

**CHANCE, FLOW AND MEASUREMENT: REVIEWING THE CONFERENCE 'TIMING – ON THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION OF EXHIBITING', CULTURES OF THE CURATORIAL AND STUDIO INTERNATIONAL, ACADEMY OF VISUAL ARTS, LEIPZIG, 19–21 JANUARY 2012**

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As anyone who has ever organized or attended a conference knows, timing is everything. Whether devised as a means to publicly disseminate academic research, to forge professional networks and connections or to reframe critical debate, the actual experience of these events is shaped by fortunate (or unfortunate) conjunctions of ideas and people, by the rhythm and flow of presentations, and also by the relentless measurement and management of available time. Although the introductory speeches at the outset of the conference 'TIMING' did include a smattering of puns and jokes about time-keeping, the organizers, Beatrice von Bismarck, Rike Frank, Jörn Schafaff and Thomas Weski, took their responsibilities, as temporal orchestrators of the event, seriously. The three day programme included ample time for discussion, there were no parallel sessions to split the audience and many of the contributors were present for several days, contributing questions and comments from the floor. This approach, while by no means radical, helped to create the conditions for an open, constructive and notably interdisciplinary exploration of temporality.

Outlining some of the main concerns animating the research process, Schafaff noted the prevalence of spatial frameworks in thinking about exhibitions, citing the work of Tony Bennett and Carol Duncan in particular. The conference was devised as an opportunity to reconsider this spatial focus in light of the continuing significance of processuality and performativity in contemporary art, and a growing interest in concepts and methodologies derived from dramaturgy and choreography. Amongst a range of reference points, Schafaff noted the prevalence of practices that explore or rehearse forms of social action, and also highlighted prominent attempts to render the exhibition visible as a discourse unfolding in time, such as the platforms of *Documenta 11* and the opera *Il Tempo del Postino*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno in 2007. Parreno had in fact been scheduled as a contributor and although unable to attend due to illness, his practice nonetheless functioned as an important point of reference for many contributors. Clearly, there are many other artists and curators who might equally be cited for their engagement with the temporal dimension of exhibiting including (e.g.) those highlighted in Leigh Markopoulos' recent analysis of curatorial approaches involving, chance and contingency (2012).

The organizers of 'TIMING' did not, however, set out to survey developments within curatorial practice. Instead, the conference press release situated practices and experience of exhibiting in relation to broader critical discourses concerning globalization and migration, asserting the importance of the exhibition as 'trans-disciplinary and trans-cultural space, as a public and social sphere [...] a set of spatio-temporal relations, a medium that is already time-based by its very nature: as a form of presentation that is of a specified duration'

(Cultures of the Curatorial and Studio International, Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig 2011). It is worth noting, however, that even in this short statement the putative status of the exhibition as 'public and social sphere' is once again linked to its *spatiality* (whether physical or discursive). This is despite the fact that the concept of the public sphere has frequently been articulated in strongly temporal terms – whether through reference to the forms of seriality that are historically associated with print media (Warner 2002) or forms of cyclicity prevalent in contemporary art, such as the biennial (Sheikh 2007).

Nonetheless, by drawing together practitioners and theorists from a diverse array of disciplinary fields, including philosophy, theatre studies and sociology, 'TIMING' had the potential to extend and deepen analysis of the specific ways in which exhibiting mobilizes temporality in ways that link contemporary art with other cultural practices. These concerns were not, however, immediately apparent in Gregor Stemmrich's somewhat abstract opening reflection, entitled 'On the presentationality of art in artistic and curatorial practice'. Insisting upon 'presentationality' as a key term in understanding the temporal experience of artworks, he seemed to question the fundamental premise of a conference organized around 'exhibiting'. Yet even though it initially seemed to suggest a false start, Stemmrich's contribution both established a useful lack of consensus and drew upon the etymology of exhibiting (originating with the removal of an object from its *habitas*) to emphasize the linkages between practices of journeying (re)collecting and curating, through which artworks are conceptually and physically abstracted from the contexts in which they are first encountered.

While Stemmrich largely avoided discussing specific examples of exhibition-making, the subsequent presentation by Claire Bishop was structured entirely around a rereading of five 'Performative exhibitions' from the 1990s, drawn from her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012). Focusing mainly on two examples ('No Man's Time', 1993 and 'Interpol', 1996) Bishop emphasized the tension between the experiences of artists, as participants in these consciously 'open-ended' processes of exhibition-making, and of viewers grappling with the aftermath. Noting that many of these exhibitions were deemed failures at the time, Bishop proposed that the turn towards open-endedness could be understood through reference to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's theorization of the 'projective city' in *The New Spirit of Capital* (2007), within which a project is often deemed successful on the basis of its generative (rather than intrinsic) value. Bishop's presentation – delivered to an audience that included several curators and scholars with in-depth knowledge of the cultural contexts in which these exhibitions had been staged – was itself also highly generative. Her claim that these exhibitions emerged in a post-1989 era, ostensibly characterized by the lack of a clear political and social 'project', opened up a productive discussion concerning historical precedents and linkages with debates towards the close of the 1980s concerning the 'project of modernity'. Through her focus on recent history, Bishop demonstrated the need to draw together disparate perspectives on timing – integrating analysis of the temporal form of the exhibition with critical reflection on the factors shaping its production, reception and subsequent inscription into historical accounts at given moments.

Harmut Rosa's presentation also situated exhibitions in relation to broader processes and forces shaping the experience of time, proposing that they might function as 'Oases of deceleration or high-speed events', in ways that either counter or amplify the phenomenon of social acceleration. Even though



systematic sociological analysis of acceleration is apparently quite limited, Rosa's main claims are unlikely to be contested – it is all too obvious that modernity has an escalatory logic that requires growth in order to maintain the status quo, and that capitalism is crisis driven, with anxiety and fear rivaling greed as a motivation for activity not only economically but also within the university and art world. The resulting sense of a 'time famine' also has particular consequences for participation in time-consuming processes of deliberation associated with democracy, which may be especially demanding in pluralistic societies. Appropriately enough, Rosa raced through his presentation and yet still did not have sufficient time to fully develop what seemed like a promising analysis of exhibitions as 'laboratories of social temporalities'. Disavowing specialist knowledge of contemporary art, he briefly compared conventional temporal experiences of exhibitions and theatre, noting that the latter typically functions as an 'oasis of deceleration' because it sometimes asserts a sense of distance and removal from the world outside. He proposed that exhibitions could potentially offer a more varied engagement with temporality, achieved by mirroring acceleration or by inviting encounters with disparate senses of time – including the everyday, the 'lifetime' or the 'age' – in ways that enabled reflection upon the experience of acceleration.

Although it preceded Rosa's presentation, and developed an explicitly philosophical approach to the conference theme, Maria Muhle's presentation on 'The actuality of re-enactment' both drew attention to and frustrated the desire for acceleration. As part of her discussion of Gerard Byrne's multi-channel installation *A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not* (2010), Muhle screened one component of the work in full during her presentation – a reconstruction of Robert Morris' performance work *Column* (1960) – standing silently to one side while the audience watched for seven minutes. But perhaps because it was dislocated from the architectonic environment of the installation and subjected to the close attention of an audience in a lecture theatre, this strategy highlighted the temporal elisions and compressions that differentiate Byrne's reconstruction from 'real-time' documentation of the performance in ways that seemed to conflict with Muhle's analysis of actuality. In addition to perspectives developed by those not directly engaged in the practice of exhibition-making, 'TIMING' encompassed many valuable contributions from curators. Although not presented explicitly within the frame of the conference, the exhibition 'Friedl vom Gröller' curated by Rike Frank at the Studio International gallery, offered an opportunity to explore rich overlaps and tensions between the temporalities of the everyday, the lifetime and the age. In addition to a selection of photographs, it included three programmes of vom Gröller's 16mm films, one of which highlighted striking continuities in form and subject matter between works that were produced up to 30 years apart. These continuities were so pronounced that the works, including several portraits of friends, family-members or strangers, could not immediately be located in historical time or biographical narrative.

The conference also included numerous presentations by curators, working independently or with institutional affiliations, of which Bassam el Baroni's was the most overtly performative. Focusing primarily on his involvement in *Overscore* (a project for Manifesta 8, realized as a member of the curatorial collective ACAF) his reflections on 'The past, curating and knowledge' were structured through reference to the alien philosophy encountered by Billy Pilgrim, the central character in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. While the aliens in Vonnegut's narrative can experience and understand the past,

present and future simultaneously, Billy Pilgrim is simply 'unstuck in time' and he struggles to connect histories and events. Rather than embrace the vantage point of the alien, el Baroni spoke about his own attempts – not always successful – to explore the processes and systems of 'edification' through which statements are established as events. In particular, he questioned certain aspects of *Backbench*, a work devised by ACAF for Manifesta 8, which brought together four different artists' collectives to engage in a conversation filmed (by Ergin Çavusoglu) over three days. This project failed to go beyond the usual loop of criticality, he argued, because some participants would not acknowledge their own complicity with processes of edification. Somewhat casually, El Baroni concluded that the project 'turned into a real-life soap opera'. Although this statement was perhaps meant simply to confirm its failure, it is worth noting that both the soap opera and the sitcom have in recent years been widely mimicked, with varying degrees of precision, by artists and curators engaged in the performance and documentation of artworld discursivity. For this reason, it seems likely that histories and theories of broadcasting, especially those that address the connections between radio, television and theatre, could be useful in the furthering analysis of temporality in exhibiting.

By comparison with El Baroni, Bennett Simpson (a curator at MOCA, Los Angeles) adopted a relatively traditional approach to presentation, articulating a degree of scepticism about the return of performance as a focus for curatorial practice and emphasizing the continued importance of established forms such as the retrospective or the historical survey. In place of exhibitions and events celebrating 'the contingency of experience', he argued for a recognition of the 'unruliness' of artworks, particularly those that involve encounters with history as unfinished – offering a specific example in the form of Stan Douglas' *Hors-champs* (1992), presented as the starting point for a curatorial project exploring the interpenetration of multiple cultural histories. Similarly, Kerstin Stakemeier sought to reflect upon her own process, while also engaging in a broad-ranging reflection on the contemporaneity of art, citing the work of the Independent Group during the early 1950s as especially important in marking art's growing 'worldliness'. Her focus, however, was primarily on the contemporary exhibition of 'labour time', a theme developed both through reference to the analysis of production and reproduction offered by Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) and her own experience of 'Anfang Gut Alles Gut', a series of performances, discussions, exhibitions and lectures in which artists were invited to engage in forms of research and actualization relating to the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*. She concluded with documentation of *Slaves* (2011), a video work by two of the participants (Emma Hedditch and Elizabeth Orr) who questioned their own position within a cultural economy that requires them to continually engage with new research material.

Sabine Breitwieser, Jutta Koether and Loretta Fahrenholz also took the opportunity to examine their involvement in a relatively recent project. Entitled *Return of the Blogs*, it was realized at MoMA over ten days in July–August 2011 by the artists' group Grand Openings, of which Koether is a member. Before the project was presented, Breitwieser spoke about her own experience as founding director of the Generali Foundation gallery from 1988 until 2007 and her subsequent role as the chief curator of media and performance art at MoMA (she has since been appointed as the next Director of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg). In particular, Breitwieser cited Dan Graham's *New Design*





Figure 1: Jutta Koether and Loretta Fahrenholz speaking at TIMING – On the Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting.

for *Showing Videos* (1995) and the exhibition 'White Cube/Black Box' (1996), both of which involved the reconfiguration of spatio-temporal arrangements at the Generali gallery. Noting that MoMA presented different challenges, Breitwieser emphasized the importance of contesting the current position of the museum as stage or 'service industry', and suggested that this might be achieved by deferring a degree of authority and leadership to artists. *Grand Openings Return of the Blogs* was presented as one example of this approach, with Breitwieser in the role of 'quasi-curator'. *Grand Openings* developed a schedule of performative projects and interventions, mainly located in the Atrium area of the museum, and produced a live, rolling account of these activities. Written by John Kelsey among others, the contents of the 'blog' were not intended to be fully accessible as part of the online calendar, but rather printed out and stuck onto a large calendar hanging on the wall of the Atrium. The calendar design also loosely echoed a weather report – an acknowledgement of the fact that the programme was scheduled in the high summer season, when the museum's atrium space is typically filled with tourists seeking refuge from the city.

Breitwieser's presentation was followed by a lecture-performance in which Loretta Fahrenholz screened excerpts from a video (then in its final editing phase) documenting the project while fragments of the blog entries were read aloud by Koether. The interplay between these fragments gave a sense of the complex temporality of the project and its textual articulation; one excerpt described a live Skype exchange between a participant (the artist Georgia Sagri) and her brother, an activist living in Greece. Sagri's brother was asked to speak about the current Greek economic and political situation and she responded by dancing, suggesting an attempt to explore the form and function of the museum as a site of political debate and action. Several events also drew upon archives of performances at MoMA, including unofficial as well as official interventions. Throughout the programme, the blog

entries attempted to grapple with the processes through which 'productive life performs itself', framing the project as an 'exposed backstage space where the museum is most exposed to its own question'. In the discussion that followed the presentation, Koether emphasized that *Grand Openings Return of the Blogs* was intended to work for MoMA – by enacting, through small scale or intimate gestures, the questions that are posed by the museum and its history. But the conversation also revealed some of the limits and constraints involved in engaging the museum's visitors and staff in this type of open-ended exchange.

As I could not attend the final sessions, I can only speculate about the conclusions articulated at the close of 'TIMING'. But the scheduled contributions by Barbara Clausen and Adrian Heathfield, amongst others, had the potential to generate a productive debate around archival and durational approaches to performance, resonating with ideas and questions raised by the presentation of projects such as *Grand Openings Return of the Blogs* and *Backbench*. Even with a partial experience of the event, it seems clear that continued collaborative analysis of temporality is important not only because of what it might reveal about the experience of exhibitions and exhibiting but also because of the broader insights and critiques that might be generated, in relation to the historical and contemporary forces that structure the experience of time.

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## CONTENTS

### Editorial

- 239–241 We are all everyday superheros  
MEL JORDAN

### Articles

- 243–268 The art collective as impurity  
KIM CHARNLEY

- 269–278 Art, politics and the public  
sphere  
PASCAL GIELEN

- 279–292 A diagram for co-participation  
STUART TAIT

- 293–302 Art, Trauma and *Parrhesia*  
KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

### Interview

- 303–312 Radical footage; film and  
dissent  
OLIVER RESSLER AND  
ESTHER LESLIE

### Reviews

- 313–317 'Iteration: Again', Contemporary  
Art Spaces Tasmania, Hobart,  
Australia, 18 September–  
15 October 2011  
ZARA STANHOPE

- 318–321 Smadar Dreyfus' *School*,  
Folkestone Triennial 2011,  
Folkestone, UK, 25 June–  
25 September 2011  
FELICITY ALLEN

- 322–327 Chance, flow and measurement:  
Reviewing the Conference  
'TIMING – on the Temporal  
Dimension of Exhibiting',  
Cultures of the Curatorial and  
Studio International, Academy of  
Visual Arts, Leipzig,  
19–21 January 2012  
MAEVE CONNOLLY

- 328–332 *The Culture of Curating and  
the Curating of Culture(s)*,  
Paul O'Neill (2012)  
COURTNEY PEDERSEN

- 335 **Index**