

James Coleman's *Box (ahhareturnabout)*

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Box (ahhareturnabout) from 1977 is the work of Coleman's that most strongly cites and involves the body.¹ It takes up the rhythm of the human pulse and hence is based not on a formal but on a structural similarity with the body. Already from a distance one hears a hollow beat, which fights its way through the exhibition venue like blood pumped through the body by a beating heart. It is an even, thunderous beat, which, like the heartbeat that consists of systole and diastole, is composed of two components, a beat and its reverberation. In the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, where the artwork was shown in 2016 as part of Tino Sehgal's exhibition *Carte Blanche*, this beat roared through the solid walls of an entire building section and became ever louder the closer one got to the room containing the installation. On entering the room it reached the limit of the tolerable; the rhythm took possession of the visitor's body almost violently and made it the resonating chamber for an artwork that one had not even grasped properly. Gilles Deleuze writes of the rhythm that its "capacity reaches much more deeply than the gaze [or] the hearing"² The beat of *Box* had a similar impact on the depths of the body, going right through it uncontrollably and with a vengeance.

The interior of the installation was so dark that to begin with one had to feel one's way through it. At regular intervals it brightened for fractions of seconds and scenes of a boxing match flashed on a projection surface. The visual staccato of stark black and white contrasts was no less violent to the eye than the acoustic beat was to the rest of the body. The flare-like flashing sequences of images were so brief that it was impossible to follow the course of the match. Rather than proceeding towards a climax one experienced the sequence of images as a continuous repetitive loop. The poor quality of the material, the interference and the disjointed movements of the figures pointed to the fact that this was old film material.

¹ On the meaning of 'ahhareturnabout' with its connotations of bout, and return: according to anecdote, during a few weeks in spring the hares in Ireland dart and box around hysterically. In the literal sense of hooks, hooks to the chin are exchanged between agile boxers.

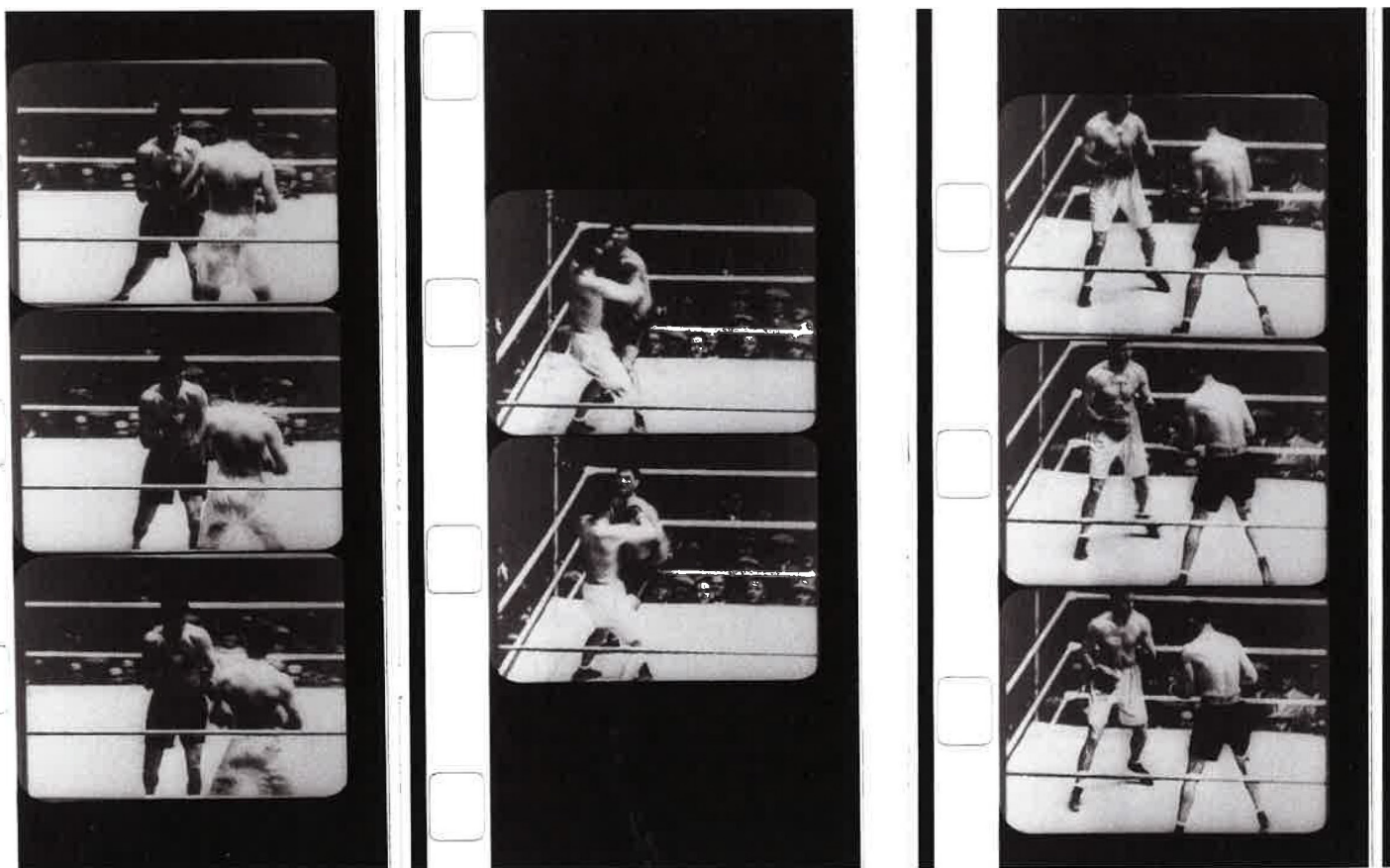
² Deleuze, Gilles: Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation, (London and New York, 2003), p. 42.

As well as an enormous loudspeaker from which the heartbeat-like sounds thundered, there was another loudspeaker in the room from which a male voice emitted, uttering individual words, phrases and fragmented sentences: “Do it - again, again - stop, s-t-o-p, return... aha/aha, ah... go on, go on... again, again.” The words revolved around the situation of the fight (“break it, break it, stop, s-t-o-p i-t”), around its stakes (“regressive, to win, or to die”) and its fear, doubt and pain (“ooh... aah... the liver... the liver”). Single words were repeated several times as if someone were reciting them to himself, and this was interspersed with loud breathing or gasping. The voice was delivered in an almost overly dramatic manner, like the voice of a body that has reached the limits of that which it can physically tolerate. The expressive intensity of its onomatopoeic qualities recalls Antonin Artaud, who speaks of the visual “and three-dimensional realisation of the word”, of “using it in a concrete and spatial sense” and dealing with it “as with a concrete object, which sets things in motion [...]”.³ It seemed as if the voice were articulating the inner thoughts of one of the two boxers during the fight, as if one were – so to speak – witness to his emotional state, churned up by pain and physical strain. Depending on one’s own knowledge of Irish culture and history (assuming you know, for instance that Murphy is a make of Irish beer or a figure in one of Beckett’s novels), it was possible to read an Irish context into the text fragments. “Murphy’s the best”, the voice said, or, “... the wood... the sticks... not capitals...”. There were fragmentary and veiled allusions, which in a vague, regionally and culturally specific coded manner suggested a historical and local anchoring of the work. In *Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard talks of the “resonance of an image, which arouses echoes of the past”.⁴ Similarly, Coleman had the representation enter into a connection with the historical that never became concretely tangible.

Box is Coleman’s only work that is based on documentary material. For this work the artist used footage of a fight between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey, to which he added regular black film frames. The fight in question is legendary in the history of boxing: the return match of the world heavyweight championship, held on September 22, 1927 in

³ Artaud, Antonin: *The Theater and its Double*, (New York, 1958), p. 69.

⁴ Bachelard, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space*, (New York, 1964), p. xii.



Box (ahhareturnabout), 1977
16 mm black and white film. Continuous cycle. Selected
frame sequence.

Chicago.⁵ Jack Dempsey was one of the most famous sports figures of his time; his popularity was comparable with that of Muhammad Ali in the 1970s. Dempsey was the first boxer to bring in millions in revenue and was responsible for earning boxing undreamt-of popularity. Like no other sportsman he embodied the 'American Dream'; he had worked his way up from his origins as the son of a penniless family of miners and shoe cleaners who had immigrated from Ireland. Known as a 'superhuman wildman', he was famous for the lightning speed of his punches, and succeeded in holding onto the heavyweight title for almost seven years. The fact that in 1926 the 'caveman' who was considered unbeatable lost the world championship in front of a gigantic crowd of 120,000 spectators was an event in itself. But the fact that he had to hand over his title to an outsider, to Gene Tunney, was a scandal. After all, Tunney, who was likewise of Irish origin, was the complete antithesis of a 'natural-born fighter'; he read poetry and Shakespeare, and was too aesthetically refined and good-looking for a boxer. In short, in those days he did not meet the image of a champion. The return fight a year later was awaited with great excitement, and was to go down in history as one of the most spectacular matches ever seen.

Initially, Dempsey appeared to be the stronger one; he knocked Tunney to the floor, and the stopwatch began to tick. But the referee did not start his count, because Dempsey, rather than going over to his corner, stood leaning over Tunney's body – which gave Tunney a few extra seconds to recover, as the rules are such that counting cannot begin until the attacker who has floored the other has returned to his corner. The incredible event repeated itself. Tunney won the fight, but was never really accepted as the victor because it was widely considered that he had only won thanks to this extra time. Ultimately, Dempsey was a winner robbed of his victory, in a fight that went down in history as the 'long count'.

There is hardly any other sporting figure around which as many myths have grown as that of the boxer. In innumerable stories the boxer embodies the rebellious individual, who employs his seemingly superhuman powers to fight for status, for a place within a certain social order. He frequently symbolises the individual revolt against repressive

⁵ On the two fighters and the boxing match see <http://www.genetunney.com>; <http://www.tunney.org>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Dempsey

social conventions. In connection with Coleman's work, a symbolic reading of the fight between Dempsey and Tunney almost suggests itself which, taken in conjunction with the recited sentence fragments, seems to allude to the conflicts of Irish history. Coleman's work, however, aims neither to exploit the myth of the boxer, nor to deconstruct it. Although there might be a suggestion of such readings in *Box* they fade instantaneously behind the aesthetic impact of its visual and acoustic stimuli.

According to the historical version, everything was at stake for Tunney in this fight. It was the return match, so he had to win a second time to defend his title. At the moment of the fight he has his status, and yet simultaneously does not. In order to defend his identity as champion he has to repeat, one might say reiterate, what he already is. This motif of repetition in a moment of existential instability characterises Coleman's work. In a boxing match it is not only the two contestants but also spectators who share a common space and a common time span, in which the division between the boxing ring and the spectator seems suspended in the spectator's identification with the boxer. Similarly, in his work Coleman sublates the division between the representation of a historical event and its present experience, between an artistic representation and its (physical) perception. In 1987, American author Joyce Carol Oates wrote an essay entitled *On Boxing* in which she describes the boxing match as a kind of artistic dialogue between two bodies, which is comparable for her with dance or music.⁶ For Oates boxing is "incredibly intimate". That sounds strange and yet is revealing because it reflects an experience which to a certain extent corresponds to the one that can be discerned in Coleman's installation. With the beat, the pulse in one's own body and the drama of the spoken word in one's ear, the feeling might arise of being both *in the body* and *in the consciousness* of this boxer. At this moment the division between inside and outside becomes porous – as in the figure of the boxer, who is simultaneously isolated and at the centre of a nervous, energetically charged field directed by a public. Coleman orchestrates a (visitor)body, who forms a bond with the visual and acoustic apparatus. This becomes most evident in the afterimages, which the eye of the observer produces on the screen in reaction to the stark contrasts between light and dark, the abrupt alternation of bright images and black film segments. These afterimages add an uncontrollable, physical aspect to the artwork, which

⁶ Oates, Joyce Carol: *On Boxing*, (New York, 1987), p. 15.

fills the space between flashing image projections with a personal feedback on what was seen.

This fusing of body and cinematographic apparatus, of perception and portrayal, calls to mind the revolutionary gesture with which Walter Benjamin – in the figure of ‘corporeal space’ (Leibraum) and ‘visual space’ (Bildraum) – develops a vision of a mechanism that absorbs the subject; of an image that, as Sigrid Weigel writes, “moves in on the subject and materialises itself in physical innervations”.⁷ In this work, Coleman connects the apparatus to the spectator’s body; he links the mechanism to a visual-acoustic experience. This produces not only the highly complex aesthetic structure of the artwork, in which theme, structure and effect are interwoven and correspond to each other, but ultimately also results in an intertwining of various time levels. The representation of a historical event and the presence of its (physical) perception become, as it were, permeable to one another. For a moment it seems as if the historical were not depicted, represented, but rather rendered present and simultaneously suspended in the aesthetic experience.

The temporal structure of Box: rhythm, fragmentation and repetition

Rhythm (that is the structuring of time) is the central structural, topical and aesthetic principle of *Box*. On a structural level Coleman draws from experimental film, more precisely from the so-called “flicker films” of the 1960s. “Flicker” refers to an interruption, a stopping of time, which serves to disrupt the illusion of cinematic movement. Flicker films generate a strong perceptual experience, because they primarily aim to stimulate and irritate the eye. In its most rigorous form, the flicker film is reduced to the essential components of the medium, to a light-dark flickering, to the alternation between sounds and silence and their chronological rhythm.

Rhythm – as a time measure that is subject to certain rules – is significant for *Box* not only in structural terms but also as a subject matter. One could describe the boxing match as a temporal drama, or, better still, as a struggle with and against time. This is

⁷ Weigel, Sigrid: Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise, (Frankfurt/Main, 1997), pp. 114-120.

particularly true for the fight on which Coleman's work is based. After all, it went down in history as the 'long count', the winner supposedly owing his victory solely to the prolonging of a measure of time: the timed count for the opponent lying on the floor. Joyce Carol Oates writes about the significance of time in boxing:

"When a boxer is 'knocked out' it does not mean, as it's commonly thought, that he has been knocked unconscious, or even incapacitated; it means rather more poetically that he has been knocked out of Time. (The referee's dramatic count of ten constitutes a metaphysical parenthesis of a kind through which the fallen boxer must penetrate if he hopes to continue in Time.) There are in a sense two dimensions of Time abruptly operant: while the standing boxer is *in time* the fallen boxer is *out of time*. Counted out, he is counted 'dead' [...]"⁸

Time, or rather the right measure of time, is of central importance to the development of boxing as a sport. In 1867, the Queensberry Rules were introduced in England to make boxing more civilised and to gentrify it. These rules lent the boxing match a certain acceptance, and a new character as a visual spectacle, but above all they served to regulate it in terms of time. The introduction of three-minute rounds with one-minute breaks, and the limit of ten seconds within which a boxer had to get to his feet again following a knockout (it had previously been 30 seconds), gave boxing a new tempo, a new rhythm and a new time frame. The Queensberry Rules deprived the boxers of control over the pace of their actions. This regulation must be seen as symptomatic of a historical transition, namely the development of controlled and standardised time that structured private and public experience within the industrialising societies of the 19th century. (World Standard Time was introduced in 1884). In the same way that factory whistles structured the segments of work time and its interruption, the new rules prescribed a temporal rhythm for the bouts and breaks of the boxing match. Essentially, boxing was adapted to the pulse of the modern age, to the tangible fact of passing time. As Joyce Carol Oates writes, time became the "invisible opponent"⁹ that could beat the boxer or knock him out. It is the inevitability of this opponent which accounts for the frequently melancholic aura surrounding the figure of the boxer. Both hero and victim (of greedy

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⁹ *ibid.*

managers and the public alike) he only fights in order to fight again and, ultimately, to move ever closer to the inevitable defeat and its attendant emotional, mental and social decline. “In the ring, boxers inhabit a curious sort of ‘slow’ time [...], while outside the ring they inhabit an alarmingly accelerated time.”¹⁰ The boxer’s time always seems to run out.

Remarkably, in his orchestration of this boxing match Coleman replaces this linear conception of time with the principles of fragmentation and repetition. There is no beginning and no end to the fight shown, just as there is no winner and no loser. The rhythmic principle of the work is endless. The experience of time that Coleman makes concrete is not narrative and geared towards an end like Lessing’s conception of time and motion, but operates with repetitions, feedbacks and loops between apparatus and body as manifested in the afterimages produced by the spectator’s eye.

In 1993 Rosalind Krauss published a book on the visual and temporal, or rather on the temporality of the visual, which is revealing in this context. In it Krauss gives a kind of anti-history of seeing in modernity. In contrast with the timeless and incorporeal conception of seeing typical of modernity, the concept she describes combines seeing with time, the body and the unconscious.¹¹ The title of her book, *The Optical Unconscious*, takes up the wording introduced by Walter Benjamin in 1931 in his *A Small History of Photography* to describe the specific analytical ability that characterises the medium of photography: the ability of the camera to capture time and motion in a manner that the naked eye cannot.¹² Benjamin combines in this figure a psychoanalytical yet materialistic perspective oriented towards the technical and material properties of the new artistic medium. Influenced by this approach Krauss turns to various artworks of the historical avant-gardes, including the Dada collages by Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp’s *Precision Optics*, in order to introduce an innovative conception of temporality in visual art.¹³ For example, Ernst’s Dada collages feature new optical instruments such as the magic drum (Daedalum), which produces an ambivalent, broken visibility. From the

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 16f.

¹¹ Krauss, Rosalind: *The Optical Unconscious*, (Cambridge/Mass.-London, 1993).

¹² Benjamin, Walter: “Little History of Photography” (1931), in: Michael W. Jennings a.o. (eds.): *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, Volume 2, part 2 (1931-1934), (Cambridge and London, 2005), p. 507-530.

¹³ Krauss, Rosalind: “The Im/Pulse to see”, in: Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, (Seattle, 1988), p. 51-78.

outside the rotating drum of the Daedalum presents a seemingly uniform picture, while from the inside you see an event broken down into its individual components. But, as Krauss explains, what unites this experience of outside and inside, the perception of an illusion and its mechanics, is a beat or an oscillation that strikes through the field of the magic drum. For more than 15 years Marcel Duchamp concerned himself with his *Precision Optics*: revolving discs given coloured patterns and fitted to specially adapted record players. While rotating the discs appear to lose their shape and to project out, in virtually organic rhythm, toward the front and the back. In both these examples there is a temporal rhythm, a beat, which both creates the shape and cancels it once again and which breaks up the formal coherence and constancy of the artwork from the inside. Krauss sees a connection between this temporal pulse and the influence of the new phenomenon of mass culture: “It is,” she writes, “through the lowest and most vulgar cultural forms that the visual is daily invaded by the pulsatile: the blinking lights of neon signs; the ‘flip books’ through which the visual inert is propelled into the suggestive obscene; the strobe effects of pinball machines and video games – and all of this undergirded by the insistent beat of rock music surging through car stereos or leaking voicelessly through portable headsets.”¹⁴

In outlining her concept of a ‘pulsating’ visuality Krauss quite rightly also refers to Coleman’s work *Box*.¹⁵ Thanks to its rhythmically composed structure, the work is never entirely manifest and present. It is the (visual) flash of *Box* that elevates time to a structuring principle and simultaneously makes it appear to stand still for an instant. It breaks up the coherence of the form and simultaneously – via the automatically generated afterimage of the spectator – connects it to the productive force of the (visitor’s) body. However, there is an aspect that Krauss does not take into consideration. In *Box* the rhythm introduces into the artwork not only time but also a concrete historical reference. In what Krauss describes as “a kind of pulsating On/Off, On/Off, On/Off”, a past event, a historical moment ‘flashes up’. As such, the temporal rhythm of this work constitutes a kind of time axis, which intermediates present time and historical event – and does so quite literally in the sense of a mediator, through whom the historical can be experienced both *in* the present and *as* present. In other words, there are two levels of time that play a

¹⁴ Bois, Yve-Alain/Krauss, Rosalind: Formless. A user’s guide, (New York, 1997), p. 164.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 161-165.

role for *Box*: that of *experienced time* and that of *historical time*, which the rhythmic principle of the artwork unites and which are mediated in the spectator's bodily and aesthetic experience. In this work, the historical appears in a unique and specific way. History is not represented but rather evoked in and as a present experience. *Box* produces an 'image' of the historical, which nevertheless takes place in a space beyond all pictorial representation. This certainly is not easy to grasp, but one way to approach the particular interconnection of time, history and experience on which this artwork is based might be through Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the philosophy of history, which were of general significance for the art discourse critical of Modernism in the 1970s, but also seem to bear an particularly intimate relation to this artwork.

"... like a muscle that contracts historical time." (Walter Benjamin)

For Benjamin, too, the figure of the afterimage plays a role, namely in the context of his theory of experience and history. Drawing on the thoughts of Henri Bergson, the afterimage is figured as a philosophical term describing the turn towards something that is already a thing of the past and can only enter the philosophical consciousness as a complementary entity, i.e. as an image contrasting with the present.¹⁶ The afterimage projects a memory; with Bergson one could say: it *is* memory. In that moment we see a memory as present. For Bergson this idea was of central importance, because he thought – and this is the concept that Benjamin refers to – that every form of experience, of experienced time, can only exist because a present perception combines with a memory, i.e. present and past interlock.

As part of a lengthier passage that reflects on history and historiography, Benjamin writes in his *Arcades* project: "Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time."¹⁷ For Benjamin it is in this idea of a condensation of time, both within and outside the human body, that the mutual bracing of past and present becomes concrete. It embodies his vision of a history that continues to be operative in the present, and a present that refers to history. This construction is based on Benjamin's idea of a

¹⁶ See Benjamin, Walter: "On some Motifs in Baudelaire," in: *Illuminations*, (London, 1999), pp. 152-196.

¹⁷ Benjamin, Walter: *The Arcades Project*, (Harvard, 2002), p. 479.

materialist historiography. For the materialist conceives of time not as governed by the law of progress, but instead, starting from *jetztzeit*, construes and constructs a discontinuous condensation and materialisation of history. Essentially, Benjamin turns here against a historicist concept of history and takes up the critique that not only had Friedrich Nietzsche presented 40 years earlier, but which also recurred in the philosophical debates of the 1920s. In historicism, history is construed as a constant chain of cause and effect that proceeds more or less without interruption and – in keeping with Newtonian mechanics – is based on a conception of time as both continuous and linear. Here, humans and things are subject to objective processes, and this is what Benjamin criticises. He wrote in his *On the Concept of History*, written in 1940, shortly before his death:

“The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.”¹⁸

Benjamin’s concept of history presumes the destruction of the historical continuum.¹⁹ He counters the mechanical, Newtonian notion of time with a “dialectical relationship in leaps and bounds” between the past and the present. The prevailing principle is that of interruption, fragmentation and repetition. Only when physical time is abrogated does historical time appear – in the sudden flickering of an image. For Benjamin, this is the mystery of time being rendered ‘present’; of a present that opens itself to history and thereby suspends all linearity. The *flash* or *shock* become images for this sublation of linear time. They have to be understood as formal principles that translate particularly modern forms of experience into the realm of the aesthetic. In modern metropolitan life, according to Benjamin, a continuum of traditional experiences is replaced by isolated experiences, as a result of which, as he had described in his essay written a year earlier, *On some motifs in Baudelaire*, “the structure of experience has changed.”²⁰ The loss of continuity, which Benjamin suggests is characteristic of the experience of modern life,

¹⁸ Benjamin: “Ten Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in: *Illuminations*, p. 252.

¹⁹ On Benjamin’s critique of the historicist view of history and time, see Moses, Stéphane: “Eingedenken und Jetztzeit. Geschichtliches Bewußtsein im Spätwerk Walter Benjamins”, in: Haverkamp, Anselm & Lachmann, Renate (eds.): *Memoria – vergessen und erinnern*, (Munich, 1993), pp. 385-405, specifically p. 386.

²⁰ Benjamin, “Baudelaire”, in: *Illuminations*, p. 153.

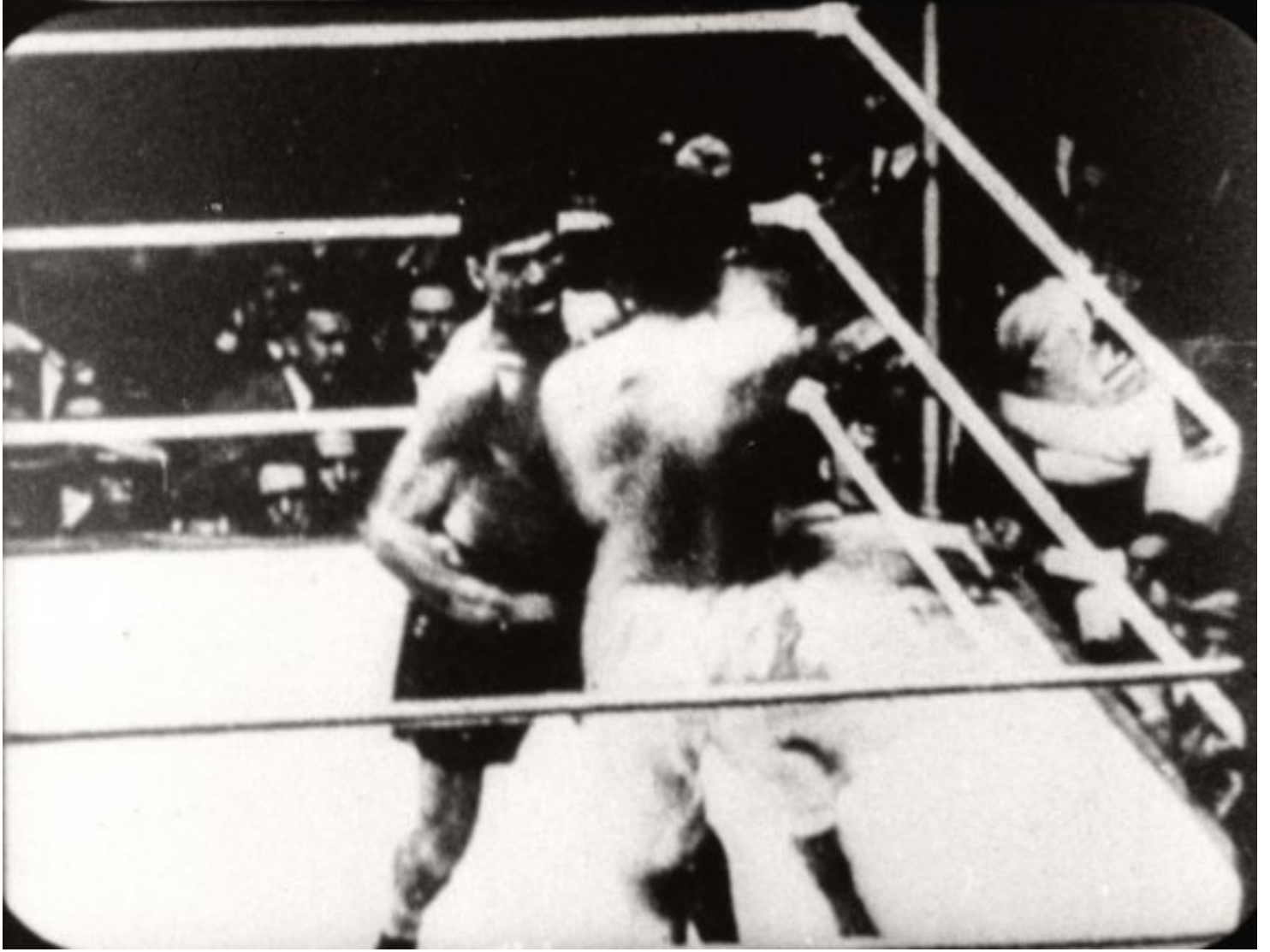
becomes the starting point for his deliberations on the philosophy of history. Benjamin's main focus is on finding a productive side to this rupture and grasping it not as a deficit but as a constitutive element in a new conception of memory and experience. The *shock* or *experience of shock* are concepts that Benjamin developed in his study of Charles Baudelaire's oeuvre and that he considers dialectically as designating both a loss and a gain in experience. On the one hand, the *shock* stands for the "energies threatening the living organism" that, if the consciousness' defences fail or do not materialise for some reason, penetrate the psychological apparatus. In this sense, it constitutes the loss of continuity and the dissolution of coherence. By contrast to these threatening shock energies, however, the *shock* as an aesthetic figure can also trigger insights. As regards its effect, threatening and yet triggering experience, the image of the *shock* possesses a dialectic characteristic of Benjamin's thinking. It is threatening, a massive stimulus that has to be repelled; yet, as a stimulus that breaches defences and penetrates into the deep levels of the psychological apparatus, it also generates experience. A process is brought to a standstill and fixed for a moment, enabling it to appear in a new, independent way. Baudelaire, by the way, captured the breakdown of shock defence not in a boxing match, but in a duel, whereby the duel can be read as a symbol for the process of artistic creation *per se*.²¹ In this struggle against the symbolic orders, the writer fights himself, "stabs away with his pencil, his pen, his brush; [...] thus he is combative, even when alone, and parries his own blows."²²

The specific quality of Benjamin's concept of history is to have linked it to a lived dimension of experience – just as, conversely, he extracts the concept of experience from its rationalist reduction in the philosophy of his day, and gives it a historical dimension. In the essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin writes on the philosophical debate over the concept of experience and makes special mention of Henri Bergson's research:

"Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of the 'true' experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardised, denatured life of the civilised masses. It is customary to classify these efforts under the heading of a philosophy of life. Their point of departure, understandably enough, was not

²¹ Ibid., p. 159ff.

²² Ibid., p. 160.



Box (ahhareturnabout), 1977
16 mm black and white film. Continuous cycle.

man's life in society. [...] Towering above this literature is Bergson's early monumental work, *Matière et mémoire*. More than the others, it preserves links with empirical research. It is oriented toward biology. The title suggests that it regards the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience. Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as in private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data. It is, however, not at all Bergson's intention to attach any specific historical label to memory."²³

Bergson has to be credited for linking perception as 'experienced time' to the productive activity of memory and, moreover, for having shown how perception and memory interpenetrate.²⁴ Just as present perception is fuelled by images from memory, the past can also be actualised and given a more differentiated form in relation to the present. Benjamin quotes from Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, where the latter writes: "Memory thus creates anew the present perception; or rather it doubles this perception by reflecting upon it either its own image or some other memory-image of the same kind."²⁵ In our perception we are, as Bergson puts it "constantly creating or reconstructing. Our distinct perception is really comparable to a closed circle in which the perception-image, going towards the mind, and the memory-image, launched into space, career the one behind the other..."²⁶ While for Bergson memory as time brought into the present is determined subjectively and later biologically, Benjamin is interested in images of collective memory. For, or so Benjamin writes, "where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with the material of the collective past."²⁷ In this sense, 'experience' can with Benjamin be understood comprehensively as the potential of a past that is rendered present. This, as Stéphane Moses has claimed, was Benjamin's "revolutionary achievement, for he transferred the experience of lived time

²³ Ibid., pp. 153-4.

²⁴ For Bergson, the biological/material brain is not to be considered a repository, a 'vessel with memories', but rather as an organ for the (repeated) perception of past perceptions. Past, remembered images and present perceived images are retained here as directly co-existent in a comprehensive notion of overall past or duration.

²⁵ Bergson, Henri: [Matter and Memory](#),

http://web.archive.org/web/20060501050756/spartan.ac.brocku.ca/~lward/Bergson/Bergson_1911b/Bergson_1911_02.html p.123

²⁶ Ibid. 126.

²⁷ Benjamin, "Baudelaire", in: [Illuminations](#), p. 161.

from the personal into the historical sphere”²⁸ and, we could add, thus proposes a new type of intermediation between the collective and the individual, the past and its present.

One of the linguistic concepts that Benjamin uses in order to find an aesthetic form for this linkage of history and present experience is that of the ‘dialectical image’.²⁹ For Benjamin, the dialectical image is an image that is “imbued with time [...] not in natural magnitude – let alone psychologically – but in its smallest gestalt.”³⁰ This ‘smallest gestalt’ is the temporal difference to be discerned in a quotation or testimony to the past. In it, we find a concrete instance of that volatile linkage of *jetztzeit* and past that Benjamin tries to pinpoint. In the *Arcades Project* he writes:

“It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relationship of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.”³¹

Benjamin’s “image” of history initially refers to the rejection of a one-dimensional understanding of history that sees history as a linear-successive process. In the dialectical image, time is sublated as a linear notion when in the “now of its recognisability”³² the past and the present meet directly and without distance. The past is rendered present; it flashes up as an image, creating correspondences between *jetztzeit* and the past. The dialectical image is a constellation in which the past and present here and there mutually illuminate one another. It is, to quote Georges Didi-Huberman, an image “that is able to remember without imitating, that comprises a new, indeed unheard-of and truly invented form of memory.”³³

²⁸ Moses, “Eingedenken und Jetztzeit,” p. 388.

²⁹ Benjamin uses the concept of the dialectical in a particular, non-Hegelian manner by deploying it for a radical discontinuity.

³⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 473.

³³ Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Was wir sehen blickt uns an. Zur Metapsychologie des Bildes*, (Munich, 1999), p. 98.

Although Benjamin's dialectical image is clearly not meant to be a material image, but rather suggests a form of representation that is beyond all image-based visualisation or representation, we can use it as a figure of thought in order to shed light on the specific aesthetic structure of Coleman's installation. *Box* is a representation that cannot be pinned down, that remains in motion. The representation of a historical event and its direct, physical experience, or in general terms, topic, compositional structure, materiality and effect, incessantly and dialectically refer to one another. The subject of the boxing match corresponds to a mode of representation that is structurally very similar to the theme: to the rhythm of the punches, to the discontinuous 'shock-like' rhythm of the visual 'pulse' and a hammer-like beat. Coleman's work produces an effect (the rendering present of a fragmentary and discontinuous image of history) that is already innate qua structuring principle in this work (as fragmentary and dissociating as it is). The artwork is based on a form of fragmentary representation, which concurs with a conception of history that is likewise defined by fragmentation and dissociation. Because the dividing lines between artwork and body appear to have been dissolved, it would seem that we ourselves penetrate the body of the boxer, just as, conversely, the visual/acoustic apparatus penetrates our own bodies. If we thus understand this artwork as – and in fact this is what I would like to propose – a kind of contemporary 'history painting', we also have to capture it as a radical renegotiation of this very idea. Not only because it questions a certain positivist tradition of historical representation and the beliefs in continuity, progress and permanence that come with it. Not only because – as we have tried to specify with Benjamin – it replaces a linear understanding of time with an idea of history that is seized and actualised from and in the present. But because it creates an 'image' without being a representation. Like Benjamin's idea of the dialectical image, *Box* evokes an image of history that is beyond pictorial depiction. And this is because its actual location is neither the visual nor the acoustic medium but a (visitor's) body that is physically seized by the impact of the beat and quite literally integrated into the work. It is only in the visitor's physical and reflective experience that the individual parts of *Box* (the visual pulse, the beat and the voice) blend to form the work. Only there does this installation materialise itself in its entirety as an artwork. And only there does this work's conception of a condensed time become concrete – in a moment that is both *jetztzeit* and history at once, like, to borrow Benjamin's words again, "a muscle that contracts historical time."

Historicity and experience (Box and Minimal Art)

With the title *Box* Coleman alludes to the distinctive iconographic feature of the Minimal Art movement of the 1960s. To a certain extent he also takes up what Rosalind Krauss calls the primacy of its “lived physical perspective”, namely the spatial orientation of the Minimalist sculptures to the viewer’s body.³⁴ However, as I wish to point out in the following, Coleman has a fundamentally different notion of the constitution of that body and its experiences.

The Minimal Art of the 1960s fundamentally changed the relationship between the object and its viewer, between art and its venue, by shifting the meaning of the object completely to the experience that is made with and through the object. The Minimalist object throws the viewer back on him- or herself, on his/her own being in space and in a situation. The level of representation and that of narration both step behind the object’s impact on that situation. It is difficult to pinpoint this experience, as it is not only the constitutive role of the viewer that comes into focus here, but also the spatial and atmospheric conditions.

For Rosalind Krauss, this phenomenological orientation towards experience, something she elaborates primarily with reference to Robert Morris’s sculptures,³⁵ not only brings with it a new approach to the physicality of the body, but even a kind of compensatory, if not indeed utopian, gesture. A viewer-subject, alienated in everyday life from his own experiences, was to be re-aligned to them through the experience of art. “This”, Krauss says, “is because the Minimalist subject is in this very displacement returned to its body, regrounded in a kind of richer, denser subsoil of experience than the paper-thin layer of an autonomous visuality that had been the goal of optical painting.”³⁶

³⁴ See Krauss, Rosalind: “The Cultural Logic of the late Capitalist Museum”, in: *October*, 54, Fall 1990, p. 9.

³⁵ As regards Morris’ “lived physical perspective”, this was probably most explicit in his retrospective planned for 1971 in the Tate Gallery in London, which was closed only a few days after the opening at the insistence of the museum’s directors. Viewers moved through the exhibition as if through a kind of guided tour during which they interacted physically with the individual sculptures. See Bird, Jon: “Minding the Body: Robert Morris’s 1971 Tate Gallery Retrospective,” in: Newman, Michael (ed.): *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, (London, 1999), pp. 88-106.

³⁶ Krauss, “The Cultural Logic”, p. 9.

Interestingly enough, over the course of time Krauss changed the approach to Minimal Art that she had developed in the 1970s. In an essay published in 1990 she revised her original opinion. She recognised that the promise of Minimal Art not only remained unredeemed, but to a certain extent had even turned into its opposite. Looking back, she no longer considered Minimal Art the seedbed for a richer form of art experience, but on the contrary as having paved the way for its depletion. And because the Minimal Art object puts the focus not only on the viewer ('s body) but also on the surrounding situation, i.e. the exhibition context, this desubstantiation of art experience also impacts on the museum. For what is in the final instance bereft of content is, Krauss suggests, the historical dimension of art experience, or, more precisely, a dimension that references the historical. Krauss becomes aware of this at that very moment when, at the end of the 1980s in America, a profound change in the social function of the museum occurred. A new tax law enabled items to be sold from collections, which affected the status of the museum collection, as did new spatial concepts, new museum architectures and new presentation forms. And remarkably, Thomas Krens, the (then) Director of the New York Guggenheim Museum and a key protagonist of this change, referred deliberately to the Minimal Art of the 1960s in explaining these developments. "It is Minimalism", or so Krauss quotes Krens saying, "that has reshaped the way we [...] look at art: the demands we now put on it; our need to experience it along with its interaction with the space in which it exists; our need to have a cumulative, serial, crescendo towards the intensity of this experience; our need to have more and at a larger scale."³⁷ The Minimalist works made Krens understand that the customary museum was not able to provide the kind of experience that these objects suggested. The sculptures thus prompted him to opt for a new type of museum, preparing and anticipating it as it were with new spatial concepts that took their cue from warehouse and factory halls and presentation formats that were geared to comprehensive, monographic shows. "Compared to the scale of the Minimalist objects, the earlier paintings and sculptures look impossibly tiny and inconsequential, like postcards, and the galleries take on a fussy, crowded, culturally irrelevant look, like so many curio shops," Krauss concedes.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

When in 1989 Krauss visited an exhibition of the Panza Collection in Paris and encountered works by artists such as Robert Morris, Dan Flavin and Carl Andre, she realised in what way Minimal Art had indeed heralded a “radical revision” of the museum. The powerful presence of these objects, she writes, enables the room per se to be experienced in its neutral dimension; the museum itself appears before the viewers as an objectified and abstract entity, “from which the collection has withdrawn”.³⁹ This experience, so Krauss says, is very intense and effective but in the final instance it remains essentially empty, as it is merely aesthetically and not historically determined. The experience evoked by the Minimal Art work is oriented towards an individual who constitutes him- or herself in the act of perception and hence only temporarily, from one moment to the next. In its radical contingency, its dependence on the conditions of the space and its respective situation, this aesthetic experience creates a specific kind of subjective experience, but not one that can (or wants to) anchor the individual in the coordinates of history. This is an experience of self that neither is nor can be historically underpinned. With Minimal Art, Krauss argues, the museum becomes a space for a new spatial/aesthetic dimension of experience, but is no longer a space where history, or rather, the individual’s rootedness in history, can be experienced.

“The encyclopaedic museum is intent on telling a story, by arranging before its visitor a particular version of the history of art. The synchronic museum – if we can call it that – would forgo history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial [...]”⁴⁰

Precisely because these objects engender an experience that remains contingent and does not refer to an essentially stable subject, but only to one that is temporarily constituted from one moment to the next, this experience cannot spawn a cultural context such as is traditionally represented by the museum. Instead of ‘reconciling’ the individual with his/her own experiences, Minimal Art, according to Krauss, therefore ultimately served to underscore what she calls the “utterly fragmented, postmodern subject of contemporary

³⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

mass culture”⁴¹ that no longer finds the terrain for experience in history. In other words, it nurtured an individual that is subjugated to spectacle.

Indeed, albeit not in factual terms (as with Happenings or Fluxus events), but with regards to its underlying conception, Minimal Art does not fit into the customary model of history used in museums. Although today Minimal artworks can be grasped as belonging to a specific time and can be represented as such, in terms of their conception they nevertheless initially exclude a specific type of reference to history. Minimal Art maintains a position beyond the historical determinacy of art and with this stance it also refuses, to a certain degree, to fit into a museum as the *mise-en-scène* of a sequence of historically determined artefacts. In a certain way, Minimal Art robs this historical narrative of content, because it shifts the meaning of artworks onto the essentially general and indeterminate level of their effect. If Tony Smith refers to megaliths, to Egyptian temples and to Herodotus, with his sculptures then these references in his works are not legible as the historical ‘source’ or ‘influence’. Instead, they resort to something indeterminately archaic and not to an actual historical epoch.⁴² Just as Minimal artworks are abstract, and – with their geometric shapes and qualities as pure objects – seem to maintain a position outside the representational conventions outlined in art history, so, too, the experience made when viewing the artworks likewise remains abstract. This becomes clear, for example, in Tony Smith’s often-cited anecdote in which he tells of his nighttime experience on the not-yet-completed New Jersey Turnpike. Smith drove down the empty street at night and reported how for him this experience was quasi-aesthetic in nature and yet also shattered all the customary aesthetic orders. “There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it”, is how he summarised the experience, and it was clear for him that such a reformulation of the aesthetic would also provoke a fundamental change in the conception of art.⁴³ The aim was the transgression of aesthetic experience that, in a certain sense, was to be universal. But it was precisely this universality which to a certain extent rendered the experience of these works indeterminate and general.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴² On the importance of the archaic and prehistorical in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, see Lippard, Lucy R.: Overlay. Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory, (New York, 1983).

⁴³ Quoted from Fried, Michael: “Art and Objecthood” (1967), in: Fried, Michael: Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews, (Chicago and London 1998), p. 158.

When Rosalind Krauss's essay was published in a German-language translation in 1992⁴⁴, it was prefaced by a film still from the absurd Hollywood romance-cum-comedy *LA Story*, in which the protagonist Harris Telemacher (alias Steve Martin) devotes himself to an unusual favourite pastime: speeding on roller skates through museums, something he does twice in the course of the film. First he races through the historical collections at the LA County Museum, and later through the Modern Art Department at the LA Museum of Contemporary Art. Euphoric, he enjoys his aesthetic buzz through art history, where the individual artworks pass him by almost as if in a film. The antithesis to the museum as the location of a collective, historical/cultural memory, as described in Jürgen Habermas' model of the bourgeois institution intended to enable visitors to experience the formation of the bourgeois individual as a historical process and as a process rooted in history, can hardly be better described: here the museum becomes the location of the potential for hedonistic experience in which a subject is not constituted, but instead loses itself, in viewing the cultural heritage.

With this discussion on the relation between history and experience in mind, we can outline the specific significance of Coleman's work *Box* more precisely. How does this artwork solve the dilemma between art that is focused on experience, and the structural framework of the visual arts that instead necessitates duration and continuity? To what extent does it reflect the relationship between artistic production and a culture of the spectacle? In Minimal Art, it is the human per se that experiences (itself) as a body standing in a rather indeterminate manner outside power, sexuality and history. Coleman, by contrast, gives experience a historical-materialist contour. With Minimal Art, the intention was to oppose the art criticism of the day and produce a form of art that refused any subjective/linguistic appropriation. Coleman's work *Box* introduces a dimension of experience into art that does not exclude meaning, language, critique and history, but gives these categories a concrete form as the necessary basis for all experience. The subject is presented in a socio- and geopolitical context and at the same time enacted on the uncontrolled level of affects, and physical (and in this regard) unconscious responses. The body is thereby conceived simultaneously as material, as a semiotic bearer of meaning, and as a psycho-physiological being. In this way, Coleman

⁴⁴ Krauss, Rosalind: "Die kulturelle Logik des spätkapitalistischen Museums", in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 1992, 2, 6, p. 131-145.

roots the individual and individual experience back in a concrete historical context. But he does not do so out of the wish to recreate a coherent tradition. Coleman's work operates instead with a (Benjamin-like) dialectic between the fragmentary presentation of a historical figure and a present experience. It is as if the intention were to constitute an individual and an idea of history in the process of disappearing, as they eventuate within a depiction and also on the very boundary of that which can be represented or experienced. And again: precisely this process is allegorised in the theme of the boxing match. Joyce Carol Oates has written that "every boxing match is a story – a unique and highly condensed drama without words". She suggests that "boxers are there to establish an absolute experience, a public accounting of the outermost limits of their beings."⁴⁵

Benjamin Buchloh terms Coleman's works an "archaeology of the spectacle".⁴⁶ "In this respect it is by no means unimportant", he writes, "that Coleman makes the classical arena of the culture of spectacle the object of his work: the public fight between two (athletic) rivals has repeatedly fascinated artists in the 20th century – not only as a primordial form of spectacle but also as a fundamental metaphor for general social relations."⁴⁷ The concept of the archaeological introduced by Buchloh can be given greater precision through the thought of Michel Foucault. Coleman's approach is 'archaeological' in the sense precisely that it does not involve a linear concept of history, but, in a radically discontinuous way, forges links between subjective experience and specific historical events, and relates these in turn to general cultural phenomena in the history of modernity.⁴⁸

When Guy Debord, who published his magnum opus *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, was asked 21 years later when he would date the beginning of the culture of the spectacle, he answered that the spectacle was hardly 40 years old when his book first came out.⁴⁹ In other words, its historical beginning can be dated to the late 1920s, even to

⁴⁵ Oates, *On Boxing*, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Buchloh; Benjamin H., "Memory Lessons and History Tableaux: James Coleman's Archaeology of the Spectacle" (1995), in: George Baker (ed.), *James Coleman*, (Cambridge/Mass. and London, 2003), p. 91-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ In Foucault's thought the concept of 'archaeology' refers to a kind of relationship to the historical and has both an aesthetic and an epistemocritical dimension. See Foucault, Michel: *Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. A. Sheridan Smith, (New York, 1972).

⁴⁹ Debord, Guy: *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, (Paris, 1988), p. 13, quoted from Crary, Jonathan: "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory," in: Rosalind Krauss et al. (eds.): *October. The Second Decade, 1986-1996*, (Cambridge/Mass. & London, 1997), p. 418.

around 1927, the year of the boxing match between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey. It was the first boxing match to be broadcast live on radio, and was transmitted by 79 radio stations in Africa, Latin America, Europe and Australia. The match was one of the first global mass sports events, a linking-up of the body with the abstractions of international transmission.⁵⁰ Likewise Joyce Carol Oates describes its character as an event for the masses. “Photographs of these events”, she writes, “show jammed arenas with boxing rings like postage-sized altars at their centres, the boxers themselves no more than tiny, heraldic figures. To attend a Dempsey match was not to have seen a Dempsey match, but perhaps that was not the issue.”⁵¹

1927 was also the year in which Benjamin commenced work on his *Arcades Project*, a history of the city of Paris in the 19th century, in which he concentrated on the origins of mass culture. The *Arcades Project*, which he kept working on until 1940, was to remain fragmentary. Benjamin developed a special combinatorial process comparable to that of a database, through which he cross-referenced quotes, sources and commentaries in an open system. In the *Arcades*, Benjamin writes on the “standardised and denaturalised” perception of the masses, and on the new forms of organising attention generated by new technologies that shaped the individual and the body in a new way. He introduces film and photography as new media that enable us to grasp a modern experience of accelerated time and fragmented space, which can no longer be construed in Kantian terms. Benjamin compares the dissecting ability of the camera to new social forms of production. “In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film.”⁵² As a medium, however, film not only offers new technical means of capturing modern forms of experience and perception; it also bears a particular relation to time, history and presence. Film seems to be fundamentally about an insistent presence, both of the objects that are represented (the iconic appearance of a person is achieved through filming that person) and of a perceptual presence that seems resistant to the passage of time (an impression that *Box* highlights in its endless and repetitive structure). If film is both like history in that it represents an absence (the

⁵⁰ Apparently, over a dozen people died of heart failure while following the match either live or on the radio.

⁵¹ Oates, *On Boxing*, p. 97.

⁵² Benjamin: “Baudelaire”, p. 171.

absence of what it re-presents) and unlike history in that it seems to erase the pastness of the past, it may very well embody the “now of recognisability” that Benjamin describes as emerging from his dialectical image. In this way, film’s temporality may well transform our own historical thinking about time and the past.

In an almost Benjaminian way, Coleman both employs the specific dissecting and shock-like abilities of the filmic medium – in order to produce an aesthetic experience that is even more dissociating – and simultaneously reflects on them, in order to shed an allegorical gaze on the interaction of technology, media and experience. His piece aims to powerfully evoke a direct experience; it is spectacular, but at the same time highlights the historical dimension of that spectacular character. The spectacular is generated in the present and yet given an historical edge; it is depicted at the level of representation, staged at the level of medium, and evoked as an effect. In Coleman’s work, as in Benjamin’s thought, experience is thereby determined in a twofold manner. First, it means construing the aesthetic itself in terms of a temporal structure, forming a discontinuous, (as it were) anachronistic constellation of the present and the past. Second, the attention is focused on transformations that emerge, through the course of history, in the structure of experience itself. The experience of the artwork is refracted in the reflection on the historical, cultural and medial origins of that experience. In this way Coleman lends aesthetic experience a specific historical-materialist thrust. The powerful experience is pegged to the moment of perception and yet it has a historical grounding, or rather, bears the historical within it. It brings the historical into the present by linking it with testimonies of a specific historical event (the boxing match between Tunney and Dempsey) charged with all the tensions and contradictions that form an actual historical situation.

Questions of how the historical could be reintegrated into art, how a consciousness of historicity was to be developed without fetishising history, and how such a conception of history might be defined, were posed by many artists in the 1970s. Attempting to reintegrate a historical dimension into art in the late 1970s, Jeff Wall embraced historical modes of painterly depiction and, for example, went back to the concept of the tableau

from Renaissance art.⁵³ From the mid-1970s, too, Dan Graham began to incorporate more traditional forms of representation and narration into his art. For artists like Coleman, Graham or Wall, growing up with Minimal Art and Conceptual Art – styles in which Modernism came to an end – heightened their awareness of the reductionist features of Modernism; of everything that remained excluded from it, above all the ahistorical and universalistic tendencies which Modernism had left behind. “[T]he culture of the 60s was about immediacy and presentness,” writes Dan Graham. “The present was detached from historical time. It was thought that one was to experiment in the here and now: thus life was a perceptual experience.”⁵⁴ Likewise the event-oriented art forms practiced in the 1960s and 1970s, Fluxus, Happening and Performance Art, conceived of art as something that lived in the present and had no interest in making this present repeatable or into a recurring experience.⁵⁵ The art of the 1960s and 1970s pronounced experience to be art. But it did not solve the problem of how event-like artworks can exist in the long term within a cultural framework that is oriented towards permanence, conservation and archiving. For the most part it did not even touch upon this issue. “Event art is actually ahistorical art – it cannot be handed down,” writes philosopher Dieter Mersch in this context and talks of a “fundamental difference between event and historicity, between singularity and permanence,” which runs through culture at the close of the 20th century.⁵⁶ Performance Art, Fluxus and Happening transformed the artwork itself into an event that (qua event) negates the museum and the model of history for which the latter stands. Today, these art forms are part of art history and (though marginally) have become part of the museum, albeit not as what is fundamental to them: not as events, but rather transformed into something else, into documents or relics. Minimal Art managed to give the event duration by subtly fusing the materiality of the object with the event-like character of aesthetic experience. However, it did not manage,

⁵³ On Wall’s relation to the history of painting, see. de Duve, Thierry: “The Mainstream and the Crooked Path,” in: de Duve, Thierry, Pelenc, Arielle & Groys: Jeff Wall, (London, 1996), pp. 26-55.

⁵⁴ Dan Graham in conversation with Ludger Gerdes, in: Alberro, Alexander: Two-Way Mirror Power. Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art, (Cambridge/Mass.-London, 1999), p. 62.

⁵⁵ This does not necessarily mean that in principle Happenings or Fluxus events were not repeated, but in structural terms these art forms are characterised, in contrast with the object-like permanence of fine arts and the mode of theatre based on repetition, by their uniqueness and singularity. See Kaprow, Allan: “Happenings in the New York Scene”, *ibid.*; “The Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings”, *ibid.*; “Pinpointing Happening”, all in: Kaprow, Allan: Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, edited by Jeff Kelley, (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1993).

⁵⁶ See. Mersch, Dieter: “Ereignis und Aura,” in: Kunstforum International, 2000, 152, pp. 94-103, p. 102f.

or even wish, to reintegrate a historical dimension, or a reference to the historical, into the art experience.

Ultimately, and in the broader context of late 20th and early 21st-century art history, the significance of James Coleman's work *Box* may therefore lie in the way it reintegrates a dimension both of history and of the event into the artwork – and thereby opens a terrain beyond both a universalist Modernism and the spectacular but ultimately short-term strategies of the avant-gardes. Coleman's works are simultaneously event-like and of duration; they deal with both the continuity of history and its suspension. They create a scenario that – both in its structural composition and its subject matter – provokes a reflection on the fleetingness of the moment and the possibilities of its endurance. There are many contemporary artworks that do the one *or* the other; that either bring in a reference to the historical or dissolve the permanence of the work towards the event. Yet *Box* is singular in the way it unites these two seemingly antagonistic categories. Opposing their apparent “fundamental difference”, it demonstrates what it means for art, for the museum and for a concept of history to understand these two categories (of history and the event) as existing in a mutually constituting relationship. On the one hand *Box* is a filmic installation that remains quite conventional in its material presence in the museum. On the other, because its aesthetic experience is so inseparably linked to its physical experience, there is also an irreducibly event-like character to this work. Coleman enforces this event-like character by generally prohibiting any documentation or technical recording. His artworks are constituted only in the here and now of their perception, and in a recollecting memory that speaks or writes about them. There is nothing that places itself above the situation in which the work is perceived; no privileged body such as a video recording that could be employed to verify the objective content of what was perceived. In writing about *Box* I can only rely on my own (subjective and incomplete) memory. To a certain extent, of course, every artwork relies on this reconstructing memory, but Coleman makes this process – the unstable survival and remaining of the work in memory – into something that is reflected in the conception of the artwork itself. It renders writing and talking about the work (and thus the remembering and actualisation of its experience) a key and constitutive element for its enduring and being passed on. Coleman operates with a work structure, which, precisely because it cannot be completely grasped and reconstructed, always remains fragmentary; indeed must remain

so, because it relies on the discontinuous appropriation and recollection of the viewer. In other words, not only within the artwork are there correspondences between subject matter, structure and effect. The fragmentary presentation of history in the work also corresponds to a similarly discontinuous mode in which the work itself becomes part of historiography. Therefore *Box* not only invents a new form of re-presenting history but, in offering an encounter with the historical that is not bound to the object character of an artwork, also realises a different mode of producing history. It draws on the fragmentary and discontinuous mode of oral history, of updating and passing on history from body to body, which to a certain extent is diametrically opposed to the culture of the document, continuity and permanence cultivated by the museum.⁵⁷ In this respect one could say that *Box* is part of a culture that, simultaneously, it fundamentally questions. And yet it is this ambiguity that not only forms the basis of its dialectical character, but also marks its relevance, as a contemporary artwork that evokes history.