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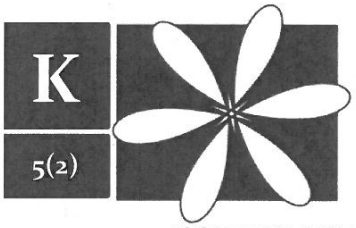

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Reflections on the First ArcheTime Cross-Disciplinary Conference and Exhibition, June 2009

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> "Our experience of time is so fundamental and so mysterious that it takes all areas of human endeavor to come to grips with it."
> George Musser, *Infinite Instances*

We founded the ArcheTime project as a quest: to deepen our understanding of and connection to time. Through interdisciplinary conferences, exhibitions, film screenings, and publications, ArcheTime gathers scholars, artists, scientists, architects, writers, musicians, philosophers, dancers, poets, and filmmakers for discourse on this primal human experience. The inaugural ArcheTime event was held in New York at The Tank, a curated space for performing and visual arts. Over the course of ten days in June 2009, a multidimensional collaboration was founded on an exhibition, presentations, and performances that included more than sixty contributors.

What arose from this event was not a fixed synthesis but, rather, a springboard for continuous interchange, as individual contributors sustained both common interests and divergent investigations. Nonetheless, over the course of the conference and subsequent reflective dialogue, we began to see certain emergent themes and patterns to the discourse, both around the nascent medium of the exchange and the substantive themes surrounding our interpretation of time.

The Medium of Mediums: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach

As shepherds of the ArcheTime discourse, we naturally first identified how the participants, drawn from a wide swathe of disciplines and media, reacted to the collaborative approach of the

conference. In a retrospective statement, intellectual historian Daniel Rosenberg (University of Oregon) described his reaction:

> ArcheTime is not about art; it is about a category of non-art that has a formal and historical relationship to art that produces critical friction. The objects that matter to my inquiries — historical charts, chronological tables, timelines — are the creations of scholars not artists, and, typically, these objects have been created with functional rather than aesthetic goals in mind. Yet the rigorous reflection that is imposed by the process of representing time in a visual medium has produced a wide range of works that are both visually powerful and conceptually challenging. To what extent are these ways of seeing also ways of thinking? How are seeing and thinking related when they are not the same?[1]

In these reflections, Rosenberg evidences a key pattern of the participants' reactions; that is, that the creation of an inter-disciplinary space is in itself fundamental to opening new pathways of thought on time, a subject that naturally crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries. During the panel discussions, art historian and critic Richard Leslie (Art and Sciences Collaboration Inc.) elaborated on this, landing firmly on the side of hybridity:

> The visual arts have always been interdisciplinary in the sense of their intersection with other disciplines. Yet, frequently, they are sectioned away from an interdisciplinary context through traditional subdivisions based on the media used or form created," Leslie said. "The intermix with science [as well as] technology, helps explain renewed interest in what we often (mistakenly) call abstract concepts but is more a foundational esthetics developed from concerns with the importance of space, motion, information, and time— all of which today consistently engage many art forms.

In the first ArcheTime exhibition, artists presenting interdisciplinary work included Katherine Davis (*Considered: Time Fragmented*), Gary Nickard (*The Tachyonic Anti-Telephone*), and Julia Morgan-Leamon (*Gestures of Time*). Alongside the arts, literary contributors also enriched the dialogue. Among noteworthy examples from the collected works were the first translation from Russian into English of Daniil Kharms's "The Universal Knot: On Time, On Space, On Existence" by Matvei Yankelevich, who spoke at the conference in 2009 in collaboration with Michael Goldman; and "The Concept of Time at the End of the Russian Avant-garde," the conversations of the poet Alexander Vvedensky and the philosopher Leonid Lipavsky, translated by Eugene Ostashevsky.

The first publication of these writings now appears in *Infinite Instances: Studies and Images of Time*. Kharms, along with Vvedensky, led the 1920s Russian avant-garde literary association OBERIU (Association for Real Art), which believed time to be the object of knowledge that is most

[1] Unless noted otherwise, the quotations from ArcheTime participants in this article are from personal correspondence, June-July 2013.

resistant to human logic and language but which attempted to describe its structure nonetheless. Although the group disbanded in 1930 under political pressure, their experiments in poetry and theater continue to be influential, and Kharms's work has maintained a following into the twenty-first century. Certainly, their fundamental belief in the interconnection of disciplines necessary to understanding time finds its echo in the ArcheTime project today.

The Emergence of Symbolic, Natural and Humanist Interpretations

As the ArcheTime contributors took advantage of the cross-disciplinary platform of discourse to present and collaborate on their views of time, we began to see the emergence of three interpretive narratives: symbolic, natural and humanist.

Symbols can be identified as primary content in several of the artists' works. The alphabet, and an even more compressed system of writing — Gregg Shorthand — were employed by Kara Rooney as formal elements in *At the Banquet of Alphabetic Form*, and the artist considered symbolic grammar, syntax, and the breakdown of language to have a crucial role in her interpretation of time. The egg, a potent symbol of origins and cycles, was represented in work by Kat Kronick (*At First*), Melissa Potter (*The Maybe Mom Ovulation Test 28-Day Cycle*), and Ula Einstein (*The Unwinding Destiny Project*). The sky as a symbol of infinite time was also reflected in the visual explorations of Linda Stillman, Edward Johnston, Michaela Nettell and Don Relyea. Surprisingly, the more traditional symbols of time that are frequently associated with its visual representation, such as the snake or dragon eating its own tail (the Ouroboros) did not appear in the exhibited works; and only one artist, MaryAnne Laurico (*Purple Past* and *Mathematics of Blue Time Before Kiss*), made any overt association between time and colour.

Technology afforded new possibilities for symbolic thought. Through *Visualizing Time*, a project that began in the mid-1990s, Camilla Torna used the nascent possibilities of the internet to collect drawings from people of many ages and locations in answer to a simple question: "How do you see the passage of time?" She gathers, analyses and presents the submissions in an online database, creating a critical convergence of perspectives necessary to understand the naturally occurring symbolism of time in our contemporary society.

Using real-time video image capture, algorithmically manipulated on a computer screen, Chris Basmajian also creates a new symbolic structure in his *Graphemes and Mathemes* project. Instead of archiving existing symbolic interpretations, Basmajian challenges his audience with incomplete, kinetic symbols, only understandable to the viewer through the passage of time. He describes time as "the distorting effect that animates the images". Symbols define the borders between pairs of sequences, but are only recognized as a difference between the changing images. These differences do not reveal the entire symbol in any one moment, but appear cumulatively over time, allowing the viewer to mentally constitute an image of the symbol

(however imperfectly) through memory. One might ask: Is time a limiting factor of perception, or its enabler?

The emergence of the second, natural narrative on time centered on the questions of how the natural phenomena that surround us are both affected by and representative of time. The ArcheTime Conference keynote speaker George Musser, a senior editor at *Scientific American*, discussed how time is viewed in physics, becoming geometrized — seen as a dimension equivalent to space. The physicists' challenge, Musser maintains, "is to reconcile this geometric view with our conventional experience of time."[2]

In their visualizations of time, many of the artists encompassed such elements as sequences, repetitions, and rhythms (Ken Jacobs, Elliot Kaufman, Luba Drozd, Robert David, Duoling Huang, Jamie Kelty, Debra Swack, Sarah Bliss, John Boone, Eliza Lamb, Glen River, Brandon Neubauer) and circular structures (Kai-Min Hsiung, Keith Brown, Hélène Lanois). Composer, percussionist, and visual artist Jesse Stewart stated,

> For me, time isn't just a linear sequence of events with the future continually becoming the present and then slipping into an ever-receding past. Rather, time is intimately connected to patterns of growth and decay, to ritual, memory, rhythm, cyclicity, and impermanence.

Echoing this thought, Catinca Tilea and David Bowen incorporated the growth cycles of plants in their artwork; and biologist Alexei A. Sharov (National Institute on Aging) supported this theme in recent comments on the conference:

Biological processes such as evolution, embryonic development, cell division, and behaviour often follow their own pace, which varies depending on the environment and internal factors and is not always predictably measured by physical time. Thus, it is often better to measure internal biological time as a progression in living processes rather than to describe processes in terms of physical time. … Living systems need their internal clocks to coordinate various processes in the same way as we, humans, use clocks to coordinate social activities. Organisms use complex molecular signalling networks, which develop following instructions encoded in the genome and adjusted to the environment. … Life is not possible without clocks, and time without life is only an abstraction.

What began as a naturalist thread to the discourse ultimately diverged to include a human-centered approach, including a series of conceptualizations on how strictly human experiences of time are structured. The poetry of Matthew Fritze led with a sense of something particularly human:

> I submit for now: this human brain is enough
> arrayed for the meaning of everything that

[2] Transcript of Musser's ArcheTime conference presentation, June 2009.

comes in waves
as a wind-scattered string of photons
through all my cells
for as long as this body lives and dies[3]

This sense of time and its relationship to the human body was also present in the video and sculpture of Jayoung Yoon, in Irina Danilova's *Shaving Performance*, and in a video by Michael Filimowicz (*Interworld*). Beginning his visual inquiry with the human body, Filimowicz stated,

> Not only are there the repetitions of the body — breathing, blinking, heart beats, walking, chewing, and the perception of wavelengths of light and sound (regularly repeating and thus identifiable) — but the environment is also ordered in layers of repeating vectors — dawn and dusk, seasonal changes, waves crashing into a beach, the repeated calls of animals and insects.

Similarly, artist Sean (scrapworm) Wrenn began and ended with a humanist question:

> When I presented the talk and paper "Astro-Timescales and Consciousness" (2009/2010), it would seem that both my perspective and the collective mind's standard for intellectual inquiry differed from the perspective many are realizing in recent years (2012/2013). While the presentation and summarizing essay exist firmly in the realm of information (observational astronomy, history, physics, and optics) for considering inherited and internalized time-keeping, they both also attempted to posit intriguing questions on the development of man's "psychological self" as reflected in our projected mental constructions of accumulated, shared, cultural, and technological realities.

Drawing Conclusions, Continuing

Our sense from the ArcheTime Conference and ongoing dialogue was that the exploratory themes briefly discussed in this reflection piece are only the initial threads of discourse that are possible from the convergence of disciplines and media represented in the project. With a potentially unlimited and ever-evolving audience, ArcheTime is building a platform that cannot exist solely within science, technology or art, but naturally draws from the substance of all three. The open and continuous nature of the endeavour is designed to create spaces — both physical and theoretical — for dialogue and exploration, and to leave a record for future consumption. We

[3] Fritze, Matthew, "All of This is the Language," *Texts*, ArcheTime, June 2009; PDF available at www.archetime.net/art_abstracts/index.html. Poole, Buzz, and Eli Stockwell, eds. *Infinite Instances: Studies and Images of Time*. Brooklyn: Mark Batty Publisher, 2011.

hope that the critical friction created by this dialogue creates an ever-growing base of contribution and thought on the study of time.

Bibliography

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Olga Ast is a conceptual interdisciplinary artist and curator who investigates the connections between space, time and information. Ast has exhibited and lectured in the United States and abroad, presenting her work at such universities as Rutgers, New York, Goettingen, Moscow, and Michigan, and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Kloone 4000 International Art/Science Project, the Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of the Imagination, the New Media Caucus, the Pushchino Research Centre of the Russia Academy of Science and NYC Future Salon. Ast began working on the ArcheTime project in the early 2000s, and organized the ArcheTime Cross-Disciplinary Conference and Exhibition – dedicated to exploring artistic, academic, and scientific concepts of time – in 2009. Ast also published *Fleeing from Absence*, four of her essays that explore the nature and interpretations of time, in 2009. More recently, she curated and designed *Infinite Instances: Studies and Images of Time*, a collection of papers and artwork generated for the first ArcheTime event.

Catherine Rutgers began exhibiting mixed-media collages, constructions, and paintings in 1979, and has presented or participated in shows at Vassar College, the Barrett Art Center, the Eli Whitney Museum, the 12 X 12 X 12 X 2000 Small Painting and Sculpture Competition (San Jacinto College) and the International Art Expo (New York). In 2001, she embarked on an exploration of digital art, which has become her primary medium. As part of the last generation to grow up without the daily presence of computers, Rutgers is interested in documenting the processes of making art both before and after this information technology watershed. Her first contribution to the ArcheTime project was four printed digital images that celebrate change over time and release from anxieties related to time. Source materials ranged from a plastic pomegranate to handwritten and computer-generated text to a black vinyl LP that had been baked in a conventional oven.

Julia Druk is a technologist by day and a writer, translator and rogue literary editor by night. She is currently leading digital product development for Marvel Entertainment, where she explores and develops new storytelling paradigms for novel technologies. She has recently edited *Fleeing from Absence* (2009), a collection of four essays on time, space and information by Olga Ast. Her ruminations on technology and society have been published in *Infinite Instances: Studies and Images of Time* (2011). Her translations appear in *The Days are Getting Longer* (2012), a selection of poems by Vladimir Druk. Her fictional works have been recently published in *1920: A Roaring Anthology* (2013), among others.

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