

## Doomsday will always be in the future, even if it is a future that is past...

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I'm interested here firstly to ask you to cast an ironic and flexible memory back to the days leading up to the moment of Y2K, and to think about the *difference* between what you *saw* and what you *heard* in relation to the subject.

### **1. Time is a problem of attention:**

Screening while I speak is part of one of the American artist Andy Warhol's films from 1962, titled *Kiss*. The choice of this film was in part arbitrary. I could have screened other of Warhol's films from this period: *Empire*, *Blow Job*, *Sleep*, any of the 15 minute portrait series. I chose this body of work by Warhol to draw your subjective attention to the issues with which I would like to trace here - the duration of time, attention, expectation (the difference between what you hear and what you see) desire and doubt, invention and finally entropy. These are also issues which surround(ed) Y2K, as it was essentially a temporal event, bound within the artificial tick tock of the hypnotic and seductive chronological clock; caught up in the ticking down of religious time bombs and cult activities and the speeding up of the economic system. Doom and desire are conjoined.

Jonas Mekas, a film maker who first screened these early Warhol films in the 1960s noted the contemporary audience's reaction: "As time goes [by]," he said,

“those who remain [in the theatre], relax. Images begin to work on them in time. They begin to think about the images. It becomes a meditative process.”<sup>1</sup>

## **2. The temporal : Now do I have your attention ?**

Y2K concepts allowed a spatialisation of time to occur and as a result, *time had to expand* to be able to encompass new information and ideas, rather like enabling virtual memory. Such an historical moment provides for individuals a point to freely montage together experience - outside of standardised temporal narrative continuity; outside of mechanical chronological time and to perhaps acknowledge their existence within a mode of simultaneity. Operating within a simultaneous mode of time is a medium by which we are all now accustomed to. We often call it virtual reality, but it is also a demonstration of virtual time. Reading a book, talking to someone, patting the cat, surfing the net, answering email, breastfeeding your child, drinking your tea, looking at the painting on the wall, the books on your desk, watching a film, listening to me talk, thinking about how much longer they can kiss for, watching the person next to you, thinking about your dinner, where you parked your car, and so on. A cubist experience of time. A splintering, or crystallisation of the events in time, within a moment, which causes a spatialisation of time. It would seem that because of this acknowledgment of the temporal dimension, that time is halted, but this is not the case as we know from experience. Instead, we can appreciate that time

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as Mekas, recorded in *Andy Warhol Superstar*.

increases, or expands as a result of such spatialisations. I'm referring to not just mechanical time, but also to accumulated time, lived time, and temporal experiences such as deja - vu which indicate to us that time's arrow could in fact go in more than one straight direction.

### **3. An apocalyptic narrative from the year 1999: (this film is now available for hire on DVD)**

The multiple realities of Y2K were well represented in David Cronenberg's film released in 1999, titled ExisTenz. The film's technology, specifically its computer systems, were mutations of a worst case scenario post Y2K world; one in which all electronic systems crashed and subsequently evolved to encompass prior knowledge, and to interface with their available environment. Cronenberg's circuitry was non mechanical, and entirely organic. In ExisTenz, computers themselves are organic creatures; breast, foot, mouth and phallic shaped pods have internal soft organs which are nourished by organic blood. These corporeal shapes heave as information downloads, and their power source is an umbilical cord connection to the human host body with all of its attendant drifts of desires and physical wants.

A scene from the film depicts the two main characters about to enter one of the other virtual worlds of existence. There is an ironic play within the scene as one

of the characters is the inventor, the creator of the 'game of existence', and thus the parallel is drawn, what if you were invited to play a game of creation with your God ? The genesis and the subsequent development of life is reflected upon.

Cronenberg develops the cells of life as his technology advances; Life separates, crystallises, and fractures into multiple environments and phenomenological selves. The threats of deadly infections are ever present, but controllable. Soft skins are changing and rapidly evolving. Time is dimensionalised according to which self is active. My point here in relation to Y2K is double: firstly to draw your attention to Cronenberg's homage and representation of a Surrealist awareness of the ability of the organic form to synthesise. That is unite its perception of the ever changing environment (drawing upon memory, experience, knowledge) and then intelligently / instinctually / psychotically learn and thereby act within the shifting environment. As Keith Ansell Pearson wrote: "Need is the organic form of expectation".<sup>2</sup> This is the secondary idea underlined by Y2K issues I would like to draw your attention to; that of expectation; also one of the great subjects of Warhol's recordings in the early 1960s. We expect something to happen ; we as organisms need something to happen in order to learn, act, to make contingency plans and thus evolve. Warhol's machine recorded human's needs - to sleep, eat, fuck; to observe and desire the empirical world ; that is to say, human's organic expectations, and their driving forces. Cronenberg's representation of the evolution, the convergence of technology and the organic is

a representation of the future. We desire to see what happens, we have expectations about our paradise, or our post apocalyptic world. Pre Y2K governmental contingency plans for managing the potential massive change in social operations should have developed structures which would serve to mediate, or even conceptualise the potential of a changed environment, but didn't.

#### **4. Pregnant time**

Another narrative scenario relative to Y2K concerns I want to consider is the creation and focus on the temporal passage and development of human consciousness, which artists often represent as forces within in the existing world. Identifying a temporal mode is a matter of actualising the virtual - something which is real, but unseen. This is not a undertaking to make a *resemblance*, rather it involves *creation*, like Cronenberg's film.

An American artist who greatly admired Warhol's work was Robert Smithson. Smithson was ten years younger than Warhol, and was also focussed on the recording and representation of the vernacular - simply what was in front of you - the results of which often had a certain black humour - (albeit Warhol's very Eastern European quirkiness has different concerns from Smithson's Beat style ironic reaction to white American middle class culture.) Smithson's early films like Warhol's, utilise a documentary strategy. Both processed their information

within a methodological scale which occurred in terms of 'time' rather than 'space'. As witnesses to the duration of and post Y2K occurrence, we as contemporary viewers, were also subjected to a scale of time which compressed space on the eve of Y2K, December 31, 1999. Then a global event of consecutive and continuous fireworks could be observed on live web and television broadcasts of the 'moment' of doom; of an arrested point in historical time, a spatialisation of temporality and a demonstration of the simultaneous mode of the virtual times of everyday life in the year 2000.

Smithson's work refers its viewers to a similar discourse of the epistemological structure of time to the one I have just constructed. That is, the questioning of the context, the how and why of temporality, and its mediating effect on the whole of human social structures. As a result of his generation's concern with apocalyptic ideologies of the 1960s, Smithson researched millenarian ideologies and historical and contemporary eschatological fears (the end of the world theories) which derive from the Christian bible as part of his work.

Smithson's art was deeply concerned with theories of time, and he firmly believed, as did many of his generation of artists of the 1960s, that the end of time was inevitable. Smithson's works were about decay, closed structures, time machines, and the desire to escape this world. His 1970 film, *The Spiral Jetty* is a text which attempts to describe the vast scales of time, and represent the process of entropy, symbolised in the film by the sun.<sup>3</sup> Entropy<sup>4</sup> is a scientific

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further explanation behind the Spiral Jetty, see Smithson's essay, "The Spiral Jetty" written in 1972, reprinted in *Robert Rauschenberg: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996, 13-153.

term, but one also used in art and literature to refer to: “the constant and irreversible degradation of energy in every system, a degradation that results in a continually increasing state of disorder and of nondifferentiation within matter”.<sup>5</sup>

An obvious example of entropy is the inevitable cooling down of our solar-system, and the irreversible dissipation of the energy of the earth’s sun. The film shows the construction of Smithson’s massive work in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, United States of America, April 1970. The jetty Smithson made is in the form of an anti clockwise spiral, a jetty which provides no obvious thalassic activity. The virtual whole of the spiral is made into a time machine by Smithson’s cinematic treatment.

In a final section of the film, Smithson recites a passage from one of his favourite science fictions stories by John Taine, where humans enter into the ‘time stream’ to search for the origins and the future of humankind at various times in history and at various evolutionary stages of the Earth.<sup>6</sup>

Time is germinated when the end of the spiral is perceptually and conceptually reached; it is the catalyst to move into the time stream, to play the game of temporal existences. Similar things have happened with post Y2K theories; instead of an end point being reached, we find a conceptual development

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word ‘entropy’ was coined by the German physicist Rudolf Clausius. Historical outline of the concept given by Rémy Bonne, *The Children of Time. Causality, Entropy, Becoming*, [1990]trans. E.C.Neher, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995, p.115.

Joseph-Alain Bois, “To Introduce a User’s Guide [to Formless]”, *October* 78, Fall 1996, pp.21-37, p.33.

occurring. This is a reflection of durational knowledge; daily experiences which demonstrate that things and events don't just age, they can also evolve. The investigation of durational knowledge by Smithson substantiates French philosopher Henri Bergson's thesis (in his book *Creative Evolution* <sup>7</sup>), which states that: "Duration is the continuous progress of the past which knaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation."<sup>8</sup> Time in Smithson's work closely follows Bergson's concept of duration. Like Cronenberg's *Existenz*, such beliefs also follow Aristotle's notion of the Universe: *as a place which contains other places*. Smithson's works are temporal vehicles which were purpose built to accommodate this particular kind of 'growth'. A temporal growth which expands to encompass new cognitive forms.

Smithson's description of what one finds at the end of the physical / mental traversing of the *Spiral Jetty* declares this belief. The end point of the jetty is an event which acts to take perception to a place where the mind is able to spatialize time and travel to other dimensions, and other geological times. This is virtual time where one is able to comprehend the passage of duration; time's Bergsonian swelling of an existing place.

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<sup>7</sup> passage Smithson quotes from is from John Taine (Eric Temple Bell), *The Time Stream*, New York: Dover, 1971,

This was originally published in 1931-2 in *Wonder Stories*.

<sup>8</sup> Smithson had a copy of this book in his library, noted in Valentin Tatransky, "Bibliothèque de Robert Smithson. Livres, s, disques", *Robert Smithson - Le Paysage Entropique 1960/1973*, ex.cat., Brussel: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1994, p.256.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* [1907], trans. Arthur Mitchell, London: Macmillan and Co, 1912, p. 5.

#### 4. The End

In all narratives I've drawn together here - Warhol's mechanical recording of time and the drifts of desire across that time; some of the themes generated by ExisTenze , Robert Smithson's ironic yet uneasy representation of both the end and endlessness of time , the concept which I'd like to ask you to consider is the epistemological shift which has occurred as a result of reaching a temporal point like Y2K. Social attitudes and perception (memory, knowledge, experience ) of temporality are changing, and this can greatly effect individual and collective development. Warhol, Smithson, Cronenberg are to my mind, a few key examples of artists whose work has disclosed the temporal conditions which were the precursors of our contemporary apocalyptic moment of Y2K. Their individual work looks at the ways in which we *configure* and *confine* and *confuse* the boundaries of time through a lack of attention (Warhol), a reliance on unsubstantiated scientific ideas (Smithson), and an uneasy relationship between the physical body and technology (Cronenberg). Their respective work also demonstrates the way that mechanical time is only relevant to certain routine realities, which are just one level of the simultaneous mode of virtual times available to us. Y2K, to me, is a contemporary temporal sign which signals the boundless potential of human thought.

**Post script: An apocalyptic narrative for the year 2000: (this is a dream I had last week)**

Awareness of an impending apocalypse spread via underground circuits of communication. Mainstream society was not informed or aware. Preparation for this apocalypse was extreme. It called for the participant to remove all skin, soft flesh, internal organs from their bodies, with just their head/brain kept intact; fleshed. From the base of the neck, under the chin a few circuit wires led to a small zip up plastic pouch, which the person kept in the pocket of their coat (everyone undertaking decorporealisation wore coats, so as not to disturb the general populace with their skeletal figures, jokingly reminiscent of a Ray Harryhausen film - you saw them, and had to laugh, despite the horror). In the early weeks, there were a few accidental over applications of the dark green, spirulina type liquid which removed the flesh susceptible to radiation from the impending explosion of the sun. Some people lost their entire arm and hand bones, but they still spread the transmuting liquid seriously and without hesitation. Then the millennial moment occurred, whilst preparations were still being made, and many unprepared people were caught in the fiery moments, and suffered death from extreme sunstroke but then even more as their environments started to disintegrate, the slow movement of a global tremor gaining irreversible momentum. The new race of skeleton people began designing soft but strong, malleable armours for their bones, starting with the protection of the reproductive systems of those soft skins still growing; (babies, children), adrenalin pushing their bones to overcome, to evolve, to succeed, to

propagate, to become and thus to overcome apocalyptic time . Durer's skeletal figures of death find refuge in polyurethane byproducts, and survive the plague. Instead of being figures of death, they survive to be the propagators of another race. A new conquest outside the congealed system of Western capitalism's 2000 year old rhythm of inclusion and integration is begun through a process of dematerialisation and denaturalisation.