

A question of balance [edited]

The issue of time is congenital to man; in other words it's an entirely subjective creation, and it is a product of the effort to face what is by nature fleeting and unattainable in order to try to understand and describe it. Presumably, it does not concern plants, nor insects, nor any other animal species besides ours: these beings rely on the leadership of the seasonal changes, which have more to do with the weather than with time and are experienced through the senses, with the alternating of warmth and cold, darkness and light.

St. Augustine of Hippo wrote, with regard to the concept of time: "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know." This statement is still the most weighty remark ever on this subject, and it seems to explain the examples pertaining to (the) so called "artistic" expressions (in other words, everything one can do and say that is free from the bonds of the useful and the contingent).

The dimension of time is indescribable; it's not possible to give it a rigid form, because it changes according to the circumstances of the event and to the conditions of the subject that attends or witnesses it. Having a strong, "anomalous" perception of time is a result of a personal experience, lived in a transient moment when one finds oneself hanging over the void in a condition of precarious balance: in this temporary void a certain idea of time lies, and trying to describe it is the same as breaking the balance ("The history of mankind is the instant between two strides taken by a traveller," in Franz Kafka's words). So the works that best express this perception of time are actually those that evoke it, by conveying to us for just a moment that same sensation of precarious balance that one feels when one is about to fall, the very moment after having jumped or flown off.

Perhaps we could say that art itself, especially in its Western meaning, both by representing and evoking that perception of time is an attempt to stop it, to fix it in a form; and such an attempt results from the subject's discovery of signs, in all things and people, which testify to their constant motion and transformation.

The performance dated 1980-81 by Tehching Hsieh (one of the artists invited to the exhibition, he's a Chinese-born American; his date of birth is December 31, 1950, and he formally retired from his artistic practice on December 31, 1999) lasted exactly one year: during

this lapse of time, the artist had to clock in every hour of every day (a gratuitous action that had no connection with any remunerated job), in order to give evidence of the observance of his self-imposed obligation. The performance was supported by photographic evidence: with the self-timer, the camera automatically captured twenty-four pictures a day (apart from a few isolated and unintentional exceptions). The animation in stop-motion (about six minutes long) which results from the assembly of these thousands of images, is an exceptional product, in which a year of a life, totally devoted to such a pointless activity, becomes an unimportant bit of time.

From the late 70s and throughout the 80s, Hsieh made further one-year performances: in all of them, the figure of the witness, i.e. the one who attends the event (or portions of it) and attests to its actual accomplishment, is ever-present and essential. This figure, for its non-involvement with the experience of the artist (whose "personal time," for instance in the above-mentioned performance, is overlapped and obliterated by the real time marked by the clock), is the touchstone - who is seemingly neutral and passive but ultimately hovers between objectivity and subjectivity - that emphasizes the otherness of Hsieh's experience: his being "out of time" lies in the comparison with the witness, in which we can recognize ourselves as well as in ordinariness*.

The witness is necessary in order to measure time and our actions from a temporal point

of view. Of course, for the last couple of centuries the main witness of the passing of time, with respect to the short term, has been the clock (as well as the calendar for the long term), which replaced the sundial after millenniums of use. But while the latter was irrefutable, superhuman, and dependent only on the unstoppable movement of the sun, the clock, be it mechanical or electronic, is always designed to have an end and is susceptible to external influence; furthermore, it is ephemeral and untrustworthy, and it's not unusual that we feel the need to consult two or three instead of just one. At times (though more and more rarely), in a railway station or in a provincial restaurant, one can find old clocks which still work but in a truly anomalous way, irregularly and intermittently: it's not that they're a bit fast or slow, they just tell a time other than the right one, a time of their own like the world of autistic people, which is disturbing to us because it is inscrutable and no longer subject to our influence, just like a tree in the mountain woods or a fish in the open sea. Well, one of these clocks, which is now rare and hard to find might as well be included in this show.

Carlo Fossati, 2007 (translated by Cristina Travaglini)

* In a passage from his novel "The Crossing" (whose title is very appropriate to define experiences of alienation from time as commonly thought: we can talk of "trespassing" or, if used in its etymological meaning, of "delirium"), Cormac McCarthy describes brilliantly this figure: "Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all."

essential bibliography:

Agostino, "Le confessioni"
Franz Kafka, "Confessioni e diari"
Cormac Mc Carthy, "The Crossing"
Chris Marker, "La Jeteé"
Peter Nadas, "Own time"