

# The Death of Immortality and the Mystery of Art's Temporal Transcendence.

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My paper today examines the death – the relatively slow death – of one of Western culture's most respected and well-entrenched beliefs – the belief that great art is "immortal", "eternal" or "timeless". The topic is relevant to discipline areas such as the philosophy of art, aesthetics, the theory of art, and literary theory. It's a topic, I believe that goes to the very heart of what art is because it concerns one of art's most remarkable characteristics: the capacity to defy or "transcend" time – or, in more colloquial terms, its capacity to endure or "live on".

Despite its importance, however, this topic is almost completely neglected in the discipline areas I've just mentioned, and you will search for it in vain in most contemporary textbooks and lists of recommended readings. Later on, I'll suggest one or two possible reasons for this, but in the meantime let me assure you that the scarcity of comment is in no sense a good indicator of the topic's importance. We're dealing here with one of art's fundamental characteristics and the neglect of the topic is, I would argue, a commentary on the skewed priorities of the discipline areas in question, not on the significance of the issues at stake.

So, what exactly is the topic in question? In broad terms, it's the relationship between art and the passage of time; that is, the effect of the passing of time – of historical change in the widest sense – on those works that we today call works of art, whether they were created in our own times, or centuries or millennia ago. But let me immediately add two important points of clarification.

First, when I speak about the relationship between art and time, I'm not thinking about the function of time *within* individual works – for example, how the passage of time might be represented *within* a film or a novel, or the function of tempo within a piece of music. Those are perfectly valid topics, of course, and unlike the question I'm addressing

today, they do occasionally receive attention from critics and theorists. My concern today, though, is of quite different kind. I want to examine the work of art's *external* relationship with time – the effects, as I've said, of the passage of time on those objects – literary, visual, or musical – that we today call works of art. So, in essence I'll be asking: Do works of art have a special relationship with the passing of time? If they do, what is that relationship? And what are our reasons for saying so?

Second, I am not speaking about the *physical* effects of the passage of time on works of art – that is, whether they're damaged or destroyed by the passing centuries. I take it as a given that works of art are as vulnerable to damage and destruction as any other objects – and sometimes more so, given that they're often quite fragile. So, the issue of physical damage has nothing to do with my talk today. My concerns relate to meaning and importance – the effects of the passing of time on the meaning and importance of works of art, assuming they *have* survived the ravages of time and avoided destruction. To give some random examples: how has the passing of time affected the meaning and importance of outstanding Byzantine mosaics such as those at Ravenna, or early Buddhist sculptures from Afghanistan, or Homer's *Iliad*, or the plays of Shakespeare, or the music of Elizabethan composers such as Thomas Tallis and William Byrd?

I'd like to begin my answer to that question with a simple and quite banal observation. It's common knowledge – a cliché one could even say – that those objects that we today regard as great works of art seem to possess a special capacity to *survive* across time. It's common knowledge, for instance, that of the thousands of novels published in Europe in the eighteenth century, only a tiny fraction holds our interest today, so that for every *Tom Jones* or *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, there are large numbers of works by contemporaries of Fielding and Laclos that have sunk into oblivion, probably permanently. So, certain works – a small minority – seem to possess a power to “live on”, as we often say, despite the passage of time, while most do not. And then if we look outside the realm of art, the point is even more obvious. We would hardly ask, for example, if a map of the world drawn by a cartographer of Elizabethan times is still a reliable navigational tool, and we know that a ship's captain today who relied on such a map would be likely to end up in serious danger. But we might quite reasonably ask if Shakespeare's plays, written at the same time the map was drawn, is still pertinent to life today, and we might well want to answer yes. The map survives as an object of *historical* interest: it tells us something about times past; but it's no longer applicable to

the world we live in. Shakespeare's plays, by contrast, are not just historical documents. They have endured, "lived on", in a way the map has not.

There are endless examples of this point and I won't try your patience by mentioning others. Stated in general terms, the proposition is simply that those objects that we today call art – whether they be Shakespeare's plays, the music of his near contemporary, Thomas Tallis, or even the 20,000-year-old images of horses and bison in the Lascaux caves – those objects possess a special power to defy or "transcend" time which other products of human invention do not. This observation tells us nothing about the *nature* of that power – about *how* art endures – a crucial matter I'll consider in a moment. But it reminds us, nevertheless, if we need to be reminded, that one of the special characteristics of art is its power to defy the passage of time. The observation is, as I say, a cliché; but clichés sometimes lull us into assuming that the points they make are fully understood; and that, I want to argue, is very far from being the case here.

So, let's examine this cliché a little more closely. So far, I've been using terms like "enduring", "living on", and "transcending" or "defying" time in a loose and general way without asking what exactly they mean in relation to art. So, I'd like to rectify that omission and reflect on the issue I mentioned a moment ago of *how* art endures – how, exactly, it transcends time.

Now, as I said at the outset, the general topic I'm considering has been sorely neglected in modern thinking about art, so you won't be surprised to learn that the more specific question I'm now addressing of *how* art endures has been seriously neglected as well. Which is, as it happens, a quite remarkable state of affairs because this very same question has a lengthy and illustrious history in European civilization, stretching back to the Renaissance. Let me explain briefly.

One of the major features of the Renaissance, as we know, was its rediscovery of, and admiration for, the sculpture of antiquity which, until that time, had been routinely dismissed as the worthless product of an obsolete pagan culture. But this new-found admiration for these works, presented the Renaissance with a dilemma: How was it possible that these ancient objects, ignored or despised for a thousand years, now seemed radiant with life? How had they, unlike the defunct beliefs that had given them birth, transcended such a vast expanse of time? What power made this possible?

The answer the Renaissance gave – an answer that has exerted a profound influence on Western thought – was that, unlike other cultural phenomena, such as customs and beliefs, great art possesses a divine power and, like the gods, is *immune* from the passage of time, *impervious* to change. One of art’s defining characteristics, it was decided, was that it exists *outside time*. In the terminology that became standard, it is timeless, eternal, immortal.

I remember studying Shakespeare’s sonnets at school and encountering lines such as “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments/Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme...”, and I remember being told that the claim that great poetry is immortal should really be seen as a flight of Elizabethan poetic fancy, a form of “poet’s conceit” – clever, certainly, but not something one should take too seriously. As I realised later, however, that advice was quite wrong because there was much more at stake. The idea expressed in lines such as those I’ve just quoted was a vital element in Renaissance thinking and helps explain why art in all its forms (and in fact the *very word* “art”) was held in such high esteem from then on, and why the same idea – that art is immortal – is found again and again in other writers of the times such as Petrarch, Ronsard, Drayton and Spenser. The immortality of art was no mere poet’s conceit. It was a serious belief that the intellectual world of the time embraced with enthusiasm. It was part of the *ideology* of the Renaissance, if one can put it that way – as much a part of the Renaissance worldview as, say, the belief in the importance of history is for us today.

The belief that art is immortal was, moreover, destined for a long and illustrious life. So influential was it, that Romantic poets were still celebrating it centuries later, as the French writer Théophile Gautier did, for instance, in his celebrated poem *Art* which proclaims that “All things pass. Sturdy art/Alone is eternal”.<sup>1</sup> More importantly for present purposes, this same belief was central to the thinking of the eighteenth-century philosophers who laid the foundations of the modern academic disciplines we know as aesthetics and the philosophy of art. David Hume, for example, writes in his well-known essay *Of the Standard of Taste* that the function of a suitably prepared sense of taste is to discern that “catholic and universal beauty” found in all true works of art, adding that the forms of beauty thus detected will “while the world endures ... maintain their authority over the mind of man”, a proposition Hume supports by his familiar dictum that “The same Homer who pleased at

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<sup>1</sup> Théophile Gautier: *L’Art. Émaux et Camées*. My translation.

Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and London”.<sup>2</sup> This belief was never disputed – indeed, it was simply taken for granted – and it was endorsed by a chorus of other Enlightenment figures including the influential art historian, Johann Winckelmann, the poet Alexander Pope, the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses on Art*, and Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*, a work which, of course, remains very influential among philosophers of art today. In short, the Enlightenment gave its stamp of approval to the well-established view: the Renaissance had declared that art was immune from time – timeless, eternal, immortal – and the Enlightenment was in full agreement. And given that Enlightenment philosophers such as Hume and Kant continue to undergird much *modern* thinking about art, the idea that art is timeless continues to exert a strong influence today. So, for example, one philosopher of art writing in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* is happy to claim that “There is a tendency among scholars and non-scholars alike to think that art works, or more specifically, great art works, are in some sense immortal”, adding rather timidly that he himself sees “some truth in this view”.<sup>3</sup>

But now I need to leave the question of immortality for a moment because there’s another important episode I need to relate in this highly condensed history of the relationship between art and time.

As I’ve said, the belief that art is immortal or timeless was fully endorsed by Enlightenment thinkers and never challenged. But a little later, in the nineteenth century, a very large spanner was thrown into the works. Thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, and Hippolyte Taine began to argue that art, like all human activities, is deeply affected by *historical* change and inevitably reflects the social and cultural contexts in which it is created. The claim was argued in different ways by different thinkers but underlying all the formulations was one clear implication: the traditional proposition that art inhabits an immutable, “eternal” realm *outside* time and change is no longer acceptable. How, after all, could something be, at one and the same time, outside time but also deeply affected by it?

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<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste, and other essays*, ed. Lenz, J.W. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Perricone, “Art and the Metamorphosis of Art into History,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, no. 4 (1991): p. 310.

This new account of the relationship between art and time – the Hegelian-Marxist view, one might call it for short – has been extremely influential, as we know – certainly as influential as the proposition that art is timeless, which it directly contradicts. It's an account that underpins large areas of continental thinking about art, and it is, without doubt, a major reason why there is so often a yawning gulf between Anglo-American accounts of art and literature, and views espoused by continental writers. On the one hand, art is placed in a timeless realm in which history is at best an *ad hoc* factor; on the other hand, in writers as various as Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Adorno and Bourdieu, not to mention Hegel and Marx themselves, the effects of historical change are never far from the centre of things, usually in ways that are viewed as systematic.

However, we quickly encounter a problem. The flip side of this emphasis on history is that when we come to the capacity of art to *defy* time, continental thought suddenly draws a blank, and interestingly enough, it was Marx himself who first drew attention to this. In a passage in the *Grundrisse* which, incidentally, receives far less attention than it merits, Marx writes:

...the difficulty is not so much in grasping the idea that Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It lies rather in understanding why they should still constitute for us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment.<sup>4</sup>

The point here is fundamental. Marx's formulation of it certainly reflects a degree of deference to Antiquity that we today may not share, but his basic argument is nonetheless perfectly valid. If art belongs to history, where do we look for an explanation of its capacity to defy or transcend history? Or in his somewhat antiquated terminology, how do we explain the fact that, centuries later, a certain work of art "still constitutes for us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and prevails as the standard and model beyond attainment."

So, where does all this leave us? It leaves us, surely, with a major dilemma; in fact, it seems to leave us in an impasse. The notion that art is timeless explains how art transcends time but is challenged quite fundamentally by the claim that it belongs within historical time; but the notion that art belongs within historical time provides no explanation of the obvious fact that it transcends time.

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<sup>4</sup> David McLellan, ed. *Marx's 'Grundrisse'* (London: Macmillan Ltd, 1980), 45. Sonder n

This, I regret to say, is essentially, where we are today – and where we have been for several decades now. Today, with one major exception which I'll mention in a moment, the theory of art – again including literature and music– *lacks any viable explanation of the capacity of art to transcend time*. There was once what *seemed* to be a viable explanation – the traditional belief, inherited from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, that art is timeless – but this runs directly counter to the widely held view that art is closely tied to historical time. Most modern writers in aesthetics tend to deal with this problem simply by avoiding it – which is doubtless one of the reasons why so little is now written about the relationship between art and time; and those few who are courageous enough to offer an opinion tend to do so rather tentatively and timidly like the philosopher in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* I quoted earlier. But if we reject these rather ignominious escape routes, we seem to be left in an embarrassing impasse, quite unable to give a convincing answer to the question: how does art transcend time? In a moment I will speculate a little about why I think this embarrassing situation has arisen, but first let me brighten the rather gloomy picture I've painted and say a little about the one major exception I mentioned a moment ago, which *does*, in my view, offer a viable explanation of the capacity of art to transcend time. For, as it happens, there is one art theorist, the French writer André Malraux, who has repeatedly highlighted the importance of this issue and has advanced a solution that overcomes the problems I've just described. Ideally, I'd like to give you a full account of Malraux's position but that's not possible in the time available so I'll limit myself to a couple of key points in the hope that I can at least give you the flavour of his thinking.

First, a preliminary remark of a general nature. The world of art we know today is very different from the worlds of art familiar to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and even to the late nineteenth century when Marx was writing; and we only need think about our art museums today to convince ourselves of this. As we know, the early years of the twentieth century witnessed the gradual entry into art museums of objects from a range of ancient and non-Western cultures – such as early Mesopotamian civilizations, pre-colonial Africa, ancient China, and the islands of the Pacific. This process took place gradually over several decades, so it tended to slide under the radar, but it was in fact an unprecedented event with quite revolutionary implications. Europe, we need to remember, had encountered many of these ancient and non-Western cultures *well before* the twentieth century but had always regarded their sculptures and paintings as the botched products of unskilled workmanship, or simply as heathen idols or fetishes – *never* as art; and, of course, no one believed for a moment that

these objects should be placed in an art museum.<sup>5</sup> In addition, modern archaeological and anthropological studies tell us that objects such as these were never regarded as art in their original cultural settings. Their function – their *raison d'être* – was religious or ritualistic: they were ancestor figures manifesting the spirits of the dead, or sacred images of the gods, and so on; and the cultures concerned had no concept equivalent in meaning to the European word art.

Now, it's fascinating to ask why, from about 1900 onwards, objects such as these came to be regarded as art and were introduced into Western art museums, but that question, to which Malraux provides an excellent answer, would divert me from my main argument, so I'll won't pursue it now. The key point I want to make here is that in cases such as these, there has been a *transformation* in meaning and importance – from sacred object initially, then, subsequently, to clumsily executed heathen idol, and now to treasured work of art. In other words, the history of these objects hammers another large nail in the coffin of the notion of timelessness, because far from being *immune* from change, as Hume's dictum would have it, objects of the kind I'm discussing have "lived on" via a process *in which time and change have played a vital role*, both in terms of whether, at certain points in time, they were considered important, and also in terms of the *kind* of importance placed on them. Clearly, objects such as these – many of which are now regarded as major works of art – have *endured* in the sense we're discussing: we are not simply speaking about objects like the Elizabethan map I mentioned earlier, which are now of historical interest only. But the *manner* of their enduring seems far less indicative of timelessness than, as André Malraux argues, a capacity for metamorphosis – a process in which time and change play an integral part, and which can often involve the *revival* of an object long regarded as without interest, as well as a transformation in its significance.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. the comment by H. Gene Blocker: "Although primitive artifacts were known to Europeans from the time of the great explorations of the New World and the Far East from the 15th century onwards, and although a few pieces were admired by artists such as Dürer and Cellini, there was virtually no aesthetic interest in such artifacts as works of art until the early years of the 20th century. Gold objects from Pre-Colombian Mexico and Central and South America were melted down and the valuable raw material shipped back to Spain; a few pieces were taken back to the home countries as evidence of the culturally savage and barbaric state of the natives; and what aesthetic response there was was largely one of horror at the ugliness and brutality supposedly symptomatic of these savage, heathen works of the devil." H. Gene Blocker, *The Aesthetics of Primitive Art* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 272.



The point is not easy to grasp on first encounter, so I'll give another example. The superb mediaeval statues of biblical figures on the Royal Portal of Chartres Cathedral south-west of Paris – which many of you may know – are now widely considered to be among the treasures of world art, on a par with, for example, the best of Egyptian sculpture, or the works of Michelangelo, or Picasso. But these statues were not “art” for the men and women for whom they were created in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the very word “art” did not exist at the time, except with a different meaning. For their medieval contemporaries, these were sacred images – manifestations of the Christian Revelation – and to place them on equal footing with religious images from other cultures, treating them all as something called “art” would, for their original beholders, have been incomprehensible and doubtless a sacrilege. Moreover, from the Renaissance onwards, as we know, *all* medieval sculpture and painting, including these, was regarded as inept and misconceived, and consigned to a limbo of indifference. The emergence of medieval sculpture *as art*<sup>6</sup> only began in earnest around 1900, that is, after some three centuries of neglect and disparagement. This is not to condemn the intervening centuries, or suggest they lacked an “appreciation of art”. But again, it does indicate that art does not endure timelessly – unchangingly – but through a capacity to “live again”, to resuscitate, despite periods of oblivion, its rebirths being inseparable from a metamorphosis – a transformation in significance.

And medieval art is of course only one example among many. Art museums around the world today – including our own National Gallery here in Canberra – contain numerous examples of works from earlier cultures, such as Buddhist India, pre-colonial Africa and Pre-Columbian America, which have shed their original significances and, after periods of oblivion, returned to life in modern Western civilization as “works of art” surviving not because they retain their original significance, as Hume’s dictum would require, but because they possess a power of metamorphosis – a power to live again, albeit with a significance of a different kind. In the title of my talk, I speak of the “mystery” of art’s temporal transcendence. But once we consider the evidence, as I have just done, we begin to see that there is really no mystery at all. As Malraux correctly says: “For us today, metamorphosis isn’t something arcane; it stares us in the face. To talk about “immortal art” today, faced with the history of art as we know it, is simply hot air. Every work has a power of resurrection or it

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<sup>6</sup> As distinct from a component of medieval history or a picturesque element in historical novels, developments that occurred somewhat earlier.

doesn't. If it doesn't, end of story; but if it survives it's by a process of resurrection not by immortality."

The same process of transformation and resurrection can of course be seen at work in the fields of literature and music, although it tends to be less obvious there because the time scales are usually much shorter. But let's consider one or two examples, nevertheless.

Hume, we recall, claimed that the *same* Homer who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, was admired in eighteenth-century Paris and London – and is still, presumably, the same Homer we admire today. Now, the early history of the *Iliad* – to take that as our example – is somewhat obscure but we do know certain things. We know that it was originally sung not recited, and certainly not read silently from the pages of a book. We also know that the gods and heroes of the story were gods and heroes in whom the Greeks of the time firmly believed – they were not merely "Greek myths" as the eighteenth century saw them, and as we see them today. In addition, there is little doubt that the modern practice of regarding the *Iliad* as "literature", to be placed on the same footing as the epics of other peoples, such as the *Gilgamesh* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, would have been unthinkable to Greek communities circa 750 BC – as unthinkable as it would have been for ancient Egyptians to place one of their gods or pharaohs in an art museum on the same footing as gods from another culture. And finally, we know that, except in corrupted and scarcely recognisable forms, Homer was lost to the Western world during the Middle Ages and had nothing like the significance it has today. So, to what extent can we speak of "the *same* Homer" – a "timeless" *Iliad* persisting across the millennia unaffected by historical change? And we face the same question, even if in less obvious ways, in more recent works. Is "our" Shakespeare the same as the Shakespeare of audiences in the early 1600s? He certainly seems to differ from the Shakespeare of audiences in the following two centuries who often preferred his tragedies substantially rewritten, if possible with happy endings.<sup>7</sup> So again, a process of metamorphosis is at work. Shakespeare has endured; his plays are not mere historical objects like an old map that belongs wholly to the past; but they have not lived on as timeless objects. They have lived on through a process of transformation – of metamorphosis.

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<sup>7</sup> As one critic writes: "For nearly two centuries people who saw Shakespeare in the theatre probably saw something very different from what he wrote." Jack Lynch, *Becoming Shakespeare* (New York: Walker and Company, 2007), p. 134.

These few remarks are a long way from doing justice to Malraux's concept of metamorphosis and there is much more to be said. But my purpose today has been less to offer solutions than to highlight the fact that *there is a problem* – a major problem – and that art theory and literary theory are failing to address it.

This state of affairs would not be so odd if the problem were not so starkly obvious. Let us reflect for a moment on our current situation. Our modern world of art is manifestly much more than a world of *modern* art. The exhibitions that greet the hundreds of thousands of visitors to today's art museums encompass vast stretches of the human past: they can include a Mesopotamian figure from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, or a medieval biblical figure, as readily as a painting by Renoir or a sculpture by Picasso. So the capacity of certain works to transcend time is now very hard to ignore – especially for the art museum visitor who has done a little reading and who knows that the medieval statue and the Mesopotamian god, for example, were created in societies in which the notion of art was unheard of and where the institution of an art museum would have been inconceivable. So, what, our hypothetical visitor might ask, are such objects doing in this thing we call an art museum? How has something that was not created as art in a society that had no such concept become a work of art for us today? What mysterious process has been at work? We were once told that art is timeless – immune from change – but that proposition now seems absurd. Yet if these works have not survived because they are timeless, how have they survived?

Leaving aside Malraux, art theorists today simply have no answer to this question, and amazingly, do not even seem to be *looking for* one. Which is why our present situation strikes me as so peculiar. Every time we cross the threshold of a major art museum, we are confronted with unambiguous evidence of the capacity of art to transcend time – something that surely borders on the miraculous – and, apart from Malraux, we seem to have no theory to explain it and we are not even looking for one. Put bluntly, the death of immortality has left us with a mystery, and art theorists are not, it seems, interested in solving it.

Why is this so? Why this lack of attention to a topic that so obviously cries out for attention? I don't have definitive answers to that question, but I'll hazard a guess.

Largely, I suspect it's because the theory of art – again using that phrase in a broad sense – is too often reluctant to ask serious, *fundamental* questions about the traditions from which it springs. An obvious case is the tendency of philosophers and theorists of art who are

heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought to view art as timeless, and to limit the questions they ask accordingly. Seen in this light, art is a static object isolated from historical change, and the questions asked are typically those to which the passing of time is a peripheral concern at best. At no point are philosophers and theorists of this persuasion questioning their basic orientation – this “static object” approach. No one is asking: should we not be taking account of the effects of time on art and, above all, the extraordinary capacity of art to defy time? Enlightenment philosophers themselves saw no need to ask that question because they already had what they, and everyone else, believed was the answer – art was timeless; so debate would have been superfluous and absurd. But modern theorists of art are not in that fortunate position. The notion that art is timeless is patently unsustainable now; to us it simply looks “preposterous” to borrow Malraux’s description of it. Yet, modern disciples of Enlightenment thinking about art, perhaps out of habit, perhaps overawed by names such as Hume and Kant, doggedly persist with the idea (even if, as we’ve noted, their support for it now has become rather muted and timid.)

The continental tradition is no better off, and it, too, shows a marked reluctance to question its fundamental orientations. Given the pervasive presence of history in this school of thought, one might have expected that the question of how art *transcends* history would arise sooner or later – especially since, as we have seen, *Marx himself* drew attention to the problem very pointedly. But in fact, there has been precious little sign of this. Apart from Malraux, who stands apart from the beaten tracks of continental thought, no continental art theorist I’m aware of has squarely confronted the question of the capacity of art to transcend time, let alone offered a plausible explanation of how it might operate.

Let me quickly conclude. In a speech as early as the mid-1930’s, Malraux commented that “a work of art is an object, but it is also an encounter with time”. This observation, which has largely fallen on deaf ears, was a reminder that as well as its object-like characteristics – its style, its structure, its technique, and so on – art also has a temporal nature, not just, as I said earlier, in the internal sense but in its *external relationship with the passage of time* – with history. *Everything* of course is affected by the passing of time, but art has a unique relationship. Art *defies* time – it can live on, centuries and even millennia after the moment of its creation. As Malraux puts it pithily “Art it is the presence in life of what should belong to death” – meaning that when so much else, such as beliefs, customs, technologies, gods and philosophies – have been consigned to what he terms the “the charnel house of dead values”,

art alone retains a power to speak to us as if it were a living thing. The crucial question is: what is the nature of this power? How does it operate? For centuries, the West believed – and believed passionately – that art endured because it lived *outside* time. Like the gods, it was immortal, and as we’ve noted, there are large areas of art theory today where that belief *still* persists in a muted, subterranean way. But even the briefest glance at the history of art as we know it today, tells us that, however plausible that belief may have seemed in the past, it is plausible no longer. Hence the dilemma: how do *we today* explain the temporal transcendence of art? Malraux gives us his solution – the notion of metamorphosis – which, I believe, is very convincing. But whether one accepts his solution or not, the most important thing for the present is *the question itself*. A key priority for art theory today, in my view, is to recognise, as a starting-point, that *there is* a dilemma, that as well as being an object, art is an encounter with time, and that unless one wishes to turn one’s back on one of art’s most remarkable characteristics, this dilemma cannot be ignored.