

# Terminality



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## **Abstract**

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The liminal term terminality serves as a conversation piece for issues to do with our escalating climate crisis; it is a term of engagement against our lingering collective dis-engagement from what many of us perceive as irrelevant to our profession. Terminality builds alliances between its nominal identity as a term, the temporal duration of a term and the arrival-and-departure characteristics of a terminal. Inevitably, however, the term also connotes end-state or terminal condition. The use-value of such a term is to summon a set of interlinked issues and propositions to stimulate action from and within the most anthropocentric discipline of all: art history. The essay discusses how art history could respond to the above on the level of the material entities of the artworks themselves (usually abbreviated as “art”) and the narrations and interconnections we produce to account for their identities, interdependencies and temporal trajectories (usually abbreviated as “history”).



Not long ago, we art historians worried about not being critical enough and devised “critical terms for art history.”<sup>1</sup> Today, we need to come to terms with the critical condition of our discipline as a key part of what was formerly known as the Humanities. The term of terms with which we have to engage might be the Anthropocene, but it is coterminously criticized and in danger of being over-used in academic and artistic discourse, despite the fact that it has not yet been certified as the adequate term for the next geological epoch that would terminate the Holocene.<sup>2</sup>

But, to paraphrase atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, we might not be in the Anthropocene anymore: “We’re in the... the... Homocene!”<sup>3</sup> As important as it is to differentiate between *zoë* and *bios*, between bare life and lived human existence, we need to distinguish *anthropos* (referring to species) from *homo* (as in the Human *as opposed to* the Natural sciences). This is not homo as in gay, but as in discoverer, conqueror and human-centered world ruler. Thus, the Homocene would include colonialism, capitalism and similar systems of extraction and exploitation, now and in the past.

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1 Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

2 Jan Zalasiewicz, ed., *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit: A Guide to the Scientific Evidence and Current Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

3 The founding anecdote is to be found, e.g., in Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (London & New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.

The liminal term *terminality* serves as a reminder and conversation piece for issues like the one sketched out above; it is a term of engagement against our lingering collective dis-engagement from what many of us perceive as irrelevant to our profession, outside of our expertise, something for natural scientists, politicians and green activists to worry about.

### **Terminality as a Term**

Terminality builds alliances between its nominal identity as a term, the temporal duration of a term and the arrival-and-departure characteristics of a terminal. Inevitably, however, the term also connotes end-state or terminal condition. The use-value of such a term is to summon a set of interlinked issues and propositions to stimulate action from and within perhaps the most anthropocentric discipline of all: art history. Some would say that we have, indeed, reached a terminal state, where we are about to overstep more of our finite “planetary boundaries” or thresholds<sup>4</sup>, as in the Greek term *terminus*, border. The etymological root system of *term* is rich and evocative; and perhaps we should dare to take a few artistic liberties and link up with discursive associates like *tempo(ral)* and *thermal* (regarding heat), both conjoined, for example, in the term *tempest*. A *tempest*, which was initially only a regular temporal phenomenon, has become “the progressing storm”<sup>5</sup> in which we stand alongside co-habiting critters like termites and species threatened with ex-termination.

Terminality as a noun unites the root word *term* (another noun and a verb with multiple meanings) with an adjective: *terminal*. An alternative would be *terminalology*, the suffix of which derives from the Greek *logos*, profoundly connoting ways of speaking, writing and thinking. The territories of terminality, however, lack a control tower constitutive of a formalized school of thought; it

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4 Johan Rockström et al, “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (Dec 2009).

5 Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

is not a doctrine, creed or *Lehre*. It is “simply” an attunement to what looks like an impending catastrophe rather than solvable “crisis,” a draft for a mindset and agenda towards action, re-, pro- and purposeful non-action.

As a term, terminality occupies historical territory as “a plane of immanence,” where the previous hook up with the subsequent, where past mingles with present and future in undetermined ways.<sup>6</sup> This does not imply a philosophy of history, however, some strife toward a happy ending, a bumpy road toward redemption, resolution or transcendence.

### **Terminal Art History?**

Art history taking terminality on board would take all the above-mentioned modes and extensions into account. Two dimensions stand out as particularly important: the material entities of the artworks themselves (usually abbreviated as “art”) and the narrations and interconnections we produce to account for their identities, interdependencies and temporal trajectories (usually abbreviated as “history”). The history of art history has its geo-history or *geostory*, which is not about global trade ways or inter-subjective encounters, but is literally pre-historical, even deeply prehuman, as it connects with *geo-* (earth).<sup>7</sup> This dimension would refer to the material and chemical ingredients of the work which not only predate and continue to support it technically and mediumistically, but which, typically, also survive the artist. This level connects the work to the earth, soil, strata and physical conditions of possibility, i.e., not to a history proper but certainly a geostory of sorts. It thus impacts the work’s nonhuman temporality as distinct from its human-centered history. To see the artist as one who recombines preexisting elements, determined to “detach and deterritorialise a segment of the

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6 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

7 Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2014) 1–18.

real in such a way as to make it play the role of a partial enunciator,”<sup>8</sup> is to deal a blow to the Romantic notion of the autopoietic genius whose continued presence in the contemporary art world and the contemporary art market is evident.

The other dimension has to do with the tales we tell about the work’s “history,” i.e., from its origin (including preconditions) to its presentation to the world (its destination) and following adventures. When modern art history, a genre established with Romanticism and under the influence of Hegel, is surveyed in its totality, however, it appears that artworks were born to die, brought forth to be immediately historized as signs, memories and testimonies of their age, period or immediate context, whereafter our interest is directed to the next notable piece in line. This is still the basic script for many educational institutes and big art history museums, unless they mess around a bit with the linear norm.

A terminal art history may seem Hegelian too, a riff on the end-of-art trope, but it is nothing of the sort. Terminality is strictly anti-post; it captures a sentiment of having reached the end of a development, followed by uncertainty where to go next, where to transfer, but without indulging in melancholy or postmodern endgames. Terminality is also incompatible with the delegitimization of metanarratives<sup>9</sup>, since we are enmeshed in the greatest possible metanarrative — the homicidal Homocene, which is not “the age of humans” but adamantly *not* about humans. Terminality is also anti-post since all post-designations are historicist — linear, developmental and teleological.

Modern/Postmodern/Contemporary was the periodizing rocket toward ever new horizons of development, advancement, growth and expansion, all fueled with incredible amounts of fossil energy that unleash excessive amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. We can blame this on capitalism, and, accordingly,

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8 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Sidney: Power Publications, 2006), 131.

9 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993).

relabel the Anthropocene not the Homocene but the Capitalocene<sup>10</sup>, as long as we realize that the hero of political radicalism (left and right), the figure of the avant-gardist, is an instance of this culture and mindset too.

No Marlboro Light-smoking postmodernist ever thought of panicking; and here, their unrecognized offspring, the presentists and contemporalists of the succeeding period, could not care less about either past or future, since they thought — still think — that all this is covered, thus accessible (by their *representation*), on our servers, screens and digital devices. Panic, however, is an appropriate sensation and preparation for engagement now, lest we all be grilled or drown. *Pan* refers to the panpipe-playing “god of flocks and herds of Greek mythology, usually represented with the horns, ears, and legs of a goat on the body of a man,”<sup>11</sup> but its prefix also designates all or completely, which nicely informs this comprehensive *humanimal* creature — a renewed emblem, as well, of our most recent pandemic.

### **The Task of Terminal Engagement**

When Georges Bataille defined the term *informe* in the journal *Documents*, he famously said that a dictionary “begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks.”<sup>12</sup> Engagement is a rich and convoluted term for the actualization or realization of a task; its essence being a commitment, pledge or *determination* to do or act toward something important — not just for ourselves but for others or a greater cause. Engagement, however, is never enough. To be engaged may be equal to being persuaded to act, committed to move and determined to take measures, without doing any of these things. We may be

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10 Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

11 “Pan, n.3.” OED Online. September 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/136635?rskey=O3ypDh&result=3> (accessed November 22, 2021).

12 Georges Bataille, “Formless,” in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, eds. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 5.

engaged (“I do care...”) without engaging, without crossing the invisible boundary between intention and implementation.

A terminal is, among other things, a place of arrival and departure, landing and takeoff. We tend to think of flight terminals as paradigmatic cases of terminals, but airports derive from ancient ports or harbors and share many traits of train stations. Such terminal places anthropologist Marc Augé calls “non-places,” places with the identity of no-particular-identity.<sup>13</sup> Another example of this “place” is the computer terminal, today an entry point to a world-wide network of routes, lines and other terminals, but pre-Internet primarily a stationary workstation.

These are all places of transmission and transition — which characterize our collective predicament right now: how to shift to a “sustainable” existence for all living beings on the planet. I put the buzzword sustainable within quotation marks to mark a distance to its frequent misuse as a way to save or sustain our current way of life within “the neoliberal, capitalist world-economic structure,”<sup>14</sup> when it is the latter that provided the turbo engine behind “the great acceleration” of recent decades.<sup>15</sup>

Transition is often discussed as a more moderate alternative to radical transformation, but what we need is, arguably, a combo; no slow reform, but a quickly installed reform of slowness; no snail-smooth transition, but a decisive shift to a more thoughtful, less energy-consuming (s)pace. We have to hurry to slow down, to paraphrase Isabelle Stengers’ Manifesto for Slow Science.<sup>16</sup>

## **Terminality as Eco-Politics for Art rather than Political Eco-Art**

As we start again, we must save and consolidate what good things and practices we have, but conservatism is not an option. We have to be etymologically radical,

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13 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, 2nd ed., trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2008).

14 Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (New York: Verso, 2019), 35.

15 J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

16 Isabelle Stengers, *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science*, trans. Stephen Muecke (London: Polity, 2017).



locate and respond to the root of the problem, while minding the gap constituted by lingering forms of traditional “radicalism” or avant-gardism (as in most forms of geo-engineering). Initiatives within our discipline or the contemporary art world at large, such as environmental art, eco art, green art, bio art, etc. unveil a paradox, since, while obviously dealing with important issues, the very denomination eco art and the like produces a niche, an exceptional forefront leaving all other art behind. A partition of labor is suggested where some new -isms or movements take care of the ecological *challenges* (this widely embraced euphemism for serious calamities) while the rest continue with *business as usual*.

Labels like eco art, moreover, fall prey to a modernist inclination that could be called *newism*, according to which every artistic approach is tinged with a new touch, attitude, flavor or marketable brand. While every new work of art is literally new, *newism* implies that it is new in a more comprehensive way, as in “the latest thing” or cutting edge. Contemporary art labelled eco art capitalizes, unintentionally, on the crisis and markets itself as a new art of green engagement. The true challenge before us, however, is that art, as such, and its history need to be ecologized — *all art must be eco art!* Artworks are human *and* non-human, material *and* immaterial and endowed with a “life” of their own.<sup>17</sup> We need to come to terms with “living on a damaged planet” in what Donna Haraway describes as a sympoietic manner.<sup>18</sup> So, what can a poor art historian do in these terminal times? Well, we can adjust what and how we study.

Modern and contemporary art, as the art market has it, is the indexical sign and quintessential vindication of the fossil-fueled modern and contemporary world. Ever since the little ice age subsided in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Industrial revolution went into high gear, “modern” art became, mostly

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17 Cf. Dan Karlholm, “Is History to Be Closed, Saved, or Restarted? Considering Efficient Art History,” in *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, eds. Karlholm and Keith Moxey (London: Routledge, 2018), 13–25.

18 Anna Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

implicitly, the celebration of carbon culture with its parasitic relationship toward nonhuman resources and the relentless flight from an alienated Nature. More and more studies are devoted to looking again at this now fruitfully estranged period, from the still lingering repercussions of the Columbian exchange to the postwar excesses of greenhouse gas emissions, which are rising as we speak.

The application of hard theory in the vein of new materialism, queer phenomenology, hauntology or post-humanism, for example, deserves to be extended to all art, and not ageistically and hierarchically reserved for new, “critical” art.<sup>19</sup> Art history in its entirety should be reviewed with an eye to materiality and artifactual ageing, without ignoring thorny questions of sustaining, maintaining and managing art on an everyday basis, since this is part of an artwork’s history, too. Artworks need to be seen not just as the offspring of high-credited artists but as ecologically embedded in shifting environments which they may impact and be impacted by. As im/material nonhuman beings, artworks have more in common with each other than with their human mothers and fathers.

Realizing “that the fundamental context for all intellectual work has changed, or must be recognized anew, as the ground beneath it becomes unstable,”<sup>20</sup> we have to brush our readings and art historicizations up against the existential imperative to transform our way of life, habits and modes of operation from within, *e.g.*, crisscrossing the globe to check out exhibitions or to embark on ten-hour flights to give a 20-minute paper at conferences with quadruple sessions and hardly anyone present to hear us scream.

## **The God of Terminality**

The Roman Terminus is typically represented as a pillar terminated by a bearded bust. This is the “the deity who resided in and protected boundary markers.”<sup>21</sup>

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19 For a fruitful nonhierarchical approach, cf. Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

20 Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 29.

21 <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Terminus> (accessed June 6, 2021).

In art history, this figure is termed a *term* or *herm* (from the Greek god Hermes). This deity is also a “personification of the term terminus” as in (any) boundary or limit – agricultural, territorial, regional, national, geo-political or planetary. The sculpted block of stone turning into a human-looking figure also manifests the concept of the nonhuman (akin to Pan), covering animals, organisms, deities and things — boulder-phenomena long considered subservient to the human. The very paradoxically human- or anthropocentric notion of nonhuman calls for a reconnection with these creatures and entities; neither, however, as phenomena to human perceptivity, nor to reflect upon the finality of our human *Dasein*, but as ecological co-habitants.

Terminus is the defining deity of terminality, embodying the state or station between coming and going, arriving and departing, ending and beginning. Terminus is the slash between these seeming oppositions, a grounded pillar of reflective sense that seems the perfect symptomatic image of our planetary predicament, unless — or especially if! — it finally collapses due to anthropogenically-induced earthly irruptions.

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