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CONTEMPORARY DRAWING SYMPOSIUM:
Drawing Through Time and Image
Hardwick Gallery, University of Gloucestershire 22nd-23rd March 2018

Contemporary Experiences of Time

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We are considering the role of drawing as a particular practice of image making: and how this is *in* and *of* our time. Yesterday we explored how practice is *situated*, *a way of seeing from*, and the political implications of this.¹

Where I'll be turning my attention on this second day is to the *con-temporary* of our present times: what does it mean to be *with our times*?

I hope this question can contribute to the dialogues this symposium opens up.

To be with our times? We can point to our current, highly mediated context, but what if we didn't do this in *terms* of our technologies and digital structures: but rather, what if we saw those structures, with all their demands and their affordances, as the emergence of a *distinct set of temporal experiences* – experiences of our time whose traces and textures mark all the work we've been looking at.²

If we understand being-with-our-time as *qualitatively* different, we should ask how and why does our time *feel* the way it does to us?

So not just looking for technological *effects, consequences* of our always-on digital environments, but the *affects of this*. The underlying emotional responses to living with-our-times – experiences both collective and individual - the always-there background hum of the past as a form of post-traumatic *stress*, the always-there background hiss of *future-threat as an anxiety* that seems so characteristic of our particular *now*.³

These pathological features of our times - and deeply human responses - are indicators of the *conflicting temporalities* that we live with:

how to be in our difficult present and how to imagine (conjure an image) of our futures?⁴

¹ The work of all the artists speaking at this symposium; Jessie Brennan, Tim Knowles, Dryden Goodwin and Barbara Walker, is implicitly inscribed within this exploration of a temporal politics of visibility, if not explicitly addressed.

² Vilém Flusser's work on technical images describes how the system and the apparatus of a technology inform meaning and therefore define the cultures they produce: each technology inevitably produces its own temporality, for example the directional flow of writing contrasts with the 'dam' of photographic images behind which time eddies in endless repetition. Vilém Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), p19-20.

His assertion that concepts such as 'true' and 'false' have been replaced with 'probable and 'improbable' in the era of the technical image also has significance for our symposium themes. Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p17.

³ Brian Massumi, 'The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat' in *Digital and Other Virtualities* ed. by Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock (New York: I.B.Taurus, 2010) pp79-92
See also *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. By Melissa Gregg and Gergory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴ This difficulty is addressed by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi in *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (London: Verso, 2017).

When it comes to thinking about art and time, we might say that being out-of-joint with one's own time is a familiar idea.

The modernist avant-garde were *ahead of their time*: was this not the *challenge* of art? To demand that we adjust our sensibilities towards the future that now could and would come into being – a future where the art, finally, would be understood in all its radical foresight. Its task was to create the conditions for this and for its own *future audience*. Art ran ahead.

But for us, the contemporary is a crowded place of many-times, all-at-once.

The artist is often a kind of *archaeologist*, exploring what, and *whose* pasts can be discerned or made visible in our present.

Art practice itself is often a site of negotiation with the legacies and the unfulfilled promises of modernity: its utopian strivings for better futures and a common-wealth of shared prosperity. In our state-of-emergency present, we look back and see futures that *promised*: the streets in the sky of social housing, now returned to us as ruins.

These futures that never fully materialised, or perhaps are still anticipated?

Past futures: are we still invested in them, as promises that might still be kept?

Or do we experience them as a form of *haunting, uncanny*?⁵

Against these emotive spectral presences, digital structures might seem indifferent: the past is just so much imagery, information, circulating, stored, data waiting to be retrieved or discarded, manipulated or repurposed.

Our digital present has framed new temporalities, desires and fears, of preservation and loss: a new tension between past and future.⁶

With apparently inexhaustible means to document our present, will our future be *haunted by images* of our younger selves, and our ill-advised comments: the 'right to be forgotten' is an interesting indicator of our time.⁷

Equally, in a decade, technical obsolescence can render information inaccessible, irretrievable: born-digital artwork needs ongoing preservation of its data *and* its medium of access, net art archives are restaging lost work from 2007 and 2008.⁸

Material traces, permanence and ephemerality take on new values for us: perhaps not coincidentally a time when drawing as *outcome*, rather than as *preparatory*, moves to the fore.

These tensions of past and future could be expressed in another way: as a tension between the polarities of synchronous and asynchronous.

Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik argue that as both Left and Right fail to address the loss of agency that comes from a predicted and pre-emptive future, speculative realism might break the impasse, a dialogue here <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/the-time-complex-postcontemporary/>

⁵ Jacques Derrida's concept of 'hauntology' in *Spectres of Marx* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006) was also used by Mark Fisher in *Ghosts of My Life* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014) to consider the lost futures of modernity.

⁶ Derrida's 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 9-63 and Hal Foster's 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110 (Fall 2004) addressed this emphasis on the archive.

⁷ Luciano Floridi 'The Right to be Forgotten: A Philosophical View' http://www.academia.edu/16491066/The_Right_to_Be_Forgotten_a_Philosophical_View_-_forthcoming_in_Annual_Review_of_Law_and_Ethics

⁸ See for example Rhizome's net archiving project <https://anthology.rhizome.org/>

Syn-chrony is the Greek equivalent of the Latin con-temporary: with-time. Although it brings with it a slightly different nuance, that of being-with-another-in-the-same-time (as all good spies know when they synchronise their watches.)⁹ But this additional inflection of being-with-others might lead us to one of the sources of our temporal out-of-jointedness: on the side of synchrony: we live in times of, and actively seek out, *social* synchrony – the synchronous experience of at-the-same-time right now of sharing and participating: the festival, the Twitter storm, breaking news, #MeToo, the petition. What is the nature of this *fear* of missing out?

This synchrony is a key expression of the social: togetherness in time, if not necessarily in space. We might, interestingly, see this as an expression of *public*. Particularly as this has coincided with the erosion of public and civic space. Modern media had ushered in the synchronous experience, creating audiences that held these experiences *in common* however spatially dispersed they might be. Radio, television: they could only be experienced in the time of their transmission. Thus a temporal compression, but spatial dispersion, between transmission and reception.

But the digital lies on the side of asynchrony: the asynchronous is both cause and effect of digital structures, *its temporal framework* - everything available *when we want* it, no queue, or wait, or missed chances. Retrievable pasts, on demand. Our own, individual *now* (is this the realm of the private, to the synchronous public?) But with access to our own *now*, we can always catch up *later*: no urgency or *moment* of decision is necessary right now, but rather an endless temporal *deferral* into the future. Data anticipating its future retrieval. *A delay, a lag in time, a suspension*: a form of debt that may never be called in or repaid.

The texture of time is pleated, folded, pliable – now is both the moment that must not be missed, lest we arrive too late, and *at the same time*, the moment that comes too early for us but can always (but may never) be retrieved: both we and our images struggle to find any stable way to inhabit these uncertain and conflicting temporalities.

It seems that time is also passing both *too fast, and too slowly*, for us to see it or represent it. Whereas modern technologies were concerned with the storage, retrieval and transmission of information, to be archived and carried as intact and unchanged as possible, into the future - *our* technologies prioritise feedback loops of information in the present, and anticipate *response* and *change* to that information in the future. Our data-tracking devices may 'know' when we're coming down with a cold, or under particular stress, before we do.

⁹ This also evokes Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein*, the pre-condition of being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) is being-with-another, being-together, always in a world that is shared with others. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010) Ch. 26, pp114-121

It becomes harder to tell if our online purchase, or perhaps even our vote, was a spontaneous decision, a considered decision - or an option that became *probable* dependent on our previous searches or behaviours.¹⁰

This feeding-forward of information, past and present used to predict or to pre-empt futures, exceeds our capacity to grasp it: the signs and the patterns are too subtle for us to observe, too-fast or too-slow.¹¹

A tragic event is now routinely regarded as a *failure of prediction*.

But predictive technologies are key to narratives of security *and* of threat: these are not just technologically driven, they are dominant *political* narratives shaping the experience of our current time.

Security and threat are also forms of affect, sensed as *emotional states*.

We live with real *present* effects that have projected *future* causes: this is especially problematic as if cause is in the future when does the threat ever end?

Terrorism, the pandemic...

We might interpret *nostalgia* (for when America was great, for example), *particularly if that past is evoked as template for the future* – as a desire to end threat by retrieving again the moment *before* the threat began.

Being-with-our-time is often to feel caught in these temporal traps.

And just as these anticipated futures or projected nostalgias have already acted retrospectively on our present moment, it becomes harder to see how radically other futures might ever be imagined, or realised: the utopian possibilities that remain obscured to us.

Here we might take care with *language*: we might try to work in the 'future open conditional' tense. This, in part, might be the utopian optimism of socially engaged art practices: to suspend the micro-calculations of the future in favour of shared, lived, unpredictable time – to simply *spend time* with others. Generosity in the present, *giving time* in an indebted temporal economy.

A speculative feeding-forward towards little potential futures: not pre-determined but actually allowed to find new paths through the terrain.

Just now I said '*it becomes harder to see*' how things could be other than they are: a function of art could be exactly to *facilitate a better seeing* in and with our time.

Just as micro-scales of time cannot correlate with human experience, so too do macro-scales exceed our ability to equate them with our own lived temporality. Interest in duration, slowed and suspended time has long been evident in art practice, questioning our perceptions of what may be past and what may be present. But these were durations and paces we were able to *feel in experiential comparison* to our daily spans of attention.

¹⁰ The recent revelations on the activities of Cambridge Analytica are currently dominating the press, from Observer 17/3/18 and Channel 4 20/3/18 onwards.

¹¹ Wolfgang Ernst addresses the 'micro-temporalities' of digital storage in *Digital memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012)

Mark B. N. Hansen explores how C21st media operates beyond the realm of our perceptual consciousness yet impacts on our senses and experiences, in *Feed-Forward: on the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)

The art of our time has been increasingly drawing attention to *scales* of time: scales of such duration as to exceed the measure of lived experience.

At the same time as the too-fast of digital prediction, we struggle to comprehend the too-slow of planetary spans of time. We are more aware that our current media technologies, so apparently new and *immaterial* in nature, access immensely ancient geologies of deep time: rare earth minerals, forged long before the carbon-based fuels we have become so dependent upon.¹² Equally, we increasingly understand that the impact of our consumption: the pollution, the radiation, the plastics, will endure long after we are gone, maybe entirely gone from our planet.

An asynchronous *folding* of one time onto another: of vastly disparate times.

The *anxieties* of the Anthropocene¹³ push us to the brink of vertiginous timescales: its time, like climate change, is a hyperobject¹⁴ too large and too complex to grasp. Again we can find ourselves unable to inhabit the present without that hum of *fear*: are we already *too late* to act, and how do we calibrate our present actions for future effects to distant for us to ever be able to observe?

To think beyond individual human timescales is another demand of being-in-our-time: this is both an *ethical* as well as an imaginative demand.

Here I'd like to turn to the concept of *slow violence*,¹⁵ which addresses the unequal distribution of environmental damage and poverty to the global south.

Slow violence can help us to think about the interactions of time, representation and visibility.

We are reminded constantly of the immediate *spectacle* of violence – explosive, urgent, demanding (if not always getting) our attention – filling our daily news feeds. We know its direct impact on bodies: and we know it is a social and a political issue, we expect the Law and its judgments to address it.

By contrast slow violence is incremental, attritional.

It escapes attention, or even representation, as it is *dispersed* through time: catastrophes that often remain imperceptible to the senses.

Delayed effects in the now, deferred into the future: effects whose causations can become so distant in time that the trail can barely be followed. Contaminations, erosions, depletions. It *also* impacts on many, many bodies: on health, on livelihood. Impacts felt in the minefields of conflicts whose motives are distant now, irrelevant to our current politics. But impacts on bodies may also be hidden: transgenerational, genetic. Or only visible in displacement and migration: attended to by the Law as a *threat* to be legislated *against*.

Thus, it may not *look like violence at all: and may face no accountability*.

¹² Jussi Parrika's work on media archaeology explores this, especially in *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015)
See also Elizabeth Povinelli's *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015)

¹³ The term for the speculative, human-driven geological era to follow that of the Holocene. Povinelli argues that identifying the 'golden spike' of when, or even if, this era began is irrelevant, for it is already doing its work as a concept.

¹⁴ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013)

¹⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013)

But, so characteristically of our present time, pasts and futures implicate each other, fold onto each other, in advance and in retrospect.

*'To confront slow violence is to take up, in all its temporal complexity, the **politics** of the visible and the invisible.'*¹⁶

With the challenge of this in mind - a temporal *politics of visibility* – we return to some of the central themes of this symposium.

To lead into this afternoon's talks, I want lastly to think about image-making, and to use the figure of the **decisive moment**.

Of course we associate this concept immediately with an approach to modern photography: the witnessing and capturing of a 'truth' that is made legible in and as an image. How distant this seems: but my point is not a nostalgic one.

The *time* of the decisive moment is only possible to imagine in relation to time as a duration or as continuum, from which one perfect instant is plucked.

It also expresses a desire to *compress* the gap between seeing and representing, to reduce it to one so small that the moment, and its capture *as an image*, becomes synchronised, indistinguishable in time.

The accelerations of modernity seemed to demand this compression between present event and its representational capture: it is witnessed in all manner of recording and transmitting technologies not just that of the image, but sound, and motion.

For Charles Sanders Peirce, seeking to understand how we grasped the world as and through representation in his theory of semiotics, believed this gap would always remain slightly ajar.

The gap was the *time of human thought*: we could never fully apprehend the present moment as our consciousness was always *too late* and *too early*. As we tried to understand what we were seeing we were also trying to *encode and decode* that experience; what is more there could be no separate grasping of a single instant, because memory, and the past, still trailed their wake, and an anticipation of the future was always already unfurling.¹⁷

Against these C19th frustrations, C19th visual technologies seemed to offer ways of overcoming such human limitations: the mechanical blink of the eye seemed able to close this gap, or reduce it to a time so brief as to escape the grasp of human vision, and up to that historical moment, its representation.

Whether still photography, or the chrono-photography of Peirce's contemporaries Marey and Muybridge, these technologies seemed to capture a *proof* of the instant, making that instant authentically visible.¹⁸ For although the photographer may press the shutter, it was the deflected light from the objects themselves that left traces on the photographic plate or film, as images. As indexical traces, the image *pointed*

¹⁶ Rob Nixon, 'Slow Violence' *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2011) <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Slow-Violence/127968>

¹⁷ Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Time and Thought', *Collected Papers, Volume 7, Chapter 5*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958) p346

¹⁸ Mary Ann Doane discusses this in the chapter 'The Afterimage, the Index, and the Accessibility of the Present' in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) pp 69-107

back to the object as witness of its presence, in space as well as time: *it was there, then*. Infallibly.

These decisive photographic moments, witnessing and archiving time, have dominated our systems of representation: telling histories both personal and collective.

But it is precisely here that we might ask, what exactly is the *privilege* that is being accorded in this concept of the decisive moment?

We might ask what *falls outside, exceeds, evades capture, or resists* this moment?

What is overlooked, never to be brought to representation?

What came before, what surrounded those privileged moments, what came afterwards?

And what is the actual **decision** that is made, not the act of capturing a moment, but the **decision** about all that *will not be made visible*, all that will not reach us as an image? What was decided *against*?

What was too slow, or too ill-defined, or too all-pervasive to be chosen for representation? Or was never just in one place, at one time?

This is the invisibility of what unfolds '*across a time-span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the life of the human observer*'.¹⁹

The gap that the decisive moment tried to close, this **might be exactly the space – and the time** – that the artists at this symposium open up.

Deliberately **a space of thought**, a decisive **duration**.

But also an enfolding, **a set of decisions to include**, other times, or other phenomena that unfold at different paces, or are *unevenly distributed*, unpredictable. Making visible forces that are never just in one place, at one time, so evade simple representation: the market, community, ecosystems, weather, geologies, gentrification, colonialism, hopes, our presence for others.

The interpretation of histories, and aspirations for futures, are not apolitical acts.

Neither are decisions about what is preserved, represented or erased.

Perhaps we might consider art as a politics of seeing *with* many times, not just our own: calibrated to acknowledge many scales and paces, and levels of visibility.

Franco Berardi calls for the different *interpretation* of signs inscribed in the present as the primary task of philosophy and art in our time. The future is inscribed, not *prescribed*: and art could be understood as a *politics of seeing* what is *not inevitable*, but still-open potential.²⁰

¹⁹ Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p15

²⁰ Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (London: Verso, 2017)