

IN OUR TIME

BY

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Abstract

In Our Time is an installation and performance. If you are viewing it outside of a performance time then you are only seeing the installation and the residue of the performers' work.

Each performance runs for the duration of 10,000 heartbeats (approximately 2:15 hours) as marked in chalk by the artist on the central curved wall. The artist listens to his own heartbeat with a stethoscope while marking off the beats. The sound of the artist's markings is amplified into the space behind the wall. In that space there are four discrete actions being performed. One person runs on a treadmill. The next writes down thoughts, stories or memories evoked by the situation at hand. The third person is filing a sterling silver egg at a maple workbench; both the egg and the bench were made by the artist. Lastly there is a person playing solitaire, the game of waiting.

The rock in the gallery is approximately 15 tons of Kansas limestone gathered in the months prior to the show from friends, farmers, gardens and construction sites.

Acknowledgments

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In Our Time

Introduction

I am interested in the fundamental, but unanswerable questions -- why do people do the things they do? What really makes one person's struggles different from another's? Why do some people know what they want in life and understand the path to getting it -- be it money, children, or a job fixing cars; while others spend their lives never getting what they want because they never knew what it was in the first place? The linearity of human life often feels very unfair. How can I avoid regret when I only get one chance at every moment? An average adult's heart beats around 100,000 times a day. If it stops beating, that person, no matter what their age, profession or standing in the world will die. I see this similarity as incredibly beautiful, and believe it should be enough to keep people from killing one another or wanting to see another fail, but it is not. I am eternally asking, "why?" I have come to believe that this similarity is so universal that we have forgotten its beauty. When you visit a city with a great monument you will notice the same effect. Everyone who lives there does not even see it anymore. I believe that we are so used to living that we take it for granted.

I understand that these thoughts are not new. They are the burden of sentience, both drunken peasants and philosophers have expounded upon them. So what is the validity of further repeating these ideas through my art? I believe that restructuring these thoughts on my own terms, and making work that speaks to my confusion allows me to gain a better understanding of my place within an existence necessarily fraught with unanswerable questions. If I see a need to make art about a topic that has been addressed thousands of times over I am sure the only thing I can bring to the subject is myself, my own unique outlook on the infinite "why?"

This may be arrogant, but I have no choice, the deed is now done. My hubris is now trapped in the past, its validity is unknowable, the only person that I can be sure was affected is me.

Thoughts and Influences

There is a strange but maybe typical occurrence that happens when someone moves from making work that is purely formal to work that is conceptual (rooted in thought rather than object). This is the assumption that a “concept” is a solid and objective idea that goes with an object or group of objects. I quickly came to believe that this was wrong, but this left me groundless, without any clear structure from which to compose my work. Finding this structure took almost the entirety of my tenure in graduate school.

In a 1992 interview with the late artist Mike Kelley he spoke about “problematizing” his art and in this last year of graduate school I have taken this notion to heart. Kelley stated, “I like the interpretations to be limited so that the process is problematized. Not just any interpretation is good, [but] there's a certain range of interpretations that are allowed; the interpretation becomes a problem -- I like that.” (Miller 1992: 42).

Mike Kelley’s work is almost purely conceptual and throughout his career it ranged from works based on organizational structures and critical theory to viscerally difficult works about childhood and repressed memory. Personally, I do not always identify with his work or find it of aesthetic interest, but the vast range and flexibility with which he moved between ideas and media affects me and I do not need to love it all to have trust and admiration for his thought process. My study of him helped me to internalize the understanding that my ideas need not have an entirely specific narrative as long I know what is guiding my decisions and never lose

awareness of the viewer's experience of them.

A further addition to this means of structuring thought came from hearing Ann Hamilton speak at the Spencer Museum of Art when she visited Lawrence. Hamilton works with performance and installation to create visually lush narratives about memory, language and the environment. Her work could not be more different than Kelley's, but she impressed me with the anomalous way in which she wove her ideas. There was a weird specificity to the exact meanings she gave to elements in her work even when she must have known there was no possibility that a viewer would perceive the details of her thinking. I came to understand this as simply a means of making decisions, of answering her own problematizing. By grasping this I have come to believe that it is okay for the viewer not to make the same connections I do. I need a way of making decisions for myself and as long as the viewer has some experience of the work and can find something to hold onto, the decision may be good, even if what the viewer gets is only an internal/emotional response rather than a thought that is explicitly cognitive.

Hamilton is also the most easily identifiable visual influence on *In Our Time*. The all over installation effect of the rock and colored light and the visual of people at desks doing tasks is unmistakably Hamilton's. What I find so compelling about Hamilton's style of performance/installation work is the degree of control with which she manipulates the entirety of a space. The performers in her work become more like living elements of the installation, rather than performers in the traditional sense, and the completeness of her control is what allows her work to be so incredibly visually compelling. To have the visual presence of Hamilton's work was not the original goal of *In Our Time*, but the lesson of beauty that I learned from Hamilton eventually took root in my decision-making process as the details of my installation evolved.

I believe the power of a visually complete installation has the ability to draw in any

viewer. When every detail in a space is attended to, the space begins to take on the presence of a cathedral and can inspire awe and self-awareness. This power makes the work accepting and opens the viewer up to thinking about what is in front of them. As the cathedral gives power to the message of the preacher, the completed space of a successful installation gives power the artist's ideas. The space becomes not only a part of the message itself but also the medium by which another message may be conveyed.

If the primary aesthetic presence of *In Our Time* may be seen in relationship to Ann Hamilton's work, its primary conceptual basis comes from Taiwanese durational performance artist Tehching Hsieh. Hsieh is known for his aptly titled, *One Year Performance* pieces, of the late 70s through the mid 80s. Over the course of the 80s he performed 5 yearlong works that were at the same time concise, massive and extremely simple. In his first *One Year Performance* he built a cage in his studio and did not leave it for a year, he had no access to any media or communication method and his only unspoken human contact was with a friend who brought him food and removed his waste. For his second piece, maybe the most physically trying, he punched in at a time clock every hour on the hour for a full year, missing a mere 133 punches over a total of 8,760 hours. For the third piece he entered no structure or vehicle and lived on the streets of NYC, wondering the city throughout all four seasons. For the fourth Hsieh was tied by an eight-foot length of rope to another artist, Linda Montano, and through fights and cooperation they went about their lives. Hsieh's 5th *One Year Performance* was purely conceptual. He committed to not think about or make art or enter any art institution during that year, for someone whose art was so inseparable from his life, abstaining from art became a work in and of itself (Heathfield 2009).

Hsieh's epic works speak more bluntly to time than any other durational performance

artist I have studied. While Chris Burden and Marina Abramovic are both known for the extreme nature of their works, the duration in their performances seems only to make the viewer aware of the strength/fragility of their bodies and minds, and their works seem to be more about their will power than about time itself. Hsieh's work, on the other hand, makes me think about the loss of life to the mundane. This makes me acutely aware of how beautifully absurd it seems to give up a full year at a time to strict and uncomfortable routine in the name of art. Hsieh's performances feel like such a waste of the little life he has, making me both aware of death and appreciative of being alive, an effect I get from no other artist's work.

It is this kernel of life awareness that Hsieh's work produces in me that is the essence of the message I hoped my thesis would send. It was my desire that viewers ultimately became aware of themselves in relationship to the finiteness of their own lives and the lives of those around them as embodied by the performers at their various stations behind the central wall. Where my approach differed substantially from Hsieh's is that his work must be understood purely through the individual's perception of what was achieved by his dedication to his art. In contrast, my approach relied on the gallery space, the viewer's understanding of it as an art space, and the combination of my aesthetic sensibility, my physical and organizational labor and the time and energy given up by all the performers to the piece. This composed whole then found itself somewhere between Hamilton's installation aesthetic, Hsieh's understanding of the collision of art and life and a thought process that I would argue has strong ties to relational aesthetics. Although *In Our Time* cannot be described as a work of relational aesthetics, certain elements of the audience's interaction with the performers, the performers' individual characters and the social organization that went into the piece relates strongly to this field.

In his essay "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art," Grant

Kester defines relational aesthetics (which he instead terms as dialogical aesthetics) in the following terms:

We typically view the artist as... alchemically elevating the primitive, the degraded and the vernacular into great art... A dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist; one defined in terms of openness, of listening and a willingness to accept dependence and intersubjective vulnerability. The semantic productivity of these works occurs in the interstices between the artist and the collaborator (2005: 81).

As my plans for the show moved towards finality and as I chose to exert more and more control over the final aesthetic of the piece, the project became less of a relational aesthetic piece than earlier plans had been. In an earlier stage of the project I had hoped to ask individuals to do whatever they pleased in different spaces within the piece, with their communication with one another and with the audience then becoming the primary “semantic productivity.” This would have been a potent loss of my artistic ego, and interesting in its own right, but would have lacked the Cathedral’s power maintained by Hamilton’s work. Instead I tried to create a balance, imbuing the space with a degree of “alchemical elevation” alongside a degree of the “intersubjective vulnerability” resultant from the unknowns involved in working with other people, even though a certain degree of control was exerted in my choices of their tasks.

Still more importantly, I believe that the process of choosing and asking for the help of fifteen other people, organizing the performances between their schedules and having each come and take on a role was an integral part of the work itself, and in a way relational. Moreover, my intention when selecting the performers was that they would be playing forms of themselves, not necessarily performing actions that they would in their day-to-day, but tasks that at least felt

comfortable. It was my goal all along that the piece be collaboration rather than a directorial dictation, and I now believe that in part it was the naturalness by which the performers played their roles that caused viewers to experience awkward self-awareness that I have been told felt voyeuristic and uncomfortably invasive. Had the actors been simply performing they would have read more like the performers-as-sculptural-elements that are recurring in Hamilton's work. In short, the egos of the individual performers, as picked up on by the audience created a sense of the relational that would not have occurred had their egos been suppressed.

Finally, I also believe that influences I have not covered are the smaller more personal ones from my surroundings and the circumstances of day-to-day living – the people with whom I interact and the social and physical landscapes that encircle me. The ability to unconsciously internalize from what we expose ourselves to is powerful, and I find it entirely conceivable that conversations with my housemate or professors have had just as much to do with the final outcome of my thesis as Hamilton, Hsieh or any other artist I have studied.

In Our Time: The Visual and Symbolic Structure

Exhibition Components

This performance takes place over four different days with a constantly changing cast. Behind the wall there are four roles being played: The Runner, The Writer, The Worker and The Solitaire Player. The only consistent member of the cast is my role, the artist.

The physical components of this exhibition are comprised of the wall, the rocks and colored light. These elements are of nearly equal symbolic importance to the characters that work within.

The Wall

Central to the visual structure of *In Our Time* is a dark-gray semi-circular wall with an 11' radius. The semi-circular form of the wall creates the physical surface and the space necessary for the artist to perform his role in the show. Simultaneously, it partitions off the rest of the gallery and transforms the space behind the wall. The pressing of the curved wall into the gallery allows for the four different tasks being performed behind the wall to be understood radially rather than linearly. This radial movement through the show guides the viewers from task to task in a way that is explicitly controlled rather than anomalously undefined.

Conceptually the curve of the wall evokes a cyclical movement, which relates easily to the over-arching themes of time and the human life experience. Furthermore, the wall and the artist's role in relation to its curve might abstractly be seen as the mechanism of a clock. The marking of the heartbeat drives the mechanism while the other characters behind the wall hold the places of numerals, or different moments within the life experience. When the viewer stands at the center point of the semi-circle he, for just a moment, does not only see the entirety of the wall's surface but also become the pivot point on the clock's face, the motor, and rightly so, for how can a work of art function with no audience?

Rocks and Light

The rock is placed in an evident gradation with larger rocks towards the back edges of the gallery slowly shifting towards smaller ones as they near the curved wall where they stop a few feet short and create a clean path of gallery floor for the viewers to follow. The calculated way in which the rock of different sizes is displayed is designed to give a sense of its degradation over time on a geological scale, but also clearly displays evidence of human agency. The effect of the

rock is complete. It covers almost every inch of floor resulting in a space that feels distinctly inhospitable. Its bleakness is in stark contrast to the humans working within. There is a raw surrealism to the placement and function of objects such as a treadmill or a desk and chair in a ground that evokes a lonely desert landscape more than any gym or office. The addition of colored light in a horizontal gradient adds to the jarring effect felt by the viewer upon entering the space behind the wall. The understandable and expected white of the gallery is destroyed and replaced with ambient color that shifts from warm to cool as you walk along the curved path between the rock and wall.

As humans struggle against time in their short lives, the rock stays still. Its life exists in a time that drags by so slowly that it is imperceptible. We are only aware of its change through our study of the landscape and the physical evidence of time rather than an ability to actually perceive it.

In addition to the function of representing a form of time, the rock's presence within the space can also be seen in relation to the artist's background in craft. Like the simple repetitive work of forming, sanding and polishing a silver vessel the pure physicality and satisfyingly tangible work of gathering and arranging rocks serves a similarly meditative function in the artist's practice. Furthermore the rock seems universally understandable, while one could question its purpose in the space the concreteness of its presence is unquestionable. This infallibility is different from the polished surface that is so hard won by the craftsman but so easy for the viewer to ignore. Subtracting skill from the equation simplifies the experience of viewing, making the overall work more accessible.

Marking The Heartbeat

The visual effect of the thousands of discrete marks, each representing a single heartbeat, is quietly beautiful. The marks are grouped closely together and in sets of five that create secondary visual units -- small whitish rectangles. Over the course of the four days of performance the artist slowly accumulates a total of 40,000 marks. Each day's marks are a little different from the last due to inconsistencies in the quality and type of chalk used. However, when seen together from afar the marks appear as a long and simply textured swath across the entire length of the curved wall.

The sets of hatch-marks are visually reminiscent of the archetypal scratching away of days on a jailhouse wall. The prisoner records the passing of days with his markings: he performs this ritual so as not to lose track of time and to make finite the duration of his term. By marking his heartbeat the artist attempts to do the same. He records time and makes explicitly finite the duration his own life.

The job of marking one's own heartbeat is a telling Sisyphean task, it is an action designed to make viewers momentarily aware of the simplicity of human existence and the finiteness of their own lives. Additionally, the action of marking can also be seen as a simple attempt to record the intangible process of living. It is ironic then that this futile attempt to document a life in the most baseline way requires so much focus and physical strain that while performing it the artist is useless for any simultaneous operation and is unable to truly live his life.

The Runner

The treadmill and The Runner are the most jarringly out of place, and the constant slow hum of the treadmill motor and The Runner's footfalls become a background for the entire piece. The pace that The Runner chooses to move at affects everyone performing as a degree of his elevated heart rate is transmitted to all those in the space through the audibly evident speed of his steps. Even the artist, whose focus is set on his own heart, cannot fail to be aware of the pace at which The Runner works.

The Runner tells a story about our fear of death. Maintaining the body is a way in which people attempt to stave off the passage of time. Maybe if he keeps his body "fit" he will not age.

The Writer

The Writer's part is simple. She writes by hand about memories or thoughts evoked by the moment in which she sits. Her job is the most creative and her words are inspired both by the strangeness of her physical surroundings and the contrived nature of the scenario at hand -- her role as a player in a carefully composed artwork.

She can be seen to signify humanity's desire to remember, its constant attempt to verbalize and preserve moments and thoughts in words.

The Worker

As The Worker files the sterling silver egg its initially polished surface quickly becomes rough and faceted. Eventually holes form. Dust falls into the worker's lap and onto the floor and a subtle sparkle begins to appear. The form of the egg is comfortable and understandable. It has no strong reference to function, but it fits the hand, and is easy to work on. Moreover the shape of the egg makes obvious references to life and its fragility.

The worker represents the impossibility of perfection through removal and the addictive combination of frustration and satisfaction that comes from that pursuit.

More generally, the worker's relationship to time is that of the chosen profession. Almost all adults spends half or more of their waking lives working, but what people actually do at their jobs is almost always a mystery to those closest to them, unless employed in the same field. It is then appropriate that the worker's action may seem foreign to the audience, for the essence of The Worker's role is as a portrait of the artist himself.

The Solitaire Player

The cards are slowly turned over, played out and reshuffled. The game starts again. The Solitaire Player plays her game alone. There is something unavoidably desolate about the game of solitaire, and there is an unfamiliarity to solitaire played with physical cards in this era of small electronics.

She represents all the layers of waiting in life. It seems that we can never be content with right where we are. In the short term we wait for buses, for lunch, for class to be out, for the time to go home, for the show to be over, for bed. In the longer term we also wait. We wait to graduate from school, for the time to get married, the time to have kids, the time to retire and ultimately for the time to die.

Artist's Note

In my attempt to describe the meaning of each element of this work I feel that I do it a sort of disservice, for I ultimately believe that there are many other correct interpretations of the piece as a whole, even if the individual parts have fairly specific symbolic meanings. I go out of my way

to state this because every time I reread the above descriptions I know that they are right, and yet I often find myself defining this project in other ways as well. Ultimately it is my hope that the piece is more complex and indefinable than the sum of its parts.

Conclusion

I believe that finding a process by which to make decisions about art has been the core of my MFA. It is my habits and inhibitions that determine the boundaries of what I allow myself to make and to maintain the worthwhile difficulty of art is to constantly be fighting against these habits. A quote I found when studying Bruce Nauman maybe sums it up best:

I remember... thinking that some day I would figure out... how you do art...

Later, I realized it would never have a specific process; I would have to reinvent it, over and over again. That was really depressing... On the other hand, that's what's interesting about making art, and why it's worth doing: it's never going to be the same, there is no method (1998: 107).

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The artist marks his heartbeat on the exterior of the curved wall



The Runner, The Writer and The Worker, behind the curved wall