

Temporal Spasms or, See You Tomorrow in Kiribati!

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Although many of the events announced via e-flux are quite conventional exhibitions, conferences, or book launches, my secret hope (and really my sole interest in this service) is the prospect of coming across things that I do not quite understand. Events that do not fit into the world of art commerce and exhibition making as we know them in an art world that is getting more and more compatible with the world of large corporations. Since many of these things seem to take place in distant locations where I have never set foot, there is often no immediate way to find out if the event in question – an architecture conference in Asia, say – really took place, let alone if it was of any major significance. All I know is that occasionally *something* is announced that interrupts the gray monotony of the global culture industry. Those punctuations, which seem to hint at new possibilities for *art* (at least in my fantasy), make me curious and full of hope: strange and radically new things are going on out there in the world ... But is really the concept of art, with its specific European genealogy, an adequate category for grasping the most innovative of these developments? I once asked Sarat Maharaj, the brilliant writer

and thinker, about these matters, and he offered a terminology involving spasms, research machines, and conductors of new thinking, subjectivity, and action as an alternative. This is what he told me:

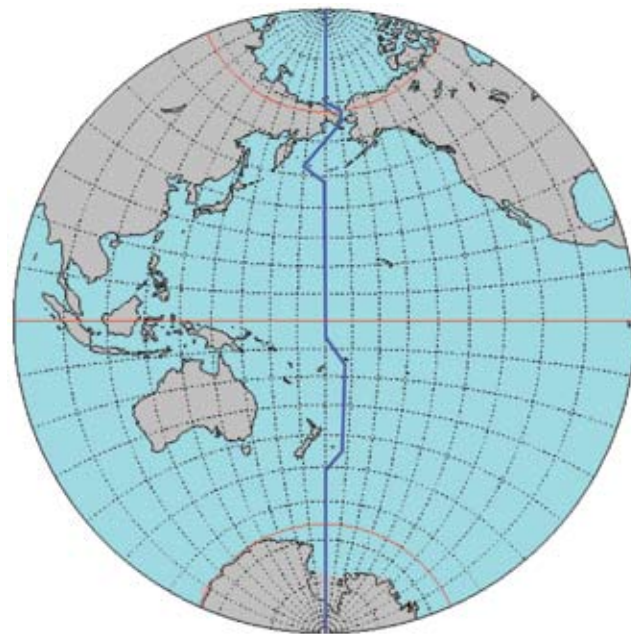
The archaeology of the word "art" as understood within the Western system is an extensive subject, but look how dramatically we are leaving that system! Unless we are alert to the transformation of the concept and what we understand as "visual art," we shall not be able to grasp changes even within what is still conventionally referred to as visual art. There is much activity in India, China, Africa that is radically interdisciplinary. It deterritorializes received concepts of art. Groups working on the Internet or with film, video, performance, and other practices are involved in modes of knowledge production that often have oblique relations to the visual. They amount to spasmodic events that are rather different from what passes as visual art in the museum-gallery system. Are such practices more like research machines through which social, political, visual, statistical, epidemiological data are telescoped? These are visual-intellectual evolu-

tions that cannot be reduced to constructions of the art system. What we call art activity is expanding, extending, transmuting in the global contemporary setting. Hence also my dogged interest in Duchamp's question "How to make a work of art that isn't a work of Art?" For me, it's a marker for ways we might be able to engage with works, events, spasms, ructions that don't look like art and don't count as art, but are somehow electric, energy nodes, attractors, transmitters, conductors of new thinking, new subjectivity and action that visual artwork in the traditional sense is not able to articulate.

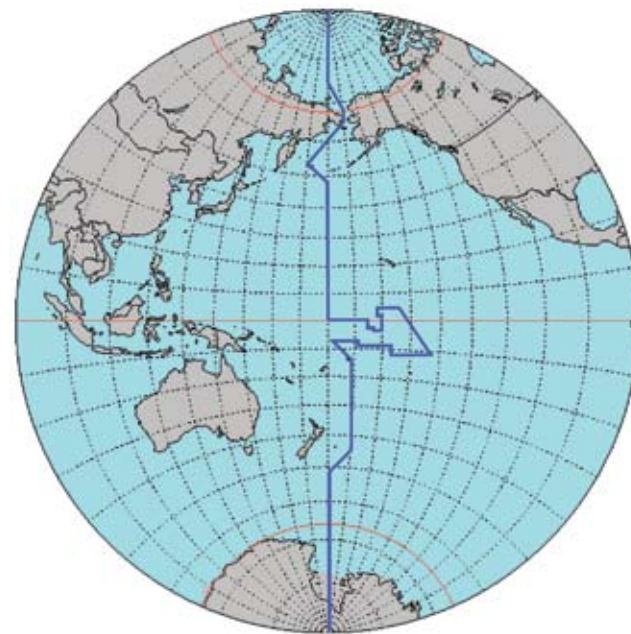
Temporal spasms: in a world where tele-presence and telerobotics are no longer just the ingredients of science fiction novels or utopian visions but features taken for granted in our everyday lives, the very concepts of time, space, movement, and velocity must be renegotiated. In the global omnipresence produced by today's digital technologies, experienced time no longer follows a linear order of successive moments. Rather, it becomes, in the words of Paul Virilio, "a system of representation of a physical world where

future, present, and past become interlined figures of underexposure, exposure, and overexposure."¹ Throughout the last decade (remember: for most of us the Internet is only ten years old!), artists have systematically explored the perceptual, narrative, and poetic possibilities opened up by the global environment produced by new technologies of communication. In a world brimming with digital information, we have moved beyond the age when machines are seen primarily as extensions of the muscular system. Today's technologies are methods of extending the nervous system beyond the traditional confines of the human body. Occasionally they seem capable of altering the very core of experience: the perception of a continuous flow of events across time.

In his novel *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald spelled out the conventional nature of our concept of time. Why do we not measure time in relationship to the growth of trees or the disintegration of limestone for a change? Why this solar obsession?



The location of the International Date Line (IDL) in 1921.



The location of the International Date Line since 1995, after the Kiribati adjustment.

Time, said Austerlitz in the observation room in Greenwich, was by far the most artificial of all our inventions, and in being bound to the planet turning on its own axis was no less arbitrary than would be, say, a calculation based on the growth of trees or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate, quite apart from the fact that the solar day which we take as our guideline does not provide any precise measurement, so that in order to reckon time we have to devise an imaginary, average sun which has an invariable speed of movement and does not incline towards the equator in its orbit.²

In a small essay titled *Chronology*, I have tried to analyze a few works of art that, if Maharaj is right, I should perhaps have called spasms rather than art pieces.³ In a way, they are spasms in time or, more precisely perhaps, spasms of time. I want to add a few more examples: the International Date Line is the imaginary line drawn around the globe, marking the boundary between today and tomorrow. Although commonly identified as being 180° longitude from the meridian located in Greenwich, England, the IDL has no fixed

location and no international law that proclaims its existence. In 1995, the small archipelago of Kiribati located in the south pacific moved the International Date Line east to 150°, so that the entire country would then be situated on the Western, “tomorrow,” side of the IDL. Julieta Aranda, who sent me this information, materializes this anomaly of time in a work consisting of a wall that replicates the path of the International Date Line. Viewers can traverse this physical version of the elusive entity that divides past from future, and contemplate its history in the presentation of charts, scientific diagrams, and related ephemera that accompanies this representation. This work certainly represents a temporal spasm.

Another example: in *Your Sun Machine* Olafur Eliasson created a “cosmological” installation with the simplest of means. It is a work about the relationship between sun and earth. His contribution is nothing but a hole in the roof of the Californian gallery where the work was presented. Above the sun blazes, creating a vibrantly hot patch of light on the gallery floor. If you concentrate on the patch, you can actually see the sun

moving. Until you remember something you learned in school: the reason that the light of this heavenly body creeps across the floor is that you and your own little planet are tearing across the universe at an unimaginable speed. Or had you forgotten that?

Francis Alÿs' video *Zocale* is also a work of art that reminds us of certain fundamental cosmic facts. A flag that stands at the center of the huge square in Mexico City casts a shadow that attracts people as they try to escape the relentless light that falls onto the plaza. Thus a large solar clock is created with human figures as an element. This is an artwork about the Mexican sun, about the movement of planet Earth through space, and about the social life in the Mexican capital. A more complicated solar clock has been constructed by Tobias Rehberger: *7 corners of the world* consists of 111 lamps ordered in nine groups. It belongs to a series of works that use light and digital technology to connect a local situation with one or several other locations around the globe. As planet Earth circles the sun, different groups are activated. Recreating the light in distant cities such as Kyoto and Las Vegas, they

shine with increasing strength and then slowly fade away. The entire room thus functions as a complicated solar clock that displays the constellation of the two heavenly bodies. The work is a poly-rhythmic light machine, at once cosmic and very down-to-earth. The viewer who traverses the room walks from time zone to time zone.⁴

All of these works seem to articulate a solar geography that has been in place since Plato. Let's remind ourselves of his *Timaeus*, where time is called the "moving image of eternity." It consists of days, nights, months, and years: "They are all parts of time, and the past and the future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to eternal being, for we say that it 'was,' or 'is,' or 'will be,' but the truth is that 'is' alone is properly attributed to it."⁵ That which truly is, is the eternal Present, the Now. To break with the powerful linear conception of time as a line consisting of Now-points seems to require a spatialization of a new kind. We need richer and more intricate architectural models that allow for temporal heterogeneity and multiplicity: not one line but always

many. Maze-like temporalities – by necessity always thought of in the plural – that cannot be visualized as a line of successive points, but rather as a pattern of bifurcating and divergent series, or, in the words of Jorge Luis Borges, as a "garden of forking paths." In his story, Borges alludes to a Chinese architect and philosopher, Ts'ui Pen, who does not believe in a uniform, absolute time: "He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of diverging, convergent, and parallel times. This network of times that approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majorities of these times. In some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us."⁶

Each new posting on e-flux travels through such a maze. Each represents a spasm in time, and sometimes one of time. Those are the really precious ones that you should not delete but collect in a secret folder and save for eternity. In the future they will become extremely valuable.

In case you wonder, the headquarters have now moved to Kiribati.

- 1 Paul Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, Sage, London, 2000, p. 38.
- 2 W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by A. Bell, Penguin, London, 2001, p. 141.
- 3 Daniel Birnbaum, *Chronology*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2005.
- 4 A large group exhibition titled *Here Comes the Sun* at Stockholm's Magasin 3 in the summer of 2005 contained a number of works that are also solar clocks. The show, curated by Rosa Martinez, Jerome Sans, Sarit Shapira, and myself, might (this is my aspiration) travel to Kiribati.
- 5 Plato, *Timaeus* 37 E in *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1961.
- 6 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, Penguin, London, 1970, p. 53.