Meigh-Andrews. First-person 'witness' authors such as London are often at their best when recalling and bringing these scenes back to life. As a curator, London's writing offers rich insights into the experience of exhibition-making and useful first-hand accounts of important shows she has staged. One notable example is her 1995 exhibition 'Video Spaces: Eight Installations', which focused on the increased visibility of video installation as an art form. While some of the artists are very well known – Stan Douglas (Interview *AM*243), Gary Hill (Interview *AM*170), Chris Marker, Marcel Odenbach, Tony Oursler, Bill Viola, Judith Barry (Interview *AM*352), and Brad Miskell – I was less familiar with Thierry Kuntzel and Teiji Furuhashi. My belated encounter with the latter's queer performance pieces with the Dumb Type collective, and his strange, poetic and activist works, was revelatory. There are too many unanswered questions in this book to adequately cover, notably London's relationship to feminism – she seems to be a lean-in neoliberal, rather than a social radical. Her survival strategy within the patriarchal and neoliberal art world has been to shirk clear polemics; but clear voices for social justice are precisely what we need right now.

Barbara London, *Video/Art: The First Fifty Years*, Phaidon, 2020, 280pp, hb, 75 illus, £27.95, 978 0 714877 59 4.

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Film

Taking the Time

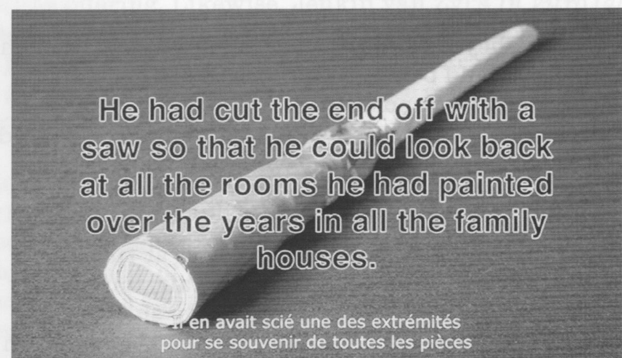
In the mid 1970s the late video artist David Hall promoted the concept of 'time-based media'. I didn't buy it. As a modernist critic bred in the Clement Greenberg tradition of 'medium-specific' values, I viewed Hall's move as an attempt to assimilate video to film, to muddle distinctions essential to my own aspiration of elevating avant-garde cinema to the full rank of fine art.

That, of course, was long before the unforeseen tide of digital image-making swept such distinctions away. Some 40 years later, 'film' has truly arrived, and a youthful aspiration has come to pass: not only does moving-image art now flood galleries and museums, but the two most recent Marcel Duchamp Prizes – the French equivalent of the Turner Prize – have each been awarded to the only cinematic entry among the four competing candidates. Paradoxically, that development has nurtured my growing realisation that Hall was right, though for reasons different from those he advanced, as I will explain below. Perhaps more surprisingly, it has also prompted the unsettling impression that the Duchamp Prize winners 'cheated' – or, more accurately, benefited from unfair conditions.

The 2018 winner, Clément Cogitore, presented *The Evil Eye*, a 15-minute digital-video montage of short clips purchased from image banks. Smartly projected on a largish screen in a blackened room with tiered benches, it had a slick, advertising look and a teasing sense of narrative. In 2019, Éric Baudelaire showed *Un film dramatique* (*A Drama Film*), a nearly two-hour montage of video diaries shot over several years by 21 middle-school pupils in a lower-class suburb of Paris. Screened in a large, dark room with comfortable chairs, it forthrightly and entertainingly explored social and personal questions that evolved over time as the children grew up and as narrative threads wove in and out. Both works were highly cinematic in the theatrical sense of the term.

Compared with their competitors, who exhibited sculptural or painterly installations of a largely conceptual bent, the time-based artists benefited from a more-or-less imposed investment of time on the part of the beholder. Assuming that s/he decided to sit down, the beholder was committed to the passive consumption of flickering images, as opposed to the hard work of deciphering a conceptual installation. The effect was a reduced-scale version of Christian Marclay's wildly successful 24-hour film *The Clock* at the Venice Biennale in 2011: after traipsing from one conceptual installation to another in Venice's cavernous shipyard sheds, biennale-goers slumped with relief into soft, comfortable sofas in a large dark zone where Marclay's found-footage sequences leapt lithely from one nostalgic scene to another, enlivened by a simple visual game (which entailed glimpsing the 'actual' time on a timepiece featured in that scene).

The works by Cogitore and Baudelaire were certainly worthy prize-winners, even if they struck this ageing, blasé critic as somewhat shallow and facile. And they both underlined the extent to which time-based criteria have become critical factors in shaping the art of moving images, in terms of production as well as exhibition. On the institutional circuit, the curatorial difficulties of the 1970s and 1980s – which called for loop projectors, tape decks, TV monitors and so on – have been eliminated by the ease of digital display, which ultimately adopts one of two basic approaches, modelled either on the cinema (viewer seated in a dark room) or on painting (beholder



John Smith, *Dad's Stick*, 2012, video

John Smith, *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, film

standing in front of a wall or screen). For the purposes of this article, I'll ignore the distinct, but non-institutional, 'internet model' of small pictures on a device in hand or lap. The two classic approaches clearly make different demands on the beholder's attentiveness. In the cinema model, once the viewer has come to rest in a darkened room, s/he tends to stay at rest, shielded from external forces, literally 'entranced'. The avant-garde films my generation championed in the 1970s were just that: films, designed (almost without exception) to be seen in a darkened room, comfortably seated, with nothing happening next door. Once that investment in time and place had been made, patience came easier, because 'moving on' meant 'going nowhere'. Long, difficult works that required breaking the boredom barrier, such as Andy Warhol's static portraits and Peter Gidal's ascetic musings, wouldn't stand a chance in today's gallery/museum context, where other still or moving pictures await nearby.

In the painting-on-the-wall model, the viewer becomes a 'moving beholder', shifting at will from one artwork to the other. As soon as attention flags, it will be magnetically drawn elsewhere, rather than turned off, or turned inward, or nudged back to the screen. It is henceforth the beholder, rather than attention, who wanders. This creates a fundamental, if often unrecognised, challenge to time-based artists, who, if they are shrewd, know they must incorporate subjective temporal *perception* into the fabric of a given work: the length of a piece should depend on how it is to be viewed; it should perhaps propose an identifiable progression which the beholder can easily grasp, thereby guiding attention through some formal or narrative structure that conveys a sense of 'beginning, middle and end'; the artist may have to dictate viewing conditions, such as the level of lighting, need for seating, minimal/maximal size of screen etc. Although it is now fashionable to refer to curating as an art, it is in fact moving-image artists who need to be curators of their own work, rather than just launching it into the world. They must design the 'time frame' in which each piece should be set. Otherwise, it simply won't be seen, much less understood.

Similarly, curators who wish to promote time-based media would be wise to avoid swamping gallery goers with too much to see. In terms of attention, more can often mean less, even if the works are by the same artist. The Bill Viola retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2014 was a grand affair, impeccably installed with large screens in relatively shielded rooms. And yet the total running time of the works on show was over seven hours, not including four endless loop pieces; even the most earnest viewer of Viola's incrementally evolving images, knowing that not everything could be seen yet not wanting to 'miss' anything, was inclined to drift away in search of something 'better'.

It might be retorted that such retrospectives are like museums, where no visitors are expected to do it all, but are simply invited to choose particular works to see. But with time-based works this issue becomes existential: either one glimpse is enough, in which case the work is truly 'moving-image art' rather than 'time-based art', because its duration is immaterial, as is often the case with looped works; or else the artist/curator is demanding super-hero powers of the beholder. The upshot is that it becomes unclear at what point the average human can claim to have 'seen' a work.

Examples of carefully curated time-based shows do exist. A strikingly effective exhibition of John Smith's work was held in Noisy-le-Sec, outside Paris, in 2014. Smith – an artist of my generation – began his career as a 'filmmaker'; all his early work was projected cinematically. Yet his show in Noisy-le-Sec was a gallery affair, meticulously curated by the artist in conjunction with Émilie Renard. Of the ten works exhibited (totalling just over 90 minutes), a few short pieces played on video screens in the central hall, while each of the others had its own small darkened room with a bench for several viewers. Because running-times were clearly labelled, it was possible to see several, indeed all, of his pieces in their entirety, from beginning to end. Although the 'wandering beholder' approach was still an option, the selection of works (including two 25-minute pieces) and their mode of presentation encouraged visitors to see them in the form they were originally conceived. Furthermore – and above all – the intellectual wit, visual beauty and formal inventiveness of Smith's work encouraged viewers to linger. Although it received little press coverage, by reasonable critical standards this brilliant show would have merited a Duchamp or Turner Prize.

Indeed, it is the competitive, 'award-meriting' dimension that brings into focus the generalities expressed here. Critical appreciation of time-based work is as difficult as it has always been. Hall's notion of time-based art, designed to blur the specificity of the medium, becomes pertinent today when employed in conjunction with a chosen mode of display, thereby sharpening the distinction between works that insist on a fixed investment of time and attention, and those that do not (regardless of medium). When it comes to judging the quality of competing artworks, this distinction may initially seem as specious as distinguishing large paintings from small, or sculpture from painting. And yet, the time frame in which a moving-image artwork is placed can become a defining characteristic that skews judgement insofar as it intrinsically skews attention span. Is it really fair to measure time-based works against the 'timeless' arts?

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