

ON TIME: NOT YOUR COMRADE

(Originally delivered as an introduction to the symposium “Time as Medium” at the Astrup Fearnley Museet in Oslo, in 2023, edited for this publication.)

In the 1970s animations *Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner*, the road carries on past the painting, the cliff is both real and imagined, and there is no ending, just an endless re-imagining and re-grouping of symbols and *stuff*, something physically real (paint, color, layerings of animated cells), which points to another pictorial reality (landscape, painting composition, gravity). There is no death (because paintings *of* something represent frozen time?), but rather a re-configuration of material and meaning.

I am thinking about the question of ‘duration’ and how time is represented in relation to painting.

As primarily a painter, who writes, not a writer who paints, my practice imagines, through acts of painting and feminist texts, how a gesture, in painting, could be understood to have an unfixed, liquid behavior. The implication of this is to imagine that gestures, in painting, re-signify in their various contexts (newly made, in retrospect, alongside historical language, fabricated allegiances, renewed political readings). To me, this shape-shifting quality of painting through time is magical and is the topic I’d like to focus on tonight.

To say someone’s work is timeless would perhaps be one of the more disturbing comments to make: in what sense should and does contemporary work act in awareness of time? Of events unfolding in a media cycle, of the time of exhibition cycles, of relevance to politics, which have a time of their own. We must, in a discussion on time in 2023, perhaps first accept that we are all outdated, at least at some point.

In the essay “Comrades of Time,” by Boris Groys, published in the e-flux journal in 2009, he states:

*Being contemporary can be understood as being immediately present, as being here-and-now. In this sense, art seems to be truly contemporary if it is perceived as being authentic, as being able to capture and express the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted by past traditions or strategies aiming at success in the future.*¹

I will not delve too far into Suhail Malik’s writing on the contemporary, but it’s worth noting Malik’s interest in the manipulation of material through communication as a means to ‘exit’ the tropes of contemporary art:

¹ Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” *e-flux Journal*, Issue #11 (December 2009). (<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/>).

While Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois proposed an art-historical mobilisation of this insistent meaninglessness under the Bataille name of the 'informe', the insistence on/of matter as art's snaring of experience persists today even through digital production with the emphasis on glitches, noise, disruptions, and slickness, all of which draw attention to what is produced and made manifest by the means of production "itself" as much as by its manipulation by artists as human agents.²

So, I'd like to propose a strategy of working, in which I imagine myself never being a comrade of time, and always refusing to be an agent doing anything in service of time, because time is not my friend as a female artist: I want to trick time by not participating, and instead of focusing on what happens during painting, to focus on what happens after it.

I want here to make a distinction from the 'experience' of painting: the acting, the material manipulation, the adding, the pouring, the cutting, the letting dry, cracking, crumbling, the sanding, the layering, the masking, the spatula-ing like cake putty, the scumbling, the great arm stroke, the letting it spread....

Instead, I'm thinking about the looking back. The regret and confusion at the painting in progress, the embarrassment, the good idea turned sour, the reclaiming and clawing out of something useful, in paint, from what, most likely, was uncool, unfinished, and ungainly at one, or all, moments. The work it takes to get through the quick idea to the slower painted object. It can be summed up in the impossible note of instruction Helen Frankenthaler said to her woodcut printers: No SCHMALTZ!³

Perhaps a straightforward question is: does painting entail a reflection of the moment, including all those emotions of the moment it is made? Or rather, can we imagine that the gestures, perhaps spawned by curiosity, method, or grief, or by joy, by critical anger, rather reverberate outwards, talking backwards to previous works by oneself and others, talking forwards, but also beginning their perhaps long journey of meaning many different things, in many different contexts. Gestures bounce around - hitting the walls of many contemporary moments, being transformed, perhaps transforming? Joining a large, ongoing flow of cultural material, which forms and re-forms, like the making of many-layered paintings.

² Suhail Malik, Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art, Spike Art Magazine: (<https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/?q=articles/reason-destroy-contemporary-art>). Last accessed 10 June 2023.

³ <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/ethereal-and-allusive-all-nuance-and-no-schmaltz-helen-frankenthaler-at-dulwich-gallery-reviewed/>

Amy Sillman has called the action in her paintings “excavation in retrospect”⁴, which is a fantastic way to put a practice that is trying to show a simultaneous-ness – an overlapping that is *not present* in a lot of painting. It is not *over* painting, it is multiple paintings from different moments, happening at the same time. A simultaneous-ness of elements in painting reflects a very contemporary notion of time, but not as Groys describes.

To be con-temporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be ‘with time’ rather than ‘in time’. “Contemporary” in German is zeitgenössisch can thus be understood as being a “comrade of time” – as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems...⁵

I point to the quote from Ursula K. Le Guin in her essay, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’, of Lillith Smith saying, “...what Freud mistook for her lack of civilization is woman's lack of *loyalty* to civilisation.”⁶

But what of us who have a *lack* of loyalty to ‘con-temporary’ time: what if we are NOT comrades with time? What if we are interested in time’s problems from all different moments, not just now?

The ‘meaning’ of pictures - of pictorial elements, or of ‘shapes’ as Amy Sillman has addressed in her 2019 “Artists Choice” exhibition at MoMA, have a different set of significations when you are never seen as an original author, as Mark Godfrey has written about in an essay, “Statements of Intent”:

These notions of paint application as faking, even betrayal are important, as is the distinction from quotation or parody: We feel confused by an act of faking, but sure of ourselves with an act of quotation.⁷

I point that both actions – appropriation as a staging of the temporal nature of an image, and the act of quotation of form, material or “recognisable” elements in painting - point to a desire not to stay still. Not to let the gesture *behave* in an overly codified manner. Not to go something to help time along, but live in the mired confusion and mess of it all.

As I described it in one essay I wrote recently on Helen Frankenthaler:

The liquid nature of a Lynda Benglis pour piece is not the fact that it was poured, or that it looks liquid: the liquid nature of a Lynda Benglis pour piece is that in the photograph of

⁴ Interview conducted with the artist April 2023.

⁵ Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” *e-flux Journal*, Issue #11 (December 2009). (<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/>).

⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” [page](#)

⁷ Mark Godfrey, “Statement of Intent,” *Artforum* (April 2014), 298.

herself making the work in 1969 (which were taken in the same year as the portraits of Frankenthaler by Ernst Haas) shows that the work exists in the transition between a performance moment and a sculptural 'document'. The means make the ends, because all material transformation is a performance in this world of an abstraction where your body cannot be *ignored*.

I am not considering the notion of time in painting as something inherently linked to performance - nor to 'outlining' an action. Rather, it is an evidencing of how one process exhibits — in a mediality — the embodied transition between states (the liquefied negatives of Eileen Quinlan, the ongoing modular sections of Charlotte Posenenske with fingerprints from previous installs, the layering of self-referential 'material' of painting in the works of Jacqueline Humphries – and similar treatment of material in Lisa Oppenheim's photographs). This 'on the move' – is how I've arrived to wondering, "what's time got to do with it?"

In one part of our interview, Amy said about her working process as a form of negation:

*I was working in a legacy of a certain kind of improvisational painting, but I was also always thinking as a kind of — as a builder.*⁸

This 'building' is not, from what I understand, building an image or composition, but more akin to looking at all the moves on a chess board game flattened in time.

An article in *The Guardian* recently titled "Clock Watching"⁹ on Jenny Odell's new book *Saving Time*¹⁰, describes how the time-line of our daily schedules and tasks is controlling our lives. Instead of paying attention to other timelines like geographical, seasonal, migratory, the time of sickness, of waiting, of love, loss, silence, sadness, of inquisitiveness, drifting, of the cacophony of children laughing, of the radio on low, weather, of things beyond our control or understanding, of time not to be googled or time sitting in water versus on land, we instead focus on how the day is structured in order to complete tasks and get through it. The article points to the distinction between the two, very different words for time in ancient Greek: Chronos — time in a sequential manner, and Kairos time.

Chronos means time is ahead of us and we follow on a string, putting the tasks and the days behind us, whereas Kairos time — which pertains to an opportune moment — relates back historically to archery and weaving. Literally, the moment of "release" or action. Kairos

⁸ Interview with author conducted April 2023.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/apr/23/clock-watching-meet-the-artist-who-thinks-time-is-ruining-our-lives>

¹⁰ Jenny Odell, *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock* (New York: Random House, 2023).

implies finding the best situation and taking timing into consideration, to act. It means - seeing the hole through which the arrow will pass, and the passing of that arrow.

Chronos is the comrade of time, and he has ruled modern art. He has awarded and bestowed riches upon those who served him, marching forwards, obliterating the past, burying, as in my favorite Lee Lozano piece, each cultural moment with the next. Kairos is a hunter, embedded in the landscape, which is multi-layered, which is not one field, but many overlapping cacophonous sounds and shapes, times, moments, gestures, and their contexts.