Time, Time Space: a conversation between Paula Booker and Laura Preston

Abstract

Why has affect theory not been accounted for in the curation of exhibitions? The current white cube model of display generally gives primacy to space over time: the encounter with the artwork is conceived as a spatial event, even when showing time-based forms. In the following conversation, Paula Booker and Laura Preston consider aspects of exhibition-making that attempt other ways of thinking about presenting the artwork to an audience in time. They ask how time affects the experience of the work, its differing of sensations, and further, altering of perception. Considering affect theory as it relates to the visual, specifically moving image, this discussion moves through various beats, from how time-based artworks test the institutional frame of the white cube, the viewing body as renegotiating the spaces of cinema inside the gallery and outside of it, time as notion and as resource, to the question of the semiotics of the cut, or the “break.”

Introduction

Thinking Feeling was a pair of exhibitions curated by Paula Booker in two cities in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2015, featuring two moving-image artists, one contemporary male
artist, Ziggy Lever, and one late female artist from the vanguard of Aotearoa’s film art scene, Joanna Margaret Paul.

Thinking Feeling, the exhibitions and the accompanying print publication that this conversation first featured in, all considered time in art and how moving image is experienced in the gallery. The selection of artworks was driven by their careful construction and their ability to affect the viewers’ experience. The works are all time-based, activating the space of reception by exploring the senses of sight, sound, and touch. In the gallery setting, they also employed staging and temporal functions usually associated with a cinematic experience. The moving-image works unfold over natural, (real) time and the artists showcased shared an engagement with duration and examination of local spaces.

Paul’s work explores her own domestic and local environments—specific localities that were carefully framed by her own perspective. She used close-ups of formal patterns and adjacencies to give intimate glimpses that create an affective dimension to her films. Lever’s project probes the tenuous relationship memory and perceptions have to reality through the creation of video structures as time-based documents. This project reflected on what it means to lose time or to distrust the sensory relationship with virtual and actual states outside of the body. Specifically, Thinking Feeling was an exhibition about one's experience of time, place, and moving image.

In bringing this exhibition together, Paula Booker considered the contexts for moving image, a thought process further elaborated through her conversation with Laura Preston. We are friends and collaborators from the same hometown, and this interview has been constructed collaboratively from discussions over email between Paris, France and Auckland, New Zealand between January and April 2015. We need to signal that this was written some time ago now, and so we ask you, what has since changed? This text is reprinted largely as it appeared in 2015, following the various beats of the online conversation, from how moving image tests the institutional frame of the white cube, the body negotiating within these nested/conflated spaces of cinema in the gallery and outside of it, time as notion and as resource, to the semiotics of the cut or what should now perhaps be termed the “break.” We wish to acknowledge that we don't
particularly address the images in the works themselves, rather center the discussion on the setup around the images, the installation form.

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**Paula Booker:** To get us started, some background on my project *Thinking Feeling*—may be useful. I have been following several lines of enquiry: Has affect theory been accounted for in the curation of exhibitions? Current white cube models of display generally give primacy to space over time—the viewers encounter art objects spatially, including time-based work in space. I am interested to compare the above with an exhibition model that attempts to deliver work to an audience in time, rather than space. I have been asking, how does time affect the experience of the work and the work affect the sensation of time? I’ve been working with affect theory as it relates to the visual, specifically art and moving image.

I have also been thinking about gallery staging and various exhibition modes and their affective dimensions. Since the 1960s, time-based work has undergone enormous growth as a contemporary art form. Yet, moving image within galleries has what Andrew V. Uroskie calls an “ambivalent exhibitionary situation” (2014, p. 5). He notes that art institutions have responded to the growth of the medium by increasingly accommodating the traditional conditions of cinematic presentation with the creation of viewing spaces within white cubes. But these sit uneasily within and alongside the familiar white cubes, because the two cultural sites of cinema theater and art gallery function in diametric opposition. I mean, there’s such a contrast in the way that we experience works in these sites. In the gallery, spectators perambulate the brightly lit white cube, encountering installations in their own temporality (the time given over to observing the work, and spent in each gallery) and vicinity (proximity/aspect/view). In contrast, cinema’s black box intentionally negates both bodily mobility and environmental perception so as to transport viewers away from their local time and space into the “narrative space” of the cinematic world.
on screen. I’m really interested in the juncture where these disparate presentation and reception models have been forced into collision by presentations of moving image art.

Laura, could you tell me a little bit about the framing of your master’s thesis on video art installation? Employing your thoughts from first-hand experience, how do you think presentations of video art have markedly changed in the last fifteen years that you have been an active audience member and a critically engaged curator?

**Laura Preston:** What I find significant about your research Paula, is that you are developing knowledge about the irreproducible aspects of the exhibition experience. It becomes all the more interesting and thereby all the more problematic when we consider how affect maybe delineated. The exhibition as a modality still intrigues me for being both a constructed view offered by its author and an unpredictable situation determined (constantly re-writing itself) by its viewer.

My thesis was an attempt to track a chronological, art historical reading on the display of artist’s video, from the beginnings of the named medium to the time of the thesis's writing in 2004. I say it was an “attempt” in recognition of the fact that it was overly ambitious to record how spatial dynamics have changed since 1963, both phenomenologically and philosophically, through studying this medium. I was seeking to understand the perception of space essentially, no small feat, and to see changing perspectives to mobility through this expanded field of sculpture; tracing developments from the quintessential sculpture-based work using the camera as recording and feedback device to the cinematic, multiple screen setups in the 1990s.

My study emphasized the works’ relations to structure and display. Chapter headings included “Phenomenology and the Body,” “Narrative and Image,” “Architecture and Site,” and “Exchange and Interaction with the Digital.” Although form is still very present in my thinking, the distribution of moving image in time very much interests me now.

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I think your questions on how time plays out in the exhibition are relevant for art history and for framing the contemporary context: the subject of time is so pressing, apparently accelerating under the pressure of capitalism. We are living with an unprecedented number of images, an over-emphasis on the ocular sense in scripting our behavior, and that of our subjectivities.

I’m really drawn to how contemporary artists are working in, and in relation to, the space of photographic image production for these reasons, reflecting from within this saturation of the “image situation,” to occupy other ways of working between representation and experience: in the world and of the world. I view moving image as an expanded form of non-fiction, let’s say, conversant with these dialectics.

**Paula:** Do you refer to artists who work in the world of real-time images (AKA The World) but create filmic sensibility of performed duration? This is also very interesting from a sensory perspective.

**Laura:** Yes, exactly. These artists seem to be working with images in real time to critique what constitutes the object and as means of reasserting the power of affect. I am thinking here particularly of two performance-based sculptures presented outside of the white cube yet reliant on its audiences: the work of Pierre Huyghe at documenta in 2012, which I would read as a film-setting that orchestrated certain viewpoints, allowing the viewer to construct many others; and Luke Willis Thompson's New York street walks of 2015, based on subtle, pointed gestures. In these works, all that is in frame becomes potential cinema. For what is cinema but a narrative ride of emotional states and triggered memories transported by images?

**Paula:** I quite agree! You said that your thesis placed emphasis on relations to structure, rather than exploring “the time of the work” or how time operates to disrupt the expected behavior of looking at an artwork. I am also interested in the way in which artwork and audience interact. Moving image literally and figuratively projects itself forward into the mind of the viewer,
occupying the same imaginary time and duration (in the Bergsonian sense) that installation or still images perhaps cannot.

**Laura:** I would also argue that the performance-installation works by Huyghe and Thompson are moving image, modelling a different way of presenting sculpture by considering the tropes of film language—duration included—and setting these structural aspects into a live-situation for the viewer to self-determine, self-film. I’d also really like to know how the structural elements of cinema are informing your own research in thinking through the collision of moving image presentation and reception?

**Paula:** Of course, it is important to think of the illusionism of cinema, in terms of affect. The means by which the mechanisms of suture or the cinematic apparatus influence audiences in moving-image contexts within exhibition structures is profound. Lawrence Grossberg writes about the machinic assemblages at work, where sensation is produced. His term “machinic assemblages” groups a range of effects linked to Deleuze and Guatarri’s term “regimes of signification” and Foucault’s “discursive apparatuses” (2010, pp 315–16). Grossberg claims such effects are useful to group together and call affect. But one must do the work of specifying the particular regime of signification, and the particular mechanistic effectivity that is being produced. I find his approach useful in critically unpicking what the affective dimensions sometimes are, or the purposes in play, and the means used, while acknowledging that subjectivity is elusive, and affect remains mysterious …

**Laura:** To take cue from Grossberg, how focused is your study on affect in time specifically visually minded? Are there other sensory states you are incorporating into your analysis of artists’ works?

**Paula:** Of course, with affect, all other sensory elements are involved and there to be explored. I have focused largely on visual primacy, as I am looking at moving-image conditions in the gallery that have evolved from the white cube context, which was so driven by the visual. In the
history of exhibition making, the white cube placed emphasis on layout and design by excluding extraneous local information or external conditions. I’m evoking Brian O’Doherty here, who we know analyzed the key aspects of the white cube’s spatial configuration, including exclusion of the outside world, removal of extraneous decorative distraction, focus on the individual work of art and the materiality of that art, and the focus on the primacy of visual perception. The white cube theory contends that by excluding the markers of specific place and time, a space for contemplation is constituted outside real time. The viewer is able to reflect on the rarefied object as a pure form, outside of their everyday experience. Yet the outcome of this contemplation, O’Doherty argues, “is not the confirming of some transcendental subject with a coherent experience of Art in keeping with this supposed blank space” (cited in Hetherington, 1981, p. 112). Such a subject is prone, he believes, to sensation and impression, and, as such, experiences not only art but their own sense of self as something fractured (O’Doherty, 1999). Instead of a coherent transcendental art experience, the alienation of the subject and the fracturing of experience is a result of the white cube paradigm. Subjectivity comes to the fore.

One of O’Doherty’s key points is that the white cube exhibition model was developed largely in response to modern art. The cube’s focus on perspective, materiality, and a stripped-back viewing field are all fundamental to modernism too. Yet, art that cannot be realized two-dimensionally shatters the carefully constructed perspective, thereby showing this viewing construction to be false. O’Doherty describes the alienation of the subject, and the fracturing of their experience into something multiple and incoherent, when confronted with art objects that cannot be viewed contemplatively in the manner of pictures on a wall. O’Doherty believes such a gallery model has this effect as the relationship between art (object) and viewer (subject) is one in which the eye of the viewer becomes detached from the embodied experience, leaving only an empty form of spectatorship and spectatorial experience.

The problem I have, is that the white cube mode has been little challenged since achieving primacy and moving-image work has largely had to compromise to fit into the contemporary condition of the white cube set aside for moving image—the black cube. I think it is very
interesting how you have this vaunted object status in the contemporary museum setting, this designed space for contemplating the perfectly displayed, unique and treasured artwork, yet moving image works shown in this context are often presented with little better than home-theater standards of display. Sensory modes are little accounted for, apart from the visual. Other senses may be only cursorily addressed, such as the aural, although even that is often with subpar presentation standards. Other corporeal senses such as the body of the viewer is the least considered in this model; so often barely a seat is provided for watching moving image.

**Laura:** In the 1990s, immersive video installation environments set inside the white cube had become the latest medium, and coincidently authorship related to identity politics was again up for debate—I'm thinking here of relational aesthetics but also of appropriation debates. These post-structuralist questions of whose body gets to speak I found to be all the more nuanced when related to postcolonial theory and to the idea of difference, the writing of the likes of Stuart Hall and Spivak. Where I think this (still-necessary) debate has shifted since, and why I bring up time as a way to name this difference, is that the artwork itself has decidedly stretched, and so have its points of access. Even those works that are best presented in cinema settings are not so easy to “locate”: there is an artistic interest in working within systems of reception, of display, of distribution, of (disruptive) marketing, of heresy. These gestures are considerate of the omnipresent market system. Strategically, it becomes a question of where does the work reside: In its making, in its archive, in its reenactment, in its criticism? And importantly for us here, in its affect?

**Paula:** How are your interests in a more dispersed notion of time, and these systems of critical engagement reflected in current thoughts or research you're undertaking?

**Laura:** I’d like to come back to your focus on the white cube firstly, as I find it interesting to think about how contemporary artists respond to the conditions and constraints of the gallery, not necessarily as means of direct institutional critique but more for reflecting on viewership within such framed spaces: the distracted contemporary subject, for example. I'm thinking here of the
video works by Francis Alÿs, and in particular his more recent performance–video produced for the controversial St Petersburg *Manifesta*. It looked at the same action based on a possibly fictitious memory he shared with his brother. The action was filmed as a series of sequences from various angles; if you were a viewer to this work you may have only seen one clip in the series. Short takes. Openly playing with the online mentality of information retrieval, memory construction, and displaced contextual knowledge. In contrast there are examples of video works that are epically long in duration: Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), for instance; seemingly the work was constructed knowing that it would not likely be seen in full form, it was a conceptual gesture. This is where I see myself working, writing between these different modalities of time for the possibility of histories to be active simultaneously and identities to be recognized as variable.

**Paula:** Did you know that Hitchcock exerted firm directorial control over the viewing experience of the audience of *Psycho*? Showings of the film commenced on a tightly-controlled schedule in theaters and a firm “no late admission” policy was put in place. You either saw the film from the very beginning, or you didn’t see it all. Hitchcock’s rule was partly due to narrative events early in the film, and partly a promotion ploy. This had the interesting consequences that the audience was already seated and waiting in anticipation when the movie started. Critics claim this staged experience of *Psycho* added much to the success of the film. I find it so extraordinary that this particular film is remade by Gordon into a moving-image artwork that no one can see in its entirety.

Along with many artists now making works to be wandered in and out of, sensible to a viewer potential absence at the beginning or end of the work, what other conditions of time do you see are at play in the delivery of moving-image works?

**Laura:** Recently I heard artist Nora Schultz speaking on this. Although she doesn't work with moving image per se, she is working within the terrain of the exhibition as a performance machine, bringing image and text together—expanded photography—found materials and
sounds presented inside the white cube to form an environment of both aural and image sensation. Time for her is about attention to the conditions at hand, while she also visualizes the construct of time by showing the residue of process. I wonder if such an understanding of the installation as a situation that reflects on the mechanism of the work could also be seen as an active machinic assemblage, another model for moving image production at this contemporary juncture when the transactional value of the artwork and by extension its time is again up for critique?

I’d like to know more about how the “break” within the “regimes of signification” is at work by moving-image artists in relation to the white cube, but also how it is working towards reclaiming embodied perception and other kinds of bodies too. Here's to taking more time in galleries and more work being done outside of them. Thank you for starting this dialogue Paula.

Notes
1 The exhibition was commissioned by Ramp Gallery, Hamilton, also showing at The Physics Room, Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. It was accompanied by an eponymous catalogue published by Ramp Press. For images and exhibition information, see Ramp Gallery online: http://www.rampgallery.co.nz/exhibitions/thinking-feeling (last accessed November 27, 2018).


Bibliography


Joanna Margaret Paul Digital, still from *Body/House*, Super8mm film 1975

Joanna Margaret Paul Digital, still from *Motorway*, Super8mm film 1971

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About the Authors

Paula Booker brings her training as an artist into her curatorial practice. In 2004, she founded experimental space Canary Gallery in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. She has written for and edited several art publications, and was Publications Manager at Enjoy Gallery, Wellington for three years. At the New Zealand Film Archive from 2012-16, Paula curated public screenings and exhibitions, testing ideas with audiences in time. In 2015, she completed a Bachelor of Media Arts Honours (First Class) at Wintec, Hamilton, exploring affect theory in relation to exhibition making. Since 2016, Paula has been a grateful visitor on Coast Salish Territory, recently curating projects for AHVA Gallery, Richmond Public Art and the Or Gallery. Since 2017 she has been Curatorial Assistant at Richmond Art Gallery and on the Board of Directors at UNIT/PITT Projects. Paula recently produced the short film Woven featuring Debra Sparrow, tracing the resurgence of Coast Salish weaving, upholding traditions and relationships with the land. In August, 2018 Paula completed the Critical and Curatorial Studies MA program at UBC.

Laura Preston works with other artists to produce texts, exhibitions, and books on contemporary art. She is currently writing her PhD with Sabeth Buchmann at the Institute of Art Theory and Critical Studies, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, from her studio A. Bureau in Berlin. More recently, she was an associate editor for documenta 14, living and working from Athens. Her role as the inaugural curator-at-large for the Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington from 2013–15 followed on from her time as in-house curator from 2008–12. In 2012, Preston was a guest curator at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main. Her writing has featured in Artforum, frieze, and the Reading Room journal. Her edited books include the ongoing series Next Spring: An Occasional Series of Reviews (Atlas Projectos, Berlin / Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, 2014–); Post-apocalyptic Realism, with Tonio Kröner and Tanja Widmann (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne / Museum Brandhorst, Munich, 2018); Michael Stevenson: An Introduction (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne / Portikus, Frankfurt am Main / Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2013); and Animal Spirits: Fables in the Parlance of Our Time (Christoph Keller Editions, 2012).