of uncertainty and incalculability.

Along with these ‘sources for uncertainty’, there is also a short look into possible certainties in contemporary life, since traditional religions and modern substitutes are not satisfactory and a strong belief in anything today seems rather improbable.

A possible source for answers and improvements which is given are the humanities. They confront people with making judgments about the relationship between facts and values. It is important in creating awareness in an ‘information society’ since innovations are value-free. Humanities can have the ambition to bring people towards each other to take up new forms of identification that are open for collaboration and unity.
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Memory says: Want to do it right? Don't count on me.
I'm a canal in Europe where bodies are floating
I'm a mass grave I'm the life that returns
I'm a table set with room for the Stranger
I'm a field with corners left for the landless
I'm accused of child-death of drinking blood
I'm a man-child praising God he's a man
I'm a woman bargaining for chicken
I'm a woman who sells for a boat ticket
I'm a family dispersed between night and fog
I'm an immigrant tailor who says "A coat is not a piece of cloth only" I sway
in the learnings of master-mystics
I have dreamed of Zion I've dreamed of world revolution
I have dreamed my children could live at last like others
I have walked the children of others through the ranks of hatred
I'm a corpse dredged from a canal in Berlin
a river in Mississippi I'm a woman standing
with another woman dressed in black
on the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem
there is spit on my sleeve there are phonecalls in the night
I am a woman standing in line for gasmasks
I stand on a road in Ramallah with naked face listening
I am standing here in your poem. Unsatisfied
lifting my smoky mirror

1989-1990

I. Introduction

In this essay I intend to create a theoretical backup for my artistic work, in which I concentrate on the following theme: how do we, contemporary Western human beings deal with growing up in a society where clear, uniform morals, principles and borders are lacking?

Contemporary changes within our society, confront people with new challenges, characteristic for our times. The numerous transformative advances in knowledge bring with them the problems of uncertainty and incalculability.

If spatial and temporal dimensions are shrinking through new inventions in communication, which leads to the dissolving of nations and the hybridizing of national identities; then where does one belong, what nationality does one have?
If social distinctions are dissolving and cultural identifiers have become blurry; then which people share one’s principles, ideas and way of living? What is there to expect from the other? How do others look at you?
If the taste for heterogeneity has caused a shift in the contemporary world towards openness, tolerance and inclusion; then one can question whether this openness is without borders? Is the tolerance honest? Is the inclusion non-discriminative?

With the increasing incredulity towards metanarratives and great ideals, it is a challenge to create certainties in life around which public, spiritual and artistic life can be centered.

With my artistic body of work the aim is to explore the theme from a more personal perspective. I see it as a way to communicate struggles related to the abundance of possibilities in contemporary life, the responsibility of making individual choices and the difficulty of finding certainties within the apparent openness (e.g. in personal choices), freedom and emptiness that typifies our contemporary western society. Hopefully, for the viewer, the confrontation with the practical work arises questions of human struggles throughout life; be it general or individual experiences.

The aim of this theoretical research is to broaden my own views and thoughts on our society and to reflect more critically upon the topic. Therefore, I will reformulate the question investigated in my practical research into the following subject: How do we, contemporary Western human beings deal with the apparent freedom and insecurity we are confronted with in our society?
Hannah Joris – … *he put the words in her mouth/For it is better to marry than to burn.* (2008)
II. How do we, contemporary Western human beings deal with the apparent freedom and insecurity we are confronted with in our society?

_Telling lies to the young is wrong._
_Proving to them that lies are true is wrong._
_The young know what you mean. The young are people._
_Tell them the difficulties can’t be counted,_
_And let them see not only what will be_
_But see with clarity these present times._

_-Yevgeny Yevtushenko (Yevtushenko, 1969)_

Growing up is anyhow difficult. Whether today, yesterday, before Christ was born or when the world was young.
But we live today and the difficulties we know and are confronted with are today’s difficulties. Or say, the ones we are most concerned about, are today’s… What are some of the contemporary difficulties our society puts us up with? What could possibly make growing up -socio-psychologically speaking- more difficult today than in former times?

Growing up one is confronted with the differences in education, how one was brought up. What always was known to be the average, the ‘normal’ is suddenly put into question as one becomes the individual who has to stand up for his/her own opinions on moral issues, politics, global concerns, humanitarian matters, etc. … New opinions are made or reconstructed through personal beliefs and through new outer influences; changing the ones one was provided with ‘back at home’.
Today outer –often opposing- influences are endless; varying from contact with group features such as cultural, economical, national distinctions to differences in individual religious beliefs, sexual behavior, political views, ecological consciousness, etc. … Being confronted with this otherness leads to a crumbling, an unsettling notion of the known, the established values which throughout time were thought to have become one’s own; leading to confusion and resulting in the questioning of the self. A learning and growing process which does not become easier with all the changes in our contemporary Western society…

As nations dissolve, national identities hybridize and new inventions in communication are made, spatial and temporal dimensions start shrinking. Increasing trade, the ease of travel and immediate world communication have led to ‘space-time’ compression and the ‘global village’. Media cultures have become more stereotyping and depend on continuous trivial variation. The result cannot be completely supported or condemned, as the drastic changes bring unique opportunities as well as problems. This leads to the duality typifying our time. The fact that there is both more leisure time and job insecurity, work variety and exploitation and the partial shift from national identification towards global consciousness are some examples of the duality characterizing the postmodern society (Jencks, 1996: 50-51; 56-57).
But this shift goes beyond mere global consciousness; in *Postmodernism in Parallax* Hal Foster speaks of a profound disconnection of subjectivity in the postmodern mediatic world. Recalling key moments in history, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989), the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the coup in the Soviet Union (1991), he concludes that “[t]his electrochemical wiring connects and disconnects us simultaneously: we are both psychotechnologically immediate to events and geopolitically remote from them. Such disconnection is not new… but it has reached a new level of pleasure/pain” (Foster, 1993: 19). Safely from the couch, one can share the fears of a war or, caught up in a battle one can cheer for a newly elected president – and this together with millions of others and with oceans in between. No matter which side of the screen you are on, it is a troublesome condition to be simultaneously immediate and remote to an event. Confusing.

This disconnection in the contemporary mediatic world is of course also existent in the electronic mediation of the ‘real war’. This has made a lot of the sickening violence much easier to carry out, as one is not really shooting or bombing, but moving the joystick and pressing the buttons. It is easy for one to forget what all the shooting and bombing is actually about; what it leads to. The victims have become countable dots on screens, rather than corpses; making the whole act more like a game. On top of that many images of violence and cruelty entering daily life are composed in a far more vivid, dramatic and gripping way than real cruelty. This turns reality into ‘less interesting’ and makes the dividing lines between the ‘news’, the drama and the game extremely vague. Reality falls between the many images existing, but differing in the sense that it is less clear, interesting or even amusing than the others (Bauman, 1995: 150-151). The images become more real than reality (Baudrillard, 1994).
Fast-moving trends have also caused the confusion of identities and beliefs, so that trivial private issues, cults and sects take over the news. Weak belief, weak thought and social insecurity are some of the common problems of the post-modern condition. There is no one principle ‘provided’; meaning our task within understanding the postmodern condition is to grasp such contrasts: to try to select the positive elements, but suppress the negative (Jencks, 1996: 50; 54).

The poem by Adrienne Rich which opened up this essay, helps to get a better view upon this problematic contemporary condition. Let us retake some lines from the poem first:

I'm a canal in Europe where bodies are floating
I'm a mass grave I'm the life that returns
I'm a table set with room for the Stranger
I'm a field with corners left for the landless
...
I'm a man-child praising God he's a man
...
I'm a woman who sells for a boat ticket
...
I'm an immigrant tailor who says "A coat is not a piece of cloth only
...
I have dreamed of Zion I've dreamed of world revolution
...
I'm a corpse dredged from a canal in Berlin
a river in Mississippi I'm a woman standing
with another woman dressed in black
on the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem
...
I am standing here in your poem. Unsatisfied

On first sight, reading the sequence of global events, individuals and communities, one could get the impression that Rich addresses some identitarian sense of a “common humanity”, to quote Bhabha (Bhabha, 1996: 442). According to the latter it is rather the opposite: the repetitive “I’m… I’m… I am…” does get a spatial extension in an object, an attribute or an event of world-historical significance, but “I am” is not the representation of a universal witness of history and culture. What should be stressed, is that the repetition emphasizes starting again, reconsidering so that the process of being subjected to, or the subject of, a particular historicity or system of cultural difference and discrimination has to be constantly re-evaluated (Bhabha, 1996: 442).

By repeating “I’m” again and again, the problem of representation or signification of historical “time” of the global as experienced today is expressed. Related to the beginning of this chapter, the sociologist Anthony Giddens states that the essence of global cosmopolitanism consists in a “transformation of space and time… action at a distance” (Giddens, 1994: 4). Living (and participating) in the mediatic world, means one can no
longer lock himself up in a bubble. There is no escape from the global uncertainty caused by the connections of the techno-tele-media forms of global culture. Rich succeeds in placing the reader in this very position, as each singular event or person inscribed in the poem is signified by a wide variety of media and image structures that we are familiar with (Bhabha, 1996: 442-443).

The position Rich claims is like an intervention in the flow of history, which stops for no one, while the repetitive “I” expresses an accelerated motion of what it means to be “torn between ways” (Bhabha, 1996: 443). Quoting Gloria Anzaldúa, it is precisely here that Rich’s ethics and aesthetics are located in the place where the woman stands “unsatisfied” in her poem (Rich 1994, quoting Anzaldúa; Bhabha, 2004: 44).

Given these contemporary facts on changes within our society, people have to deal with new challenges, characteristic for our time: where does one belong if the world has turned into the ‘global village’? How to feel ‘rooted’ if it is unclear which nationality one has? Where do I come from, what nationality do I have? Does it depend on the blood that runs through my veins? The place I lived the longest? The languages I speak? The amount of people I know in one country or another? Is it the country where I appear the least foreign, where I blend in the most? If I were to be adopted, then where would I come from? The challenges go on; by the time you might have figured out where you could possibly come from, which nationality you could live by, it’s time to find out what category is the next in line. The category defining what religion you have, which morals you value, what kind of work you do, how you fill in your free time; simply, a category including people who share all these properties. In the past, at least, that would have been the next step. Today, it is somewhat different.
Social distinctions are dissolving and cultural identifiers – accent, dress, social attitudes and values – have become blurry (Jencks, 1996: 51; 53). This is quite the contrary to the modernist society where people were forced to belong to one or another group, thus sharing fashion, moral arguments and mental habits. Those who did value a plurality of tastes did best to keep it to themselves. Today, there is not one group or class that leads, runs or owns our post-modern world. This disappearance of a recognizable class with established interests has made First World political polarization between left and right more problematic and has caused the uprise of new agenda politics; issues of gender, ecology and distributive justice (Jencks, 1996: 57). Everything and nothing goes hand in hand. One can basically blend in all the ingredients desired into a personal-trait-cocktail. One can be a catholic scientist with many ecological concerns, traveling the world, being against abortion, but for death penalty, once voting for democrats, then for socialists and perhaps the next time for the green party or maybe the extreme right party instead… and God knows what more. Examples for these fuzzy, fading social distinctions need not be black and white or outspoken; one does not have to look hard for subtle creative combinations of characteristics within one single person. It is a healthy change, to be able to think beyond the borders and compose one’s own manual of how to go through life, but at the same time a rather confusing change. Social interaction – not to say: life itself – becomes far less predictable and loses a great amount of self-evidence. What to expect from the other?

Taking it to a more intimate level, one could ask oneself following questions: does the maturity of the body nowadays coincide with that of the mind? Or does the maturity of the contemporary body correspond to its sexual experience? These two questions are just a hint of the countless uncertainties an individual deals with in our post-modern society, creating an awareness of possible gaps between the self and the other. How do others look at me? What would people expect from me, experience wise, morally, and so on. And what about religion? What does it mean ‘not to be religious’? If one is brought up within a setting of Christian morals, then perhaps one ‘belongs’ more to one religion than to another anyhow? To state whether one is religious – a ‘believer’- or not, is maybe just an outdated topic to ponder upon?
Living in an epoch of tolerance…
The new assertions of minority rights, of ‘otherness’ as a predominant, even desirable, category and the taste for heterogeneity have caused a shift in the post-modern world towards openness, tolerance and inclusion. As there is not one leading class, there is also not one single movement that is typical of the new agenda politics, the pluralism of groupuscules. In the West there is a more cosmopolitan way of thinking towards conflicting worldviews, opposing to the exclusivist modern project of the emancipation of humanity, conceived as a white, European, rationalist male. In the inner cities there is a ‘live and let live’ attitude; a grudging tolerance of difference (Jencks, 1996: 60). This awakens another question, if the tolerance is ‘grudging’, then what is still acceptable as true or real? What is the value of tolerance within a society if it is hesitant? Does this not lead to a constant condition of doubt and distrust? And, then, once again, what to expect from the other?
One must note, though, that it is not the case that today people are noticeably more tolerant, rather that they keep on changing their tastes, at such speed that their successive convictions on the whole look quite ridiculous. With the rising of the global village and the revival of so many ‘Neo-Styles’, the moral claims of people look more and more like wishful thinking (Jencks, 1996: 59).
It is paradoxical that the post-modern world includes pre-modern as well as modern conditions as essential parts of its existence. Stronger still: it is on these dispositions that it thrives. It does not take an aggressive position with respect to an agricultural civilization nor has it sought to destroy industrialization; the post-modern society does not put forward a single totalizing ideology. This recognition of the fact that life would be drastically diminished if it all took place in the global village plays an important part in defining. Meaning consists precisely (if only partly) in difference. Oppositions are absolutely necessary for establishing identity (Jencks, 1996: 61).

We are witnessing a globalisation of the economy? For certain. A globalisation of political calculations? Without doubt. But a universalisation of political consciousness – certainly not.
-Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1979-1984)

Our times are defined by political ‘distortions’, economic divisions and ethical dilemmas, because we live in an era of global transition in which opposing extremes exist next to one another. The ‘secular’ liberalization of the markets has seen the increase of xenophobia and religious fundamentalisms; diasporic populations living in the West and participating in its modernizing public spheres and civil societies, are among those who most fanatically support traditionalism and orthodoxy; Western governments that become defenders for the democratic ideal in the world, are themselves coming from countries struggling with the profound intolerance of the Religious Right movements (Bhabha, 2004: 36). The economic ‘solutions’ to inequality and poverty, as provided by the World Bank, are sadly enough not free from such paradoxes. These ‘solutions’ consist of the reproduction of dual, unequal economies, which makes poorer societies even more dependent and which ensures economic domination for the so-called First World countries. There is no doubt that the variety of opportunities and choices has enlarged,
but the colonial history still comes through the successes of globalization (Bhabha, 2004: 37).

Retaking the poem by Adrienne Rich, could help to put some contemporary issues on inequality into perspective.

...  
I’m a woman standing  
with another woman dressed in black  
on the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem  
there is spit on my sleeve there are phonecalls in the night  
I am a woman standing in line for gasmasks  
I stand on a road in Ramallah with naked face listening  
I am standing here in your poem. Unsatisfied  
...

As mentioned earlier, in this poem the sovereignty of the self is attenuated; the self-justified consciousness of ‘first world’ priority or positionality is broken in order to create something like a global solidarity, without becoming a sentimental surrender and refusing superficial forms of historical correspondence (Bhabha, 2004: 43). The continuous repetition of “I am” is as an uttering of ‘unsatisfaction’ about the borders of memory, narrativity and agency. It confronts us with the promises and betrayals throughout history; the unreliability of the narratives of history and memory which in the end forces the poet into the position of a witness. To quote Bhabha: “When historic memory fails public morality, is the compulsion to repeat, the beating rhythm of death, the only answer? [...] If oppression and destruction can tear down walls and destroy frontiers, then why can’t those gates remain open, those spaces de-territorialised, in times of peace? It is as if hostility brings us closer to our neighbors, in a deadly embrace, than hospitality ever can.” (Bhabha, 2004: 45; 49).

Each line has a specific narrative in which the instability of memory is illustrated. More specifically speaking, in the last line the emphasis on ‘standing’ clearly is a political standpoint. This line is about the ‘standing of citizenship’ as a measure of public approval, in terms of respect and recognition. Speaking of citizenship as ‘standing’ comes from the poet’s insistence that as active citizens we have the duty to stand up against the state’s strategies of exclusions and discriminations covered up by its promises of formal equality and procedural democracy (Bhabha, 2004: 45-46). Hereby she addresses “intertemporal equity” and “intertemporal rights” which emerge with the “increased intermixing of the peoples of the world through various forms of transnational migration”, quoting Richard Falk (Falk, 2000: 210). The final lines stress a global ethic of expanding hospitality to those who have been unhomed by historical trauma, injustice, genocide and death. The repetition of the simplest expression of human existence, of being human, “I am” becomes a claim for human rights, but also an embodiment of the responsibilities and obligations of global citizenship (Bhabha, 2004: 47-48).
Seen the fact that we live in the Post-Industrial society, also called the ‘information society’, innovation of communication and knowledge occupy a significant role (Jencks, 1996: 51). Uncertainty does not only derive from fading social distinctions, hybridizing national identities, the shrinking of spatial and temporal dimensions; all truly transformative advances in knowledge bring along the downside of uncertainty and incalculability. In other words, new knowledge brings with it an exhilarating sense of a new beginning, but also a profound doubt about established principles in the production of knowledge. This leads to the fact that in order for new knowledge to be effective, different aspects must be taken in account. The values, judgments and claims made concerning the knowledge, must be discussed and balanced out; the scale of its effectiveness must be estimated: the conceptual doubt and temporal contingency must be confronted (Bhabha, 2004: 33-36).

This problem of scale is not sufficiently grasped when discussing globalization through the spatial perspective, in which the global world ‘undergoes’ a binary division of the global and the local. Although this spatial division does emphasize the unpredictability of global development, it still seeks to define the measure of globality in “the language of gigantism” or the “increasingly small”. The measure of globality lays in incalculability (Bhabha, 2004: 36).

Contemporary globalization is a side-by-side movement of inequalities and disjunctions, and less a binary or polarized movement. This has led to an intersection between ‘enlargement’ and ‘compression’. ‘Enlargement’ refers to the interactions and interconnections that transcend states and societies, while ‘compression’ stands for the ‘action at distance’, blurring, space-time compression and velocity of the global. At this point of intersection, we feel an urge to search for more certainty (Bhabha, 2004: 38-39).

*If the natural world is ruled by fate and chance, and the technical world by rationality and entropy, the social world can only be characterized as existing in fear and trembling.*

-Daniel Bell (Bell, 1980: 36-37)
If nations are dissolving, social distinctions becoming fuzzy, space and time getting compressed, then there’s a whole lot for the individual to figure out for him/herself. And if Lyotard is correct in defining the postmodern as “an incredulity towards metanarratives”, then we have lost yet another support in life (Lyotard, 1984: 37). Perhaps it is not necessarily incredulity towards metanarratives that leaves us “torn between ways”, with the difficulty of choice and seeking guidelines in life. It is the forthcoming of global civilization that makes the deficiencies of traditional and modern cultures more visible. Present and future are always deeply linked to the past, which implies that religions –Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.- are more than spiritual traditions: they form a civilization, a culture, a nation. Of course it is impossible today to return to, what Jencks calls, “the magical state of mind”. On top of that, the modernist substitutes for religion –such as the metanarratives of social emancipation, progress, universal brotherhood, nature as norm- have also become traditional religions. Their relevance remains, but they cannot function as a satisfactory objective towards which public, spiritual and artistic life can be constantly centered (Jencks, 1996: 70).

Today people continue to worship in traditional ways, but selectively, as they wish; à la carte. But along with this there is the fact that the amount of ‘cheating’ is greater than ever; a consequence of weak belief in the institutions we create. It is important to mention here that it is especially those nations favored by their geographical position and historical circumstances, that show a grosser spirit and a weaker hold on moral principles today (Yevtushenko, 1963). This opens up to the question “Is a strong belief in anything possible today?” (Jencks, 1996: 70); sounding very much like the question that Bell asked twenty years earlier: “If science –as it hopes- captures in its calyx the unity of nature, religion seeks the awareness of the totality of life in the culture: uniting the ethical, the metaphysical, the meditative and the mystical. Is that unity possible in the modern world? ...Is any of this possible – in the West? ” (Bell, 1977: 446-447).

As the state, in the First World at least, cannot provide morality and spiritual direction, Jencks suggests the universe –slightly elevated above the state- as a unifying focus,
putting forward “to acknowledge the beautiful emergent cosmic order and our relation to it”. He criticizes the existentialists, who “overrate the uncertain, the undecidable and the chaotic”, but agrees that we are confronted with ‘overchoice’ in the postmodern world: we are free and this leads to a certain anxiety of choice (Jencks, 1996: 69, 73).

Zygmunt Bauman points out that this ‘heavy’ matter of choices is –morally speaking-, however, not new. We are unavoidably existentially moral beings, because we are confronted with the challenge of the Other, in other words we are faced with the challenge of responsibility for the Other, a condition of being-for (Bauman, 1995: 1). The changes which the new postmodern perspective has brought, such as the breaking up of certain modern hopes and ambitions, and the fading of illusions concerning social processes and the conduct of individual lives, allows us to see the true nature of moral phenomena more clearly than was ever possible before. As we are moral beings, our condition is a moral problem and our life choices are moral dilemmas. Along with this we are faced with the responsibility for the Other, an ambivalent matter. But there are no ready-made answers or solutions; we are alone and lonely in making our decisions. Moral life is a life of constant uncertainty. Thus, it is not surprising that throughout history much of human inventiveness was committed to inventing ways of lightening the burden.

In our contemporary world the tyranny of choice has returned, as the traditional and modern supports do not suffice (Bauman, 1995: 2-5). To use Bauman’s words: “In the volatile atmosphere of flashing flames, flickery fads and freak franchises, this is not an easy matter…” (Bauman, 1995: 5). With the lack of universal principles and absolute truths, the question arises whether or not it still matters what personal principles and private truth one holds on to and follows. Perhaps it has become more important than ever before: the downfall of universal principles and absolute truths has made the responsibilities of the individual more profound and more consequential than before (Bauman, 1995: 6). This condition results in the possibility of a better awareness of the moral character of our choices, of us more consciously facing our choices and seeing their moral contents more sharply. Of course this does not necessarily imply that people will become better beings (Bauman, 1995: 7).

“We can now do what we want, the only question is what do we want? At the end of our progress we stand where Adam and Eve stood: all we are faced with now is the moral question.”

-Max Frisch (Frisch, 1977)

How should we who live with the asymmetries and disjunctions of the global world, inhabiting its here and now, relate to the historical contingencies that shape our identities, imaginations and our communities (Bhabha, 2004: 39)? Rather than just pushing these “too many alternatives” aside and jumping to the “beautiful emergent cosmic order”, it is interesting to see how Homi K. Bhabha confronts the uncertainty.
Bhabha strongly puts forward the important role the humanities (can) have in contributing to the creation of global community and interdisciplinary knowledge. Even though the humanities do not relate directly to something real in the outer world and also do not create methods and protocols that evolve towards some final result or conclusive truth, the humanities are effective in the education of the senses (Bhabha, 2004: 27-28). Defining for the humanities is how they work within that field of “representation” where form turns into feeling and the aesthetic or cultural experience leads to disciplinary knowledge. The latter ‘consequence’ evokes a continuous, productive tension in the humanities between what is fact and what is value. Therefore the humanities share a common purpose: not a method, but the act of interpretation that leads to scholarly interlocution, intellectual dialogue and public debate. Quoting Bhabha: “it is this tension in the production of humanistic knowledge that establishes… the single most foundational contribution of humanities to social life. The humanities build communities rather than models.” On top of that the integration of the conditions of global knowledge-production within the humanities is increasing (Bhabha, 2004: 28-29).

Humanities confront us with the crucial process of making judgments about the relationship between facts and values. Making judgments and participating (whether actively or passively) in public debates creates an awareness which gains importance in a time where innovations are made at an increasingly high rate. To be more blunt and concrete: scientific and technological advances are, in themselves, value-free tragically
illustrated by the holocaust. This raises the issue of the strong, disturbing link between the seductive power of new knowledge and the necessity to reflect upon the implications of one’s intellectual responsibility and moral choice (Bhabha, 2004: 30-34).

Also Edward Said sees possibilities within humanism, even though he clearly points out its double character: the great monuments of civilization which humanism has brought forth, along with its underside of suffering and oppression (Mitchell, 2005: 462). Most important about humanistic thought is that it is an action of resistance and critique, even when it is about trying to understand the past (Said, 1999: 285-291). In this sense it is high time for humanism to be revivified as a rational, worldly and historically-minded communitarian activity that can stand up against the fragmented knowledge provided by the mass media and the internet (Siddiqi, 2005: 80). It is this information’ which nationalist and religious conformities often broadcast by the mass media, because they focus ahistorically and sensationaly on the faraway electronic wars and give viewers the illusion of receiving precise information. Instead these broadcastings hide the terrible suffering and destruction produced by modern warfare (Said, 2003). Humanism should have an unsettling notion rather than a stabilizing effect; it is a means of questioning, upsetting and reformulating that which is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial and uncritically codified certainties (Said, 2004: 28; Siddiqi, 2005: 81).

Said believes that, in the right circumstances and with the right leadership, people can leave behind their disruptive political identities and take up new forms of identification that are open for collaboration and unity. More specifically, it is in the process of collaborative music-making that he sees a possibility of growing past the dividing borders of political differences and creating new forms of identity and community (Barenboim & Said, 2004: 9-10; Siddiqi, 2005: 84-85).

“...always and constantly the undocumented turbulence of unsettled and unhoused exiles, immigrants, itinerant or captive populations for whom no document, no adequate expression yet exists tot take account of what they go through... Humanism, I strongly believe must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant barely surviving groups...”

-Edward Said (Said, 2004: 81)
III. Summary / Conclusion

This essay has become more of a walk through phenomena, changes and consequential difficulties in our contemporary, Western society. Many observations are brought forward; few possible ‘solutions’ are given. A wider and more thorough investigation probably would have brought forward more answers to the question on how we contemporary Western human beings deal with the apparent freedom and insecurity in our society. More current thoughts and facts on violence, forming identity, adolescence, the subject and religion would have been welcome additions to this discourse. Moreover, these issues would have been necessary in order to give some kind of answer. But perhaps the fact that while looking for consequences and possible solutions to phenomena, one stumbles upon more complications and further ‘troubleshooting’ is a sign that there are not many answers at hand tout court? Nevertheless, an important part of seeking answers to newly raised questions is pinpointing the changes and difficulties with accuracy and reflecting upon them critically. This essay has explored a number of contemporary shifts and their consequences in our society.

A first important issue brought up, is the space-time compression in our society. This has led to the dissolving of nations and hybridizing of national identities, and also to the odd situation we find ourselves in of being simultaneously immediate and remote to events; a duality typifying our time. This disconnection has reached a different level of pain/pleasure; reflected in, for example a more distant, game-like form of violence.

Fast-moving trends have caused a confusion of beliefs and identities and as there is not one principle provided, one has to learn to grasp the contrasts. On top of that social distinctions are dissolving and cultural identifiers have become blurry, which has the upside that it has given space for new agenda politics. Today there is a taste for heterogeneity, causing a shift towards openness, inclusion and tolerance. It is on its dispositions that contemporary society thrives. But at the same time, this means that opposing extremes exist next to one another. Opportunities and choices have increased, but the colonial history is still visible through the successes of globalization.

In our ‘information society’ innovation of communication and knowledge occupy a significant role. Besides the confusion caused through the space-time compression, all truly transformative advances in knowledge bring along the downside of uncertainty and incalculability, defining the measure of globality.

Searching for certainty in our times is a difficult task: traditional religions and modern substitutes are not satisfactory and a strong belief in anything today seems rather improbable. As we are moral beings, perhaps the downfall of universal principles and absolute truths will create within us a better awareness of the moral character of our choices and responsibilities. This of course does not necessarily mean the world will become a better place, with better people…

A possible source for answers and improvements could be the humanities. They confront people with making judgments about the relationship between facts and values, creating intellectual dialogue and public debate. This is important in creating awareness in an ‘information society’ since innovations are value-free. Humanistic thought is an action of resistance and critique. It can have an unsettling notion, stimulating us to question, that which is presented to us as uncontroversial and uncritically codified certainties.
Humanities can have the ambition to bring people towards each other to take up new forms of identification that are open for collaboration and unity. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to add, if only briefly, that it would have been desirable for me to add more concrete information and thoughts—a discourse if it were—about the development of my artistic body of work within this project, in relation to recent theories, evolutions and artworks.

“We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men.”
-Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1973: 14)

(Theys, 2008: URL)
Confundida, me quedo…
(Confused, I remain/stay...)
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