

Time Shift: an essay for Slipstreams

Thinking about time at this exact moment, surprisingly, the first thought that comes to mind is, "I miss Bernie Mac". His character was funny and irreverent, but seemed to care deeply about the human condition. His show also makes me think about my kids, who are now adults, and how we all thought The Bernie Mac Show was funny for its humor amid a newly reconfigured family's struggles. He died young by today's standards. My second thought is about Neil Young, whose face holds as much experience and erosion (in a good way) as the Grand Canyon. Young's song, *Comes a Time* is one of my favorites and begins, "Comes a time/when you're driftin'/Comes a time when you settle down/comes a light/feelin's liftin'/lift that baby/right up off the ground." Fellow musician John (Cougar) Mellencamp introduced Young at Farm Aid as someone who "reinvents himself time and time and time again" in 2011.

Art spaces share similarities with cultural chameleons and time tricksters like Young. With each new exhibition there are shifts in identity, mood, and creative goals. Unlike music and other portable media, however, exhibitions are not always compatible with and can rarely be fully experienced via popular forms of distribution such as publishing, streaming, downloading, etc. An exhibition is usually an ephemeral enterprise tethered to a particular space during a particular time. Exhibitions are conceived in the mind, created through collaboration, and then, after a few photographs and, if one is lucky (or unlucky), a review, are dismantled, archived, and perhaps unearthed as part of another curator or art historian's research years later. Some future researcher might read this essay and note that Joseph Whitt and I should have included a Bernie Mac sit-com episode and Neil Young's song in *Slipstreams*, but it was this exhibition that brought me to those items, so the timing was off.

Television and music do have a place in *Slipstreams: Contemporary Artistic Practice and the Shaping of Time*. Music floats through the downstairs galleries with Conrad Ventur's *Romona (Candy for Werner)*. In his video installation, Ventur appropriates a video of Candy Darling singing in a film by German director Werner Schroeter. A transsexual actress, Darling was one of artist and filmmaker Andy Warhol's "superstars" during the 1960s. In *Romona*, Darling's visage and song are made ethereal and haunting through a combination of Werner's attention to melodrama/opera in the original footage and Ventur's installation, which appropriates and fractures Werner's moving images via prisms and distorts Darling's voice via lo-fi projector speakers. Past and present collapse into a liminal, romantic environment that simultaneously seems to long for and illuminate the impossibility of a nostalgic revisiting of the past.

In his *Static* series, Stephen Sollins appropriates printed television schedules from newspapers and then whites out or blacks out the text (information) with correction fluid or black marker. All that remains in the compositions are the skeletal structures of those schedules. The things we watch are no longer enumerated. They are reduced to color keys (blue for movies, yellow for news, etc.) and rectangular boxes. With every new season of television programming or a newspaper's design facelift, the contents and colors might change, but the days and hours cycle through - - 365 days, 24 hours a day. By obscuring the information, Sollins converts television schedules into abstract drawings that simultaneously reflect on daily routines, the methodical qualities of conceptual art, and the ongoing role of popular culture in our daily lives. His work is threaded throughout the exhibition, punctuating the galleries with subtly drawn abstraction and delicate materiality.

Drawing continues to weave its way in and out of *Slipstreams* with the works of Pierre Bismuth and Anna Lundh. In Bismuth's "Following the right hand of..." series, images jump from screen to life and back -- shadows as subjects and subjects as shadows. Bismuth, like Ventur, begins with appropriated source material from the relatively distant past. He watches movies and follows the right hand of actresses, tracing their gestures with a magic marker on Plexiglas. Bismuth disengages from this activity whenever he loses interest in the actress's actions, making some drawings more visually cacophonous than others. Not surprisingly, Lauren Bacall is largely obscured by magic marker in *Following the Right Hand of Lauren Bacall in "The Big Sleep"*. By following the right hand of these actresses from the Golden Age of Hollywood, Bismuth creates drawings defined by actions over time, touching on the topics of narrative, attention span, women in cinema, and entertainment, while also commenting on the practices of drawing and film.

In her ongoing experiment *The Year is a Python that swallowed an Elephant*, Anna Lundh encourages others to draw how they see time. First, the artist asks visitors to fill out a survey with questions such as "What were you doing this time, 2 days ago?" and "Name something you will do this summer". After her subjects fill out the survey they are instructed to draw how different units of time (years, months, weeks, days) appear in their minds. Lundh then interviews each participant, gathering additional data. For *Slipstreams*, the project includes two days of surveys at Franklin Street Works, an installation, and a performance. Through these components Lundh explores how time might be described or seen without the use of agreed upon measuring systems such as clocks and calendars. In addition to *The Year is a Python that swallowed an Elephant*, Lundh has created a zine for *Slipstreams* that features a work in progress. Titled *The workings of work: a study*, the project involves Lundh punching a time card for various activities in her studio, including checking email, coffee breaks, and planning. The zine represents one week of activities from November 7 – 13, 2011.

The time clock again makes an appearance in Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1980 – 1981 (Time Clock Piece)*. An illegal immigrant during his early career, Hsieh did a series of one-year performances that included extreme isolation and/or

endurance, reflecting his perceived position as an outsider in the New York art world in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For *Time Clock Piece* Hsieh punched a time clock every hour of the day for one year, forgoing uninterrupted sleep and only missing 133 punches during the project. A camera shot one frame of 16mm film each time the artist punched in. Each day, consequently, is represented by one second of film. Hsieh shaved his head at the beginning of the project. The passing of time is most noticeably expressed in his film through the moving hands on the time clock and Hsieh's hair growth. As with all of his projects, Hsieh made a poster for *Time Clock Piece* as well as a succinct statement about the work in a letter. A DVD of his film, the letter, and poster are on view in *Slipstreams*. Also included are two black and white photographs from Hsieh's first one year project, *Life Image: One Year Performance 1978 – 1979*, where the artist placed himself in solitary confinement in his studio for 365 days.

Two works in *Slipstreams* tackle time concepts we can only experience abstractly and in the mind – eternity and time travel. Samuel Rousseau explores an expanse of time with no end in his work *Un peu d'éternité, (A little eternity)*. Projecting an “eternal” flame onto a candle, his video installation serves as an interesting contrast to Bismuth's tracking of action with a beginning and end. Here a candle will never burn out or melt. Its flame moves, implying the existence of action, yet the materials remain the same. When viewing *A little eternity*, units of time become obsolete and the moment takes on a meditative quality. Tara Kelton's video *Time Travel*, also meditative in its form, provides two differently timed windows into the world. Using a video camera, a long firewire cable and a laptop, Kelton sends a live video feed from the camera to the laptop, which sits in front of a train car window while traveling through India. When watching the laptop viewers can see approximately 1/10th of a second into the “future”.

Firmly rooted in the moment, the earliest work in the exhibition is an excerpt from Andy Warhol's film, *Empire* (1964). Decidedly deadpan, *Empire* was originally an eight-hour movie featuring the Empire State Building. It was intended to be screened in cinemas. While Warhol wasn't attempting to symbolize eternity the way Rousseau does, the duration in a movie theater setting most likely conjures thoughts of what eternity might feel like. With *Empire* Warhol intentionally made a film that, a la Hsieh, is an endurance test, but in this case for audiences. In their zine, *#empire* (available in the café for the duration of *Slipstreams*) Bradford Nordeen and Adam Baren tweet about watching (and napping during) a screening of *Empire*. Referencing Warhol's own take on his movies Adam Baren types, “*I was actually wondering why we've both decided to come see the movie. After all didn't Warhol say that his films [in particular this film] were better heard about than actually seen?*” In challenging viewers' expectations of cinematic narrative and the movie experience, Warhol presents a New York landmark in real time, creating a banal film far beyond the attention span of the audience. Ultimately he leaves us in the dark with our own thoughts -- a state of mind similar to the one that had me missing Bernie Mac twelve hours ago.

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