

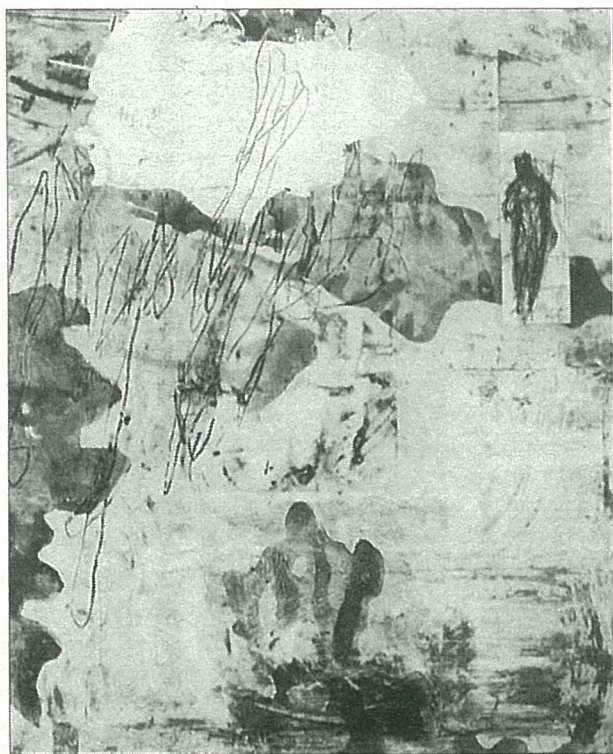
Artweek

■ Time ■ Arthur Sordillo ■ Bill Viola ■ Kathryn Glown ■ Margaret Honda

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Artweek



Audrey Welch, *Book of Hours—Pretini*, 1997, acrylic, collage, shellac on paper, 40" x 30", at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery. page 19

4 On Point
by Mark Van Proyen

5 Off Main
by Sheila Lynch

12 Time

Time and the Artist
by Meredith Tromble
12

The Precise Location of a Moment: Artists and Time in Public Space
by Terri Cohn **14**

Time and mortality: a conversation with Bruce Cannon
by Frank Cebulski **15**

A conversation with Enrique Martinez Celaya, painter
by Christopher Miles **16**

Slow time: Helen Lundeberg's still life paintings
by George Tapley **17**

18 Reviews

Northern California

'Black is a VERB!' at WORKS/San Jose
by Amy Berk **18**

'Obsession + Devotion' at Haines Gallery
by Debra Koppman **18**

Arthur Sordillo at Thomas Oldham Gallery
by David M. Roth **19**

'Women in Abstraction' at SFMOMA Rental Gallery
by Casey FitzSimons **19**

'Weaving Metaphors' at Arts Benicia Center Gallery
by Carole Austin **20**

Southern California

Bill Viola at LACMA
by Christopher Miles **21**

A conversation with Bill Viola
by Holly Willis **22**

Margaret Honda at Shoshana Wayne Gallery
by Victoria Martin **22**

Ann Thornycroft at Deanna Izen Miller Gallery
by Mary-Kay Lombino **23**

Nevada

'Architects and Artists II' at UNLV
by Gregory Crosby **23**

Oregon

Women in photography
by Lois Allan **24**

Washington

Kathryn Glown at the Museum of Art, Washington State University
by Ben Mitchell **26**

Departments

News **2**
Previews **6**
Calendar **7**
Competitions **28**
Classifieds **31**

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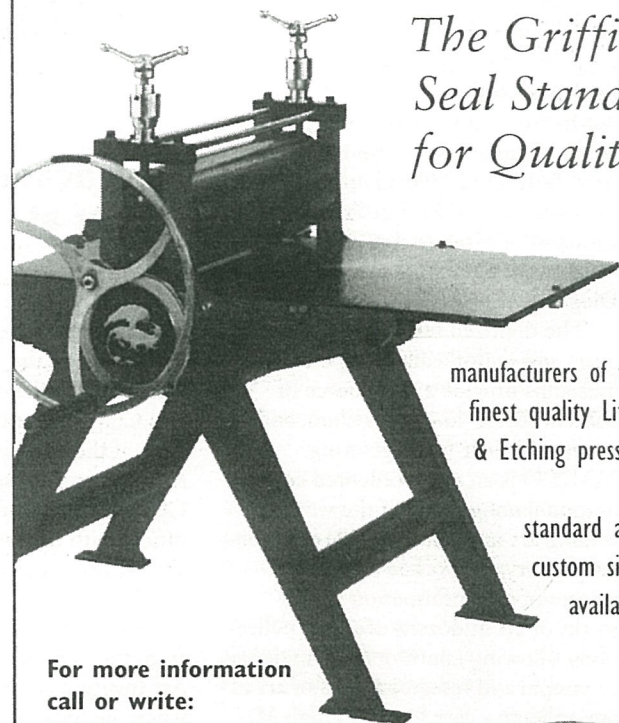
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TIME



Time and the Artist

By Meredith Tromble

If such a clock were to be made, more merchants would come to the fairs, the citizens would be very consoled, cheerful and happy and would live a more orderly life, and the town would gain in decoration.

—from a fifteenth century petition for a city clock for Lyons, France

I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is, and try to explain, I am baffled.

—St. Augustine on time

Time. Artists pursue grants to get it, search for “day jobs” that leave it, and struggle to organize it. The words “I don’t have enough time” echo through my days. But what is time? Every day has 24 hours, but some days I “have time” and some days I have none. What is measured when we measure time?

In his recent book *The Measure of Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), Alfred W. Crosby writes that the Western view of time is part of a mindset, or *mentalite*, that emerged in Europe in the late thirteenth century. European thinkers began to impose order on experience by breaking down things and energies and practices and perceptions into uniform parts

TIME

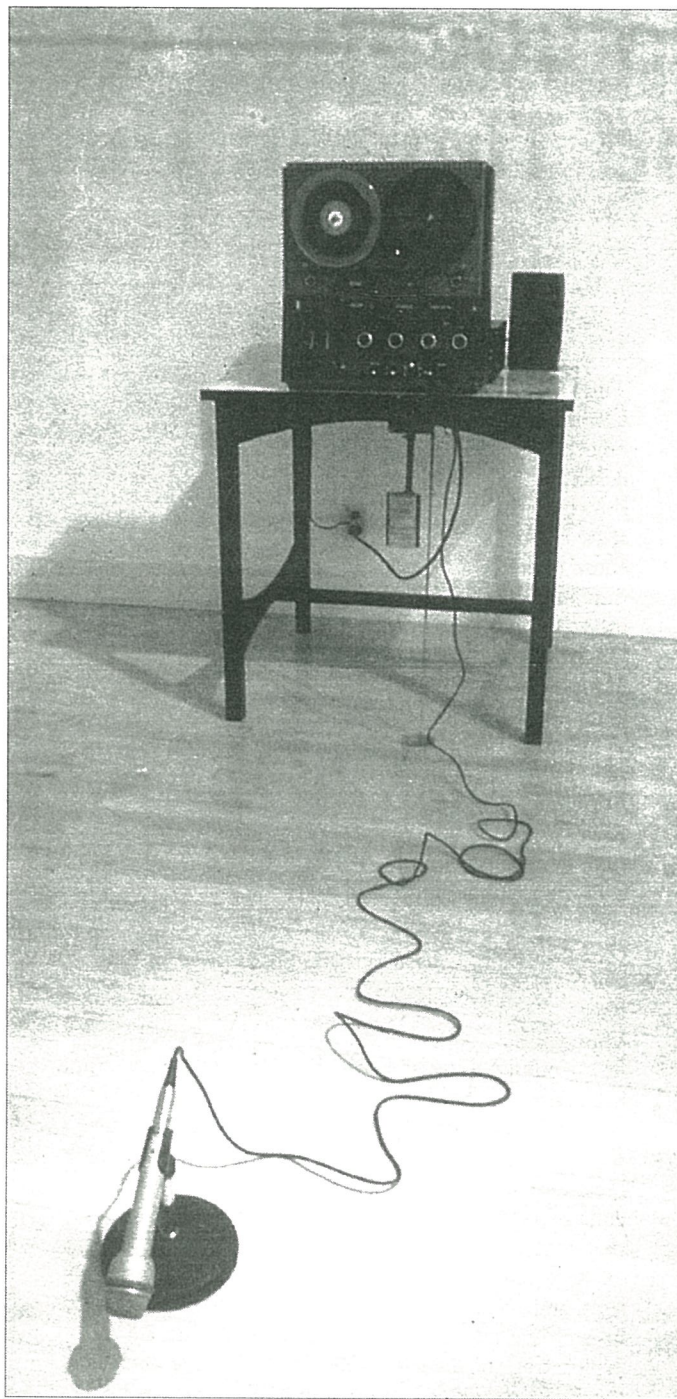
and counting them. Between 1275 and 1325 someone built Europe's first mechanical clock. Linear perspective, polyphonic music, surveying instruments, the widespread use of currency, and many related developments followed. Crosby points out that this shift resulted in an emphasis on visual information. For example, singers of the new polyphonic compositions looked at written music to synchronize their harmonies, unlike earlier choirs who learned by ear.

This surge of quantification gave European civilization an edge in science and technology. The citizens of Lyon, petitioning city rulers for a public clock, clearly yearned to participate in the new order. But, Crosby says, "the fee that obsession with temporal precision exacted for its services was anxiety." He quotes Leon Batista Alberti, Renaissance man and pioneer of perspective, saying "I flee from sleep and idleness and I am always busy about something."

My own experiences of temporally-induced anxiety color my response to Linda Hope's still life *Clock* (see cover). An altar's distance away from the viewer sits a lone clock, the focus of a space bathed in rich red light. But it has no hands; the march of time is halted. The simple image resonates in contradictory ways. The part of me that can't bear to pitch an old toaster in the trash feels sympathy for the armless machine; pity for the clock's silence which is really sorrow for the ultimate stillness of us all. Yet the part that sees the clock as a representative of time delights in the image of its defeat. The fact that I can so readily empathize with Hope's image—a painting in oil—shows how automatically vision shapes my "reality" on at least two levels. Although it doesn't feel like a clock or sound like a clock, Hope's brushwork reads "clock." And the machine itself, of course, was invented to show, visually, all at once, twenty-four hours, letting viewers judge their position in that span, as if the clock *were* time. These assumptions shape our understanding so thoroughly that it's only in contrast to a different mindset that they can be seen as assumptions, not just the way things are.

Crosby's description of the *mentalite* which quantitative thinking supplanted is fascinating. Medieval Europeans' worldview was qualitative, not quantitative. They paid little attention to the details of time. Events were dated vaguely—Crosby quotes an English document dated "after the king and Count Thierry of Flanders had talks together at Dover before the count went to set out for Jerusalem." And they had a system of "unequal, accordion pleated hours that puffed up and deflated so as to ensure a dozen hours each for daytime and nighttime winter and summer ... like an octopus, its (time's) shape was no more than approximate." Their qualitative model of the world encompassed much more than the experience of time. The first person to attempt a measure of temperature had to decide if hot and cold should be measured separately or together. "We would claim that weight, hardness and temperature ... are quantifiable," says Crosby, "but that is not implicit either in these qualities or in the nature of the human mind ... they do not come to us as quantities of discrete entities. They are conditions, not collections, and even worse they are often flowing changes."

In retrospect, the flowing change in Lewis de Soto's 1992 installation *Alas Time* offered a qualitative experience of time. Visually, de Soto presented little of interest. Entering a small room, I found it empty except for a chair, positioned in front of a print hanging on the wall, and a recording device. As I crossed the room to



Lewis de Soto, *Alas Time*, 1992, print, chair, table, tape recorder, microphone, amplifier, speakers, audiotape and hole. (Photo courtesy of Haines Gallery, San Francisco.)

inspect the print, this device amplified and recorded my footsteps. But the length of black recording tape, instead of spooling onto an uptake reel, spilled from the recorder and disappeared through a hole in the floor. The black tape slipping into the unknown, marking time through the sound of the body—left me, as a "viewer" (how deeply the assumption of "vision" is embedded in the language of art!) with a deep, wordless impression of the passage of time.

Hope's and de Soto's pieces, in their different ways, stirred feelings of sadness. Yet, human feelings about time are inconsequential. Time continues; time shapes us. If my personal time were limitless, I would be a veterinarian and a ballerina as well as a writer and artist. But time keeps prodding me into shape; a form made up mostly of the things I cannot help doing plus a small percentage of experiences gained by choice. (The part the choices play is uncertain—I chose to work as an artist; the life which followed is not at all the life I

imagined I was choosing.)

I felt all this as I sorted through old figure drawings to make room in the flat files. My drawing group has been meeting once a week for 19 years; the models now are much like models in 1978. But background details jump out at me. A window or a pillow recalls the group's early years. When the drawings were made, these details were incidental, accidental. But that studio was lost to an aerobics club, that rug lost to a minor flood, that companion lost to a move—and suddenly those drawings are trapped in irrecoverable circumstance. I can never do drawings with those particular artless details again.

This private experience of time trapped is amplified to a much grander and public scale in Tim Hawkinson's work *Inverted Clocktower* (1994). The corner of a parking garage—one can't imagine a more contemporary structure—is indented; it appears to have been built up around an old clocktower. The original structure has vanished, leaving a clocktower-shaped hole. But traces of the brickwork and masonry, and an impression of the clock, remain in the poured concrete. For Hawkinson, the piece invokes nostalgia, "a past remembered and made tangible through its perceived absence."

In a work of fiction, Hawkinson's piece might serve as a metaphor, a suggestion that the *zeitgeist* which moved the citizens of Lyon to request a public clock is disintegrating; giving way in its turn to a new impulse and a new worldview. This may be true for our children's children. But on the scale of my life, and your life, the clock as we know it is going to rule. Today and tomorrow, we're still not going to have enough time. There seems to be no respite from this predicament of the artist.

In much of life, the 80/20 rule rules. ("If all items are arranged in order of value, 80 percent of the value would come from only 20 percent of the items, while the remaining 20 percent of the value would come from 80 percent of the items." In other words, cleaning the dustballs in the living room is adequate to give the impression of a civilized life—the fur under the bed can wait.) But this "rule," which applies so widely in ordinary life, must be left outside the studio door. Art needs 100 percent time. The painter Wayne Thiebaud spoke of this when I asked about his experiences making both commercial and fine art. "The biggest difference," he said, "has to do with the pure notion of time. In commercial art, in most cases you never have enough time to do it as well as you'd like to do it. Whereas if you're painting a bowl of beans you can paint on it forever. Go on endlessly. And that's a real significant difference."

We are involved, as artists, in an enterprise that could absorb nine lives and more—no wonder we feel pressed. Paradoxically, the only respite from time's pressure lies in the enterprise. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who applied quantitative thinking to the experience of happiness, found that "One of the most common descriptions of optimal experience is that time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does. The objective, external duration we measure with reference to outside events like night and day, or the orderly progression of clocks, is rendered irrelevant by the rhythms dictated by the activity. Often hours seem to pass by in minutes." Time, after all, is a state of mind.

Meredith Tromble is editor-in-chief of *Artweek*.