

Nato Thompson

# Contractions of Time: On Social Practice from a Temporal Perspective

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Many can relate to a sense of disembodied franticness that expands across the landscape of our daily lives. We are busy people. We are plugged in to phones and computers, and constantly on the move. An elusive horizon – the purpose of our quicksilver existence – has been erased in favor of a go-to emotional state that is the result of a privatization of time. We are frantic workers even when we work against the very conditions that produce our franticness.

In his incisive book *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher diagnoses various psychological ailments (Attention Deficit Disorder, dyslexia, bipolar disorder) that have emerged from a social environment of deeply privatized and consumable moments:

If, then, something like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a pathology, it is a pathology of late capitalism – a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture.<sup>1</sup>

This affective control not only perpetuates a form of consumption but, more basically, a particular temporality. If products demand to be produced and consumed in ever-expanding contexts, they may also be adapted to durations more suitable to electronics than to what our bodies can endure. And without a doubt, the accelerated pace of disembodied consumer desire ultimately alters the basic structure of our bodies. “The consequence of being hooked into the entertainment matrix is a twitchy, agitated interpassivity, an inability to concentrate or focus.”<sup>2</sup> We are plugged in. We are in the matrix. We are atrophied hunger machines.

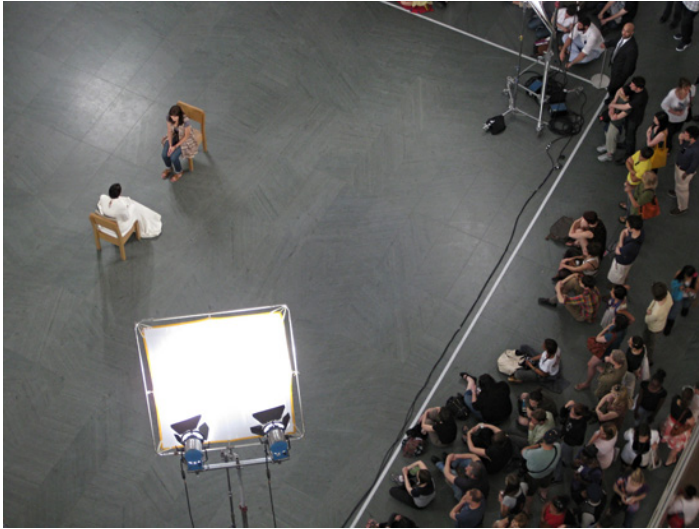
Fisher’s lament that life is getting too fast and that people cannot concentrate is hardly new. And in left-leaning art culture, pointing the finger at capitalism is no more novel a diagnosis. Certainly, the dominant social order is responsible for the present social order – the system perpetuates itself and we are its subjects. And the self-help industry would be much more compelling if its balm for depression and spazzed-out children included a radical redistribution of wealth, but that goes without saying. Nonetheless, the picture Fisher paints offers a clue to an evolving condition of behavior that must be accounted for in the production of meaning in culture writ large. Any cultural formation that comes into being now necessarily does so according to the terms of a general cultural shift toward the twitchy, the disinterested, the agitated, the dyslexic, and the bipolar.

When Marina Abramović sat for hours at a time in the central gallery of MoMA, bright lights

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beaming down on her as she met visitor after visitor with her steady gaze, what shook the audience was her commitment. The act of willfully placing oneself on a rigorous schedule best suited to an endurance sport, sitting passively and doing nothing but staring, struck the audience as touching upon the two poles of the elegiac and nihilistic. The artful meaning of looking into the artist's eyes was eclipsed by the pure physicality of it all – how could she possibly sit there every day?

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Marina Abramović, view of *The Artist is Present* at the MoMA. Photo: C-Monster.

Having emerged in the context of 1960s art, the durational performance finds a new form of reception at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The return of the body and of prolonged time resists the dematerialized, agitated nature of the current era. Abramović's performance brought the world of spectacle into the two forms of experience many considered beyond its purview: the body, and time. If spectacle is meant to be consumed rapidly, and from a distance, then Abramović's performance rendered the spectral character of fame human flesh, placing it front and center for the long term. Imagine Brad Pitt just standing there day after day, not running away from paparazzi and their flashing cameras; just a sustained presence. It runs counter to the collective nature of spectatorship, and for that reason, Abramović's performance sparked the imagination of a mass public. The title of both the work and the exhibition, the phrase "The Artist is Present" captures a heightened sense of engagement – as though, for the very first time, the artist is finally here. Elevated to the stature of an icon by marketing materials promoting the exhibition, Abramović's performance, in a reverse gesture, pulls the artist down into that space we normally occupy without noticing.

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In witnessing Abramović's steady breathing calm, we sense our own fidgety qualities. We sense our own nervous appetites. The arts have long played host to patience and duration. One can usually identify contemporary video art, dance, and performance by its agonizing embrace of all things slow, endless, and tedious. Operating against the grain of contemporary temporality may not only be a hallmark of the arts, but also the delineation of their discursive boundary. How do we know it is art? Because it takes so long to appreciate, it couldn't be aimed at a typical consumer. Because it is so annoyingly long it must be interesting.

*Inevitably, the fast pace of consumerism is accompanied by the tantalizing promise of slow time* – Allen Ginsberg once complained of a heart attack en route to his weekly meditation.

Just as the arts were reinvented in the age of the camera, so too must they be in the age of accelerated time. If the internet and the touch screen represent the apparatuses of our age, then the material and the prolonged have become a niche for the discursive and formal role of the arts. Much like a spa, the arts play host to a malnourished subject eager to experience something nostalgically other. Slow time and tangible bodies become so rare experientially that their aesthetic value finds a home in the cul-de-sac of scarcity that is art.

Since the advent of mechanical production, the arts have been the space in which the hard-to-find seeks refuge. And while the art market has been much discussed, we now find another form of scarcity in forms of experience. At times in tension, at times in collusion with capitalist scarcity, the scarcity of experience encourages forms of art that are not as easily distributed as – and thus more distinguishable from – the mass produced goods of the broader market. Massive installations, sculptures, performance, civic institutions (the museum), time-based relational aesthetics all find value in their experiential distinction from larger markets. Museums offer special opportunities to experience the body in space. In this spasmodic era, we find the arts recalibrated as a temporal, spatial, and bodily escape.

This kind of shifted aesthetic disposition resists not only the pace of the information economy, but, perhaps more importantly, our very ability to consume our experience. If we are frantic, it is only because we need to be so in order to keep up. Slowness does not only characterize a mode of consumption, but also a mode of behavior. To that end, we now find numerous forms of contemporary art that gain resonance by tweaking behavioral codes with regard to the body and temporality. Some projects comprise bite-sized moments that are

quickly consumed, context-specific chunks of experience that enter the mind and dissipate quickly, in harmony with the frantic and the contingent. They are brain candy and they are meant to be delicious. While there is nothing new in describing numerous forms of participatory art as mere products of an information economy that caters to the needs of power, their temporal qualities certainly play a role as pithy and poetic correspondences to capitalist consumption.

2010 could be described as the year that relational aesthetics made its way to the mainstream in the US, where it had remained quietly operational for ten years. Abramović's retrospective, which could in theory be collapsed into a relational sort of zeitgeist, garnered the most attention, but there were many other associated phenomena. Over at the Guggenheim, Tino Sehgal had a multi-generational armada leading people by the hand in explorations of the idea of progress. At the New Museum, Rivane Neuenschwander granted wishes on bracelets. At Creative Time, Paul Ramirez Jonas's project titled *Key to the City* allowed the general public in Times Square to briefly participate in a ceremony that provided them with a key to the city of New York. This object, to all appearances an ordinary house key, awarded to the public in a brief but intimate moment at the heart of NYC spectacle, is not only symbolic, but also functional, in that it opens a myriad of locks across the five boroughs. These unmediated interpersonal projects take as their starting point a specific experience, a poetic moment, that is registered, digested, appreciated, and completed.

Just upstairs from Abramović's time-based project at MoMA, we found a carnival of discreet projects in which performance artists were hired to enact Abramović's earlier works, bringing new life to these works. The most notable of these works was *Imponderabilia* (1977), originally performed by Abramović and her partner Ulay, in which the couple stood naked in a doorway and visitors were required to squeeze between them in order to gain access to the other side. The 2010 reenactment had a different character altogether; sliding between the two naked performers became an option and not a requirement, as one could simply access the same room through an alternate hallway. This slight transformation reveals something about our present condition, and perhaps also something about the popularity of the exhibition itself. In place of coercion or daring, the passage assumed the character of a carnival ride. People opted to participate, and participate they did. Lines grew as the eager public waited anxiously to brush their bodies against the bodies of the performers. The performers' nakedness became even more tantalizing as people waited in line for

this strangely sanctioned experience. Whereas Abramović's central-gallery project was about duration, the retrospective upstairs was a discreet pleasure zone, a mall of bodily experiences ready for consumption.

But what else can a museum or public art organization do? Without question, certain temporal limits are necessary for artistic projects to be brought to a general audience. Were the discreet embodied moments of Abramović's retrospective limited simply by the duration of a conventional museum visit? Is there really any value in a critique that calls for a duration so extensive that no public institution can actually host it?

Rather than make normative claims regarding the display or function of these works, my intention is to clarify the emerging cultural landscape across which these aesthetic experiments function. The reenactment of these performance artworks of the past allowed the work to fit neatly into the current aesthetic needs of a public deprived of its own bodies, wherein any renewed interest in performance has to be reframed and displayed in a manner that accounts for the dematerialized and accelerated climate of today. And the aesthetic allure of Abramović's physical presence captured the temporally agitated imagination of a mass audience.

But this kind of artistic production also provokes skepticism for its compatibility with a predatory capitalist economy. It can be bottled and sold as tiny little moments, all for the taking. Tino Sehgal's *This is Propaganda* (2002) hovered over the exhibition of the Dakis Joannou collection curated by Jeff Koons at the New Museum, in the voice of a paid performer who sang, "This is propaganda." The voice expands melodiously throughout the space and then states in a rather officious tone, "Tino Sehgal, This is Propaganda, 2002." What is propaganda? Perhaps self-conscious, perhaps commenting on the artworks on display, or perhaps commenting on the condition of communication in general, this reflexivity certainly gains another layer when sung in the public exhibition of a collection of a New Museum board member. "This is propaganda," as the song goes – a song paid for and included in a collection, that whistles its way into the ears of an audience finding their way through a museum. This is propaganda.

Tino Sehgal's work has enjoyed a tremendous critical reception from the writer Claire Bishop, who has written:

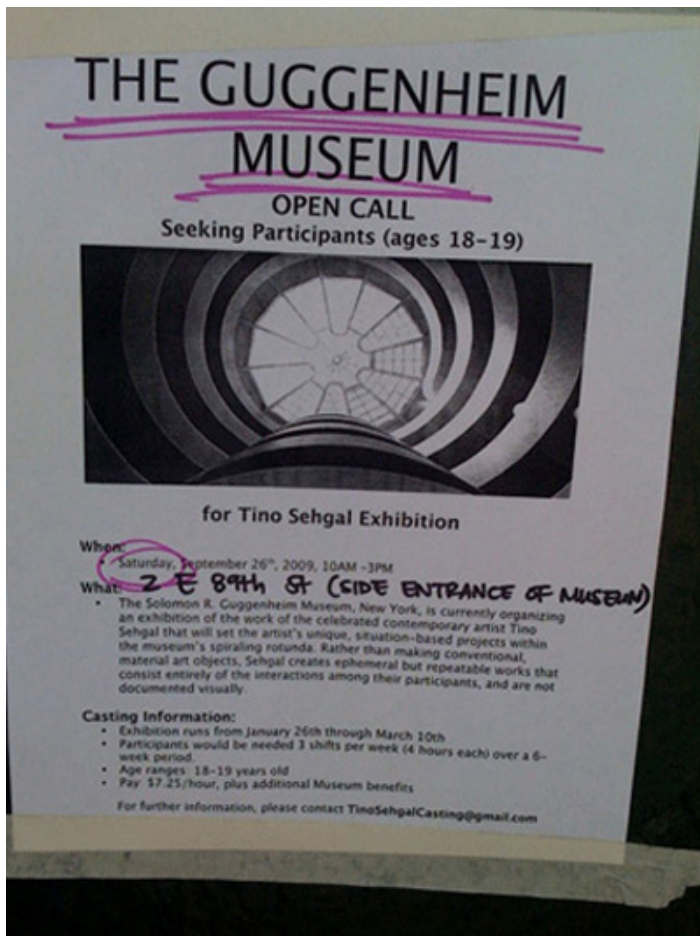
It is worth paying closer attention to Sehgal's aspiration to a "simultaneity of production and deproduction instead of economics of growth." It is clear that what

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is being deproduced in his practice is the materiality of the art object; but what is being produced? Gesture – and here it may be worth recalling Giorgio Agamben's claim in *Means Without End* (2000) that gesture is the purest form of politics (and also of intellectual activity).<sup>3</sup>

Despite Sehgal's reflexivity, or perhaps enhanced by it, the singular embodied practice of a song sung during an exhibition nonetheless constitutes a form that is extremely convenient for a dematerialized economy. It should be noted that Bishop's assessment came following Sehgal's work being on display at London's ICA in 2004. But with the intentionally vague "this" of its "this is propaganda," the work's meaning shifts radically depending on context. And so the performance at the New Museum, situated in an exhibition of a private collection, had an entirely different character than its ICA counterpart. If the statement at the ICA had some implications, in the context of the New Museum it became a confession of outright complicity.



Tino Sehgal casting announcement.

Can it really be the case that market-friendly forms are simultaneously, and conveniently, the highest form of political

content? Now that information has become a commodity and advertising codes have penetrated the very essence of what it means to communicate, we can no longer pretend that art remains magically outside this logic. While it would be wonderful if the gesture could somehow escape this trap of cultural production, the museum and gallery are not safe-zones immune from capital and power. As a result, we must continue to view artistic gestures with the special skepticism reserved for all cultural production. Reflexivity alone won't save it. An advertisement that tells you it's an advertisement is no less edifying, just more contemporary.

Even if the disembodied and easily consumed are not inherently corrupt, they are assiduously brought into the fold of a transitioning art market. And this quality of economic acquiescence that characterized relational aesthetics in the '90s can now be found in the United States. So while there are certainly merits to discussing the limits of the gesture, the commodification of the present nevertheless plays out across the body and time.

In some cases, a strategic recalibration of the gesture's market-friendly quality has resulted in cultural projects seeking refuge in the long term, in methodologies that expand across a temporal horizon. Slowness has emerged as a strategy for resisting the consumable flow of information and developing a form of social cohesion that withstands the frenetic needs of capital. Artist and de facto urban planner Rick Lowe's seventeen-year involvement in the alternative arts and Project Row Houses certainly demonstrates an exceptional commitment. Unwilling to follow Richard Florida's pro-developer gentrification models, Lowe created a locally based community housing project that combined cultural production, community organizing, and artist residencies in an economically depressed African-American neighborhood in Houston's Third Ward, even integrating art residencies and housing for single mothers.<sup>4</sup> This peculiar hybrid, multiuse center evolved over the last two decades into a space of trust and, to use that Deleuzian term, becoming. The community of the area gradually became involved in a process of spatial transformation. Rather than operate with a top-down model, Lowe introduced the tools and resources for the neighborhood to rebuild their own subject positions, and his commitments demonstrate that time is indeed a more valuable social relation than money. What makes Lowe's project altogether different is its resistance to not only the demands of consumer culture, but also to its underlying class and race determinations.

There are few corollaries in the arts to

Lowe's work, which has more in common with civic infrastructures that tend to be far more vernacular and collectively produced than art projects. Churches, social clubs, fraternal organizations, union halls, faith-based youth organizations, after-school programs, the workplace, and schools are all social spaces that evolve over time. As sites of becoming, they go far beyond the gestural. Unwieldy, loose-knit, and often dealing directly with sites of power, they hold far more sway than the arts in producing collective social imagination. And yet, the prospect of undertaking a seventeen-year project such as Lowe's Project Row Houses is extremely daunting. According to the terms of survival in a flexible contingent economy, committing to such a long-term socially based project seems like economic suicide. Could such a long-term practice be a little *too* successful at resisting the market? How can one gain the social capital (or, for that matter, the capital) necessary to survive while being committed to a project in the long term? The answer is not easy and must be negotiated at the heart of the politics of cultural production today.

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the readily consumable moment. This is not to say that these infrastructural projects are impervious to the needs of the market, but rather that this shifting economic and cultural landscape has produced heightened interest in forms of infrastructure (they will most definitely find their own moments of coercion and vulnerability). Socially based artistic projects in the form of alternative schools, markets, legislation, and food programs appear to be on the rise as a move away from the gestural and convenient.

Jakob Jakobsen and Henrietta Heise's Copenhagen Free University, which closed its doors in 2007, used a long-term approach to emancipatory public education; the Chicago-based artist collective Incubate works as "radical arts administrators" on alternative funding models for cultural production; the artist Caroline Woolard's skill-share trade site OurGoods offers a Craigslist approach to swapping services in order to escape the logic of capital. In all of these approaches, we find a civic form of participation whose goals are infrastructural in scope. They all propose a means of connecting people over an extended period, and offer a response to the problem of shrinking time. In the long run, these works may find their resistance to consumable capitalism to have worked all too well. The production of cultural meaning that resists the flow of capital will need to ultimately produce forms that contribute to radically altering culture. If the civic is a space of long-term engagement with subjectivity, then perhaps the cultural producer interested in producing meaning must find a way to overcome the economic and temporal logic of the attention-deprived.

Ultimately, the spasmodic age we live in has created new needs, new desires, new markets. And the art world has catered to the shifting aesthetic, experiential, and economic conditions of the contemporary age. Movements along the temporal and bodily axes have acted as strategic calibrations between the desire to communicate and the demands of capital. It will not be so simple to locate where these long- and short-term projects find their place, but in attempting to understand them we begin to enter their complex politics.

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Project Row Houses, before, during and after renovation. Photo: Project Row Houses.

The artist Tania Bruguera has said that it is time to put Duchamp's urinal back in the bathroom. That is to say that bringing life into art can no longer be considered an important gesture. Rather, life should be viewed from the epistemological vantage point found in some contemporary art. If one is interested in a more ambitious and meaningful project, perhaps it isn't enough to depend on the niche market that is art. As accelerated time comes to characterize not only survival in the arts, but also the default condition of the public, we find forms of meaning that resist the tide of capital and gravitate toward not only the long term, but also the profoundly civic.

A certain interest has emerged in civic infrastructural projects that unfold over an extended period of time. While a pedagogic turn has been heralded in the field of contemporary art, it has been accompanied by a temporal logic. As alternative schools appear, so do more sustained commitments to subjects that resist

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1  
Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester UK: Zero Books, 2009), 25.

2  
Ibid., 24.

3  
Claire Bishop, "No Pictures, Please: Claire Bishop on the Art of Tino Sehgal," in *Artforum International* 43, no. 9 (May 2005): 215–217.

4  
See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

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