

Art and Time

by *Lucy Cantwell*

Fall 2011

At a fundamental level, all art and creative output is the result of some expenditure of time, as time is the medium in which thought and physical construction take place. However, much of how we experience art is removed from time, not only the passage of time as it relates to us, but also the time used by the artist to make the work or even the time period in which it was produced. In a gallery or museum (in virtually every space except the active artist's studio itself), art is received as a static object, removed from time and flux.

This raises some questions—is it possible for a work of art to express the realities of being an experience wrought by time? If so, is this necessary or productive or interesting? Conversely, can one create art outside of time entirely? Is it possible to create art that is not concerned with time at all (acknowledging but entirely discounting the construction)?

Les Levine wrote in 1976 that the only medium that could adequately deal with time was television, because the viewer was able to perceptually understand the experience as it unfolded through time, rather than being forced to intellectualize the time crystallized, as he saw it in other art objects. I think this misses a great many facets of the way we perceive time, however. Painters and sculptors as diverse as Andy Warhol, Chuck Close, Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg and Felix Gonzalez-Torres all managed to create works that are perceived as much a part of time as they are as art objects in and of themselves—works that used and make the viewer aware of the time used, in ways that broaden our appreciation of the pieces themselves. Lawrence Weiner and John Cage flesh out our discussion of time by being outside, or entirely about time—or both at once—while Christian Marclay's *The Clock* is not as prescient as it might seem.

Andy Warhol's screen prints are as much of time as they are of pop culture. In short, the prints are about time *because* they are of pop culture—Warhol is a timely artist because of what and how he chose to create, when. The screened image of Elvis or of Campbell's soup cans or even the Mylar balloons that filled Leo Castelli's Gallery in 1966—art objects, all of them—are inextricably linked to time because they could not have been produced at any other time with the same salience. These objects forced the contemporary viewer to be aware of art changing before their eyes, and the viewer changed because of these undercurrents. The same power can be said of Yves Klein and his IKB or the erased de Kooning by Robert Rauschenberg, as well—art that inevitably became part of the historicized past because of its persistent originality.

The process-heavy work of Chuck Close brings time to bear for different reasons. Although his manipulation of images on a minute, highly specified level fits well within the contemporary interest in exploring a whole and its parts, time is at the forefront because of the immediate and necessary awareness of the viewer as to how much time was *spent* creating the image at hand—the simultaneous realization that this is paint layered upon other paint and that someone made this by applying brush to canvas and that that took time. Time is not experienced here as it is experienced by the viewer of a video experienced linearly, but it is refracted and compressed and nonetheless present. One cannot look at a piece as process-oriented as one by Chuck Close and forget the time spent in creation, present perceptually in the instantaneous reaction “I couldn't do that (no matter how much time I had).”

Some works, to use Picasso's series after Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* or the aforementioned Rauschenberg as an example, include time by being built consciously and obviously upon art that came before. Picasso's investigations, contingent on a viewer's understanding of the inspiration, is about the work that Velázquez already did. Picasso used

the time passed between the them as something to be manipulated, played with and pointed to. Picasso's *Las Meninas* is the conversation across time by two of the greatest Spanish artists, amplified for the viewer.

Less abstractly related to time is the sculptural work of Smithson or Gonzalez-Torres (as discussed in my previous essay for *Artwrit*). Both men managed to activate diverse but straightforward objects—curating the earth in the case of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or candy in Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)*—to draw attention to the past, the future and the present all contained within a single moment. Any witness/participant to this piece by Gonzalez-Torres observes the candy pile before subtracting a piece and then again after, and this observation brings awareness of the inherently temporal qualities of the piece—all aspects of time suspended, in plain sight. The *a priori* frameworks of both those pieces, involving as they do an understanding and interest of how they specifically persist through time, do complicate their status as pure sculptures somewhat. Perhaps they are a form of art that Levine was not able to anticipate from his place in 1976.

To push the boundaries of art and time, and to answer some of the initial questions asked above, the discussion should include Lawrence Weiner's "Declaration of Intent" from 1968:

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

Weiner made the idea as much a medium for art as any other physical one. By dematerializing art, the time spent in creation becomes negligible (once it is thought of, it is art) so the art remains outside of time. Time is sometimes spent, true, to render the idea as text to make the work transmittable to others, but because Weiner's art persists whether constructed or not, visible or not, audience or not, the art itself remains entirely outside of time, operating instead through the medium of cognition.

A discussion of art and time would also do well to include work that is about or fundamentally constructed around the passage of time. *The Clock* by Christian Marclay is the most obvious contemporary example, but in reality adds little to this investigation. The piece does not serve to increase our understanding of time's facets as the viewer's perception of time is activated by cultural awareness but not complicated, nor confronted by the clips—time continues to pass there as it does in real life. Linearity rules.

Conversely, John Cage made a piece that seems as if it revolved around time, *4'33"*, but in reality, reduced time to a signifier of a broader concept (a popular musical score). What was important in *4'33"* was not the time spent, but the action absent, and how that played off the audience's assumptions about musical performance. The actual time in which the piece was expressed was irrelevant, as it could have just as easily been 3'41" or 4'22". *4'33"* is arbitrary in a way that *The Clock* cannot be, and is all the more interesting for it—time as used in Cage's piece shows us a different possibility for what a performance might be, but has no interest in time itself. Time's traditional power to constrain and order (because it could have ordered as well at 4'32" as at 4'33") is deflated and made irrelevant while Marclay does not critique or promote the received notions of time on any level.

These examples attempt to push a seemingly inane observation—time is a part of everything created, art or not—into interesting territory. What can be gained by these observations? What of art that has no interest in time in and of itself and only uses it as a tool necessary for the ultimate construction of an object to be devoured by future art viewers? Is there anything to be gained by thinking about the role of time in a Jeff Koons sculpture such as *Balloon Dog*? Or in the wrappings of Christo? Aside from thinking of the time sunk in their creation as just one more type of capital absorbed by monumental artistic statements (a part of the appreciation of time in Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* to be sure), I'm not convinced. A complex relationship with time is not necessary to be good or great art. But sometimes that relationship is the backbone of art that is also good or great.

[Home \(http://www.artwrit.com/\)](http://www.artwrit.com/) [Oral History Initiative \(http://www.artwrit.com/category/audio/\)](http://www.artwrit.com/category/audio/) [Archive \(http://www.artwrit.com/archive/\)](http://www.artwrit.com/archive/) [About \(http://www.artwrit.com/about/\)](http://www.artwrit.com/about/) [Contact \(http://www.artwrit.com/contact/\)](http://www.artwrit.com/contact/) [News \(http://www.artwrit.com/news/\)](http://www.artwrit.com/news/) [Support \(http://www.artwrit.com/support/\)](http://www.artwrit.com/support/)

Copyright 2009-2012 Artwrit

Subscribe to our mailing list

GO



[_ \(http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/Artwrit\)](http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/Artwrit)



[_ \(http://www.twitter.com/artwrit\)](http://www.twitter.com/artwrit)