

Perhaps the End of the Beginning

“They say that the past is a foreign country, but it’s not really. It’s just the other side of the wall. We can hear it, we can smell it, and we can even have a look at it by using such technologies as ropes, ladders, hammers and drills.”

(Sally O’ Reilly, *Catachresis in Pieces*, performance at the Rietveld Academie)

In her lecture performance, Sally O’ Reilly compared the past to the other side of the wall. Perhaps the smell and sound of the past create the wall, or render it visible at least. We first have to see the wall between then and now before we can tear it down. The Friday at Studium Generale was a day of picturing, puncturing, piercing and peeking through such walls between past, present and future. The opening question by curator Alfredo Cramerotti remains a pressing one: is there is a way to make sense of what we do *now* in relation to a bigger picture? Can we describe the relationship between our personal experiences and a historical context? How do we weave them into one narrative? To aspire for such a tapestry of history, a space where the personal meets the general, is an ambitious endeavor. We need thought experiments in reversing and exploding time to undo our temporal walls.

1 year = 1 cm

First we should become aware of our unconscious conventions in experiencing and conceptualizing time. Cathy Haynes invited the Rietveld students to view a 5-meter long historical timeline, an antique ‘synchronology’ that she had brought to display.

[IMAGE 1]

Sebastian Adam’s *Chronological Chart of Ancient, Modern and Biblical History* shows a long colorful string of synchronous events, grouped by country and era, starting in 4004 BCE with the creation of Adam and Eve and ending in 1881 with the most recent U.S. president.

[IMAGE 2]

Due to its shape, we can only grasp such a document by walking along it, date by date. During this journey we experience a linearity of time that has become the hallmark of representing history. In today’s world, history is line, a time line. Centuries of time management and mapping have slowly transformed history into a cartographic space with regular intervals. 1 year = 1 cm.

We have turned history into a map and we have turned time into space. Even the most beautiful, lucid charts of history, those that turn time into trees, spirals, rivers and temples, are still guilty of freezing time into solid chunks of space. The famous ‘flow of time’ – as, for example, represented in Friedrich Strass’ *Strom der Zeiten* – can and should perhaps never be committed to paper.

[IMAGE 3]

Freezing time

According to philosopher Henri Bergson, we should refrain from lines indeed. For Bergson, the metaphor of the time line is a dangerous ‘idol of language’, ‘a fiction’ that deceives us. The time lines that we are able to conceive, however detailed and precise, can never deal with duration, with history as infinite successive moments in a variety of rhythms.

“to perceive consists in condensing enormous periods of an infinitely diluted existence into a few more differentiated moments of an intenser life, and in thus summing up a very long history. To perceive means to immobilize.”

(Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 1896, p.274)

A reflection on the immobilization of time, on fragments of intenser lives, is perhaps what happened in Tai Shani’s performance *Headless / Senseless*. A frail woman on stage lip-synced to the voice of a poetic narrator. She recounts the intersecting lives of two actresses. Pondering over the plot turns in her play, one of the actresses seems dazed by the implications of the script. Who is the narrator of my life? ‘On page 78, I’m alive, but on page 79, I’m not?’ Her own life seems to start anew when the voice of the narrator falters and she stops to synchronize.

[IMAGE 4]

Stop synchronology

The act of stopping synchronology became an essential maneuver throughout this Friday at the Rietveld. Sally O’ Reilly stopped the speeches of historical figures mid sentence; to scrutinize and compare the way their voices and vocabularies have impacted us. Fay Nicolson, in her lecture performance *Marginal Notes: Documentary Absurdities*, stopped the flow of time by reflecting back upon history from the year 2022. She recounted the history of a small art school called the ‘Future School’, which ran from 2013-2021. Her fragmented digital archive only gave her hints as to what had ‘really’ happened in these eight years. Such accounts are necessary ‘documentary absurdities’. However empirical such histories attempt to be; personal stories and general narratives our bound to intermingle. Perhaps, Fay seems to suggest, we can only live in the time that we experience, not time as we are told. In this vein, the Future School endorses the ideas of an art teacher from the past:

“To reject mechanical or habitual application is to promote inductive studies recognising practice before theory, trial and error before insight. In short, we believe in learning by experience, which naturally lasts longer than anything learned by reading or hearing only.”

(Joseph Albers, *Search Verses Re-search*, 1969)

The last day at the Rietveld was perhaps not the end. It was not even the beginning of the end. But it was perhaps the end of the beginning. The beginning of a temporal thought experiment in continuous jumps between past, present and future. A manifesto for a non-linear concept of history. As Cathy Haynes, emphasized: we need to think of a way to produce a collective experience that allows for difference, for different histories. A history that doesn't command us to follow the line. That enables us to think more like this:

[IMAGE 5]

“Thankfully”, Alfredo concluded the day, “as artists, we have the right to start from the middle.”

References

Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1911), 275. [originally published 1896].
Joseph Albers, *Search Verses Re-search*. (Hartford: Trinity College Press, 1969).
Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. (London, New York, G. Routledge, 1853). [originally published 1759-1767].
Daniel Rosenberg & Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*. (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010).

Captions

[IMAGE 1] Image of students standing at table with time line, photographed by Malthe Stigaard

[IMAGE 2] detail of the *Chronological Chart of Ancient, Modern and Biblical History* by Sebastian Adam, 1881, copy by Deacon and Company, photographed by Christian Crutz.

[IMAGE 3] *Strom der Zeiten*, (Stream of Time) by Friedrich Strass, translation by William Bell, copy published in 1849.

[IMAGE 4] Image of performance by Thai Shani, photographed by Malthe Stigaard.

[IMAGE 5] Narrative time lines in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne, 1759.

Bio:

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