

THE (NON)REENTERABLE DOORS Andrey Shental

“Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past. If all time is eternally present. All time is unredeemable” recites Lana Del Rey in her *Burnt Norton* for the *Honeymoon* album (2015). T. S. Eliot’s famous eponymous poem (1936). The opening lines of this interlude offer a view of temporality that is in consonance with the contemporary scientific worldview. In non-Newtonian physics, especially within the theory of relativity, time is treated as a dimension that is intertwined with space in a four-dimensional spacetime continuum [fig. 1]. Events are not constrained to the past, present and future in the same way they are in classical physics. The reclamation of the male poem by a female singer and songwriter, who deliberately constructs her sexuality and gender from snippets of bygone eras, is itself an act of redemption. While the “eternally present” suppresses historical reversibility, Del Rey attempts to interrogate this temporality, opening the door “into the rose-garden”.

The fetishisation of the new is an irredeemable process, or a process of making time itself irredeemable. Even though after the calamities of WWII, the Western idea of progress was seriously questioned, it was revived with the advent of globalised neoliberalism. The suicidal concept of “creative destruction” could be seen as a perverted modernist principle of negation of the tradition [fig. 2]. It simply packages colonial progressivism in a more attractive commodity form be it renovation, urban regeneration, deindustrialisation or speculative investment. Thus the vulgar understanding of “contemporaneity” as a mere up-to-dateness — as newer than modern or flat presentism¹ — was uncritically appropriated by neoliberal ideology. Simultaneously, the dimension of ruptural futurity — the hallmark of the revolutionary avant-garde, this radical sibling of modernism — was consequently eradicated. The white cube, the paradigmatic container for artworks today, illustrates this at its best. The immaculate whiteness of this sacrosanct atemporal space must annihilate all traces of time; it bleaches out the past, controls the future and imposes the nowness as the inevitable.²

The phenomenological experience of the present moment was a significant foundation for the medium of painting, the meta-genre of modernist art. In comparison to sculpture, which exists in three dimensions, painting primarily operates within two. Any attempt to create an illusion of depth was viewed by modernist critics as opening a forbidden door to the fourth dimension. The reference to non-existent space was likened to a narrative in literature, evolving in time and thus considered aesthetically impure.

To paraphrase the art historian Pamela M. Lee, we can perceive this tension as the dialectic between chronophobic or chronophilic impulses. “No doubt there is a fine line between a phobic obsession with time and an almost perverse fascination with its unfolding,” she writes. “As if the brute gravity of that unfolding demanded a respect of equal but opposite weightiness to the anxiety time might produce.”³ While many artists (most notably, cubists) sought to co-present different temporalities within a single frame, the critics like Clement Greenberg or Michael Fried aimed to eradicate all temporality for the sake of instantaneity, immediacy or presentness.

In the Oedipal struggle against her teacher Greenberg who suppressed temporalization of experience, Rosalind Krauss reimagined art history through a metaphor of concatenating rooms. This imaginary *enfilade* comprises, for her, generations of artists with their idiosyncratic pictorial acts supplanting one another. But such a developmental or stadial view of history paradoxically contradicts its own chronophobic premise: “The flatness that modernist criticism reveres may have expunged spatial perspective, but it has substituted a temporal one — i.e., history”. She goes on: “It is this history that the modernist critic contemplates [...]: a perspective view that opens backward into that receding vista of past doors and rooms, which, because they are not reenterable, can only manifest themselves in the present by means of diagrammatic flatness.”⁴ The repression of time on the level of an artwork, thus leads to its compensation in the multi-temporalisation of history.

The traditional art historical narrative understands time as a linear and irredeemable evolution of styles similar to biological evolution and therefore naturalises it. But in reality, there is no strict causality and linearity, but rather multiplicity of directions, loopholes and repetitions. In order to challenge the conservative view (but also to promote his American peers), art critic Hal Foster advocated the repeatability of certain artistic phenomena, namely the historical avant-garde of the 1920s in “really existing communism” and prewar Europe and two neo-avant gardes of the 1950s and 1960s in post war consumerist Northern America and European welfare states. According to him, the original avant-garde was not cancelled by its repetition, but rather “enacts its project for the first time — a first time that, again, is theoretically endless”.⁵ To prove his view, Foster resorts not to Karl Marx’s famous repetition of history as farce, but rather to Sigmund Freud’s figure of repression, i.e. the unconscious blocking of distressing memories, emotions or thoughts [fig. 2]. Similarly to the human psyche, the historical avant-garde, that was traumatically repressed by right-wing movements, was recollected by the early post-war

artists and then elaborated and critically evaluated by the institutional critique. Such a departure from the logic of one-directionality opens for art the doors into the rooms of missed possibilities.

When we zoom in from the panoramic view, i.e. the dimension of (art) history and see the close-up, i.e. the dimension of an artwork, we find ourselves again amidst the chronophobic — chronophilic dialectics. What proponents of modernism admired in objects as perpetual nowness of experience, was later degraded into atemporality of the endless art fairs and industrially produced artworks that got stuck in the perpetual limbo of irredeemable present. In contrast to presenteeism, French surrealists or artists like Joseph Cornell or Kurt Schwitters sought out and integrated outdated objects into their assemblages. Their artistic approach could be epitomised by the image of a ragpicker, lauded by Walter Benjamin as “someone who collects the day’s discards in the capital”.⁶ The detritus of ordinary existence held, for the philosopher, remnants pregnant with untapped historical potential against the fleeting cycles of commodity production.

Amidst the ongoing housing crisis and ceaseless gentrification, the wallpapers [fig. 3] that have endured numerous cycles of renovations encapsulate drawings and bodily imprints, bearing witness to alternative communal ways of dwelling, where art and life remain intertwined. Serving as a counter to the atemporality of the “white cube”, they bear testament to multiple renovations that have themselves aged, revealing up-to-dateness as already passé. In the face of the global resurgence of neo-conservative ideologies, the obscene literature and sensational erotic books, rescued from bibliographical oblivion, could testify to the liberated desires and emerging gender subjectivities of the sexual revolutions of the 20th century [fig. 4]. Simultaneously, they might shed light on the subsequent return to “traditional values” and neo-colonial politics [fig. 5]. The rag-picked items reclaim a forgotten or stolen past that may appear more futural and progressive than the perpetual present, which drapes today in the garb of bygone eras. However, in the process of reproducing the repressed in the new contexts, the task of memory demands elaboration, critical evaluation and working through its contradiction. In this instance, history is not merely replicated but opens the door into the yet unrepeatable.

NOTES

- 1 Osborne, P. (2013). *Anywhere or not at all: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. Verso. Pp. 15–16.
- 2 O’Doherty, B. (1999). *Inside the White Cube: The ideology of the Gallery Space*. University of California Press. P. 10.
- 3 Lee, P. M. (2006). *Chronophobia: On time in the art of the 1960s*. MIT Press. P. XIV.
- 4 Krauss, R. E. (2013). *Perpetual Inventory*. MIT Press. P. 124.
- 5 Foster, H. (1996). *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century*. MIT Press. P. 20.
- 6 Benjamin, W. (1996). *Selected Writings: 1938–1940*. Harvard University Press. P. 48.

FIGURES / WORKS

- 1 LAXLAN PETRAS. *Comm-Sui*, 2023, this construction. Organising the temporal and spatial aspects of how the works are experienced.
- 2 HEIKE-MARIA LANGER. *Dramaland Verantwortung 1*, 2023 and *Dramaland Verantwortung 2*, 2023.
- 3 WALLPAPERS, 1990, remnants of these paintings, found in KuLe refurbishment made by the artist, painted by KuLe’s first tenants.
- 4 LAXLAN PETRAS. *The Encyclopedia of Intimate Life*, 2023, Video combines text and images from two books, ‘The Encyclopedia of Intimate Life’ (1967) and images from ‘Kama Sutra’ (both authors unknown), books lent from the antiquarian collection Bookvica (Moscow/Tblisi).
- 5 LAXLAN PETRAS. *Pathways to Erotic Pleasure*, 2023, from *Carlo De Paoli. Sexual Healing: Pathways to Erotic Pleasure* (1996). The Russian translation of this book was found by the artist in Ufa, Russia in 2012.

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