

## What goes around, comes around: time's cycle in the work of Dennis Oppenheim, Frank Gillette, and Shirley Shor

### *Prologue*

I could not help observing that man is only superficially a reasoning animal. Basically, he is a desiring, suffering, death-conscious and hence, a time-conscious creature. Temporal experience, it seemed, more than any other aspect of existence is all- pervasive, intimate, and immediate. . . . In short, it appeared to me that time must and should occupy the center of man's intellectual and emotive interest.

-- J.T. Fraser, ed., *The Voices of Time*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1981, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, pp. xvii-xviii.

It is the paradox of modernity-- or one of them, anyway-- that the more efficient we become at saving time, the less of it there seems to be. Our days are doled out in arbitrary increments of communication or travel, production or consumption, that have little to do with the rhythms of either the body or the turning world, and disappointment ensues when ten tasks aren't accomplished in five hours. Yet Fraser's observation suggests that our obsession with time *passing* (and our immanent, inconvenient mortality) is far from being a consequence of modern life. Long before human beings began to take time's measure by recording successions of historical events, they experienced it as a perpetually revolving wheel of day and night, summer and winter, unaltered by even the rise and fall of entire civilizations. These essentially dichotomous ways of describing history (and its eventual destination, the future) are *time's arrow* and *time's cycle*. The first suggests that history is "an irreversible sequence of unrepeatabe events." Battles, inventions, tidal waves and discoveries all take place along a line that goes from an initial falling domino to (a still unknown) final destination. In time's cycle, on the other hand, the only motion is that of repetition. Fundamental states are unchanged by successions of seasons and centuries, which are themselves part of a vast, expanding spiral that has no destination or conclusion.

Modern life's ever-increasing volume of events both good and bad (and the ever-faster speed at which we learn about them) could make an idea like the slow, almost ponderous spinning of time's cycle seem creaky and quaint. But even as it has become possible to create, capture and present ever-more spectacular images and ideas, some artists have chosen to use such tools and techniques to take a measure of a time so deep, so broad and so high that it can barely be imagined. In different yet related ways, works in the Berkeley Art Museum's collection by Dennis Oppenheim, Frank Gillette, and Shirley Shor adroitly manipulate relationships between time and space, randomness and repetition, until time flies, stands still-- or disappears. In addition, another kind of time links the work of these three: the arrow and cycle of art history, in which works look back to those of other artists as they move forward into uncharted territory.

1.

My use of quasi-scientific nuance or notation was meant to oppose abstract gestures on the land, lines that only meant themselves and didn't refer to anything else. I believed applying abstract gestures onto the land was carrying a studio ideology that referred to painting, out of doors. It was retrograde. If you were going to use land, you should make it part of a holistic, ecological, geological, anthropological continuum.-- Dennis Oppenheim

A geopolitical boundary was literally at the center of *Annual Rings*, an action performed by Dennis Oppenheim early in his career and documented by a series of photographs in the collection of the museum. The full caption of these images explicates the mysterious pictures: *Annual Rings, U.S.A. / Canada boundary at Fort Kent, Maine and Clair, New Brunswick. Schemata of annual rings severed by political boundary. Time: U.S.A, 1:30 PM, Canada: 2:30 PM, 1968-69.* Annual rings are the concentric layers of wood created as a tree or shrub grows. They are a durable, visible proof of the passage of seasons or years<sup>1</sup> Radically altering their scale, Oppenheim reconceived his rings as lines scraped through snow that had fallen on the frozen surface of a river that separates two countries and time zones. Working against "the Modernist crypto-religious belief in the artwork as eternal and autonomous,"<sup>2</sup> he made a piece out of frozen water that would either disappear under more snow or melt away.

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<sup>1</sup> In wet years more than one ring of light and dark wood can form, though most commonly one ring represents a cycle that spans four seasons.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Oppenheim Selected Works, 1967-90, Alanna Heiss/ Thomas McEvelley, p.20

As memorialized in the photographs, Oppenheim's rings are monumental, requiring a wider view than the camera made possible in order to be completely seen. Neatly and precisely carved with a (Duchampian) snow shovel, they form a quasi-scientific diagram of time's cycle that breaches the dark river --the national boundary-- as well as the invisible demarcation between Eastern Standard Time and Atlantic Standard Time. In retrospect, Oppenheim's act seems mildly anarchistic, in light of the fact that it was 1968, a time when young American draft resisters were fleeing conscription into the Viet Nam War by entering Canada. In addition, he seems to be pointing our attention towards the conflict between our private internal clocks and the public temporal standard dictated by the conveniences of modern transportation (trains) and communication (telegraphs). When Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* was published in 1907, the idea of a Standard World Time had only recently come into being. In Conrad's book, the protagonist's mission is to 'blow up the Meridian;' that is, to destroy the Greenwich Observatory. Though these rings in the snow don't implicate any such violent act, they do ask whether it's really a different time on one side of the water than it is on the other. Are we an hour older on one side of the circle, an hour younger on the other?

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We say that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed...We cooperate with mechanics in destroying the old poetry of distance and wild solitudes..." FT Marinetti

Aransas: Axis of observation (1978) offers its viewers an opportunity to be at the center of the meditative wildness of a landscape untouched by Marinetti's "beauty of speed:" to regain a place in an Eden setting by embracing the artist's strategy of vision. Frank Gillette's innovative video installation consists of six monitors arranged at compass points around a circle. Two pairs face each other at either end of a North/South axis; single monitors are placed at East and West. On each screen, a different nonlinear sequence of images plays continuously, showing the marshes, prairies, tidal flats and seashore of Aransas County in south Texas. Sometimes the camera shifts quickly from the intimate examination of plants or animals to wide vistas of water and sky. Sometimes it stays on one image for a minute or two. But however long each scene remains on the screen, the camera is generally fixed in place. Water and wind are moving constantly, but we, the observers, are not.

Gillette's strikingly original (if ultimately disorienting) use of what was then a very new technology draws upon the anti-Modernist stance expressed in the previous decade by artists like Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim through site-based works of Earth Art. Aransas: Axis of Observation represents the execution of a system, a strategy, a series of ideas and principles. It is not a Romantic paean to the beauty of Nature, but rather a highly-mediated distillation of ephemeral moments into something that aspires to aeviternity<sup>3</sup>. To make these tapes, Gillette recorded fifty hours of material at thirty-four different locations. He then edited this footage using a complex metrical structure guided by three basic criteria: scale, angle of vision, and duration. Like Oppenheim's quasi-scientific overlay of one kind of time over another, this is a clearly a system based in ideas and principles rather than intuitive gestures. As Gillette has described it, "Th(is) strategic method aims to extract natural time by isolating it in invented time."<sup>4</sup> In other words, his intent is to take time's cycle and manipulate it, and through it, to manipulate his viewers.

Aransas County's vast uninhabited spaces are divided between a wildlife refuge and large ranches. When this piece was made nearly thirty years ago, the county was home to many rare species of birds and animals, including a few that were verging on extinction. Unlike most of the United States, it probably still looks the same as it has for centuries—maybe even millennia. This quality of atemporality is part of what allows Gillette to carry out his complex manipulations. At any given moment, most of the six programs feature water, flowing quickly or rippling almost imperceptibly; seen close up, or from a distance. This repeating motif is a reminder of nature's seemingly random, infinitely complex formlessness. It can be difficult to measure one's location or even size against Gillette's elaborate construction of time and space. Sometimes when the camera pulls back in a shift of scale, what appeared to be a clump of weedy grasses reveals itself as trees, moving slightly in the wind. In this unmapped terrain, we think we know where we are-- but without knowing the time, we can't go forward or back. Instead, like Leopold Bloom, we are in a present that repeats itself, sometimes, slowly, sometimes quickly.

**(NOTE: a reproduction of one of Gillette's diagrams here might be interesting.)**

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<sup>3</sup> Aeviternity differs from time and eternity as something midway between them. (looking for better definition)

The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it... It is the map that precedes the territory.

*Baudrillard, Simulations*

Duration and scale come into play as well in Landslide, Shirley Schor's hypnotic projection piece from 2004. As with Gillette and Oppenheim's works, one of Schor's subjects is landscape manipulated through time. Schor's terrain, however, is wholly fictional. It consists of a real-time animation, continually reconfigured by computer code created by the artist, that is projected onto the surface of a sandbox measuring four by six feet. The surface of the sand has been shaped into gentle undulations, reinforcing the impression that this rectangle represents a map-- albeit one that is continually in flux. A two minute cycle begins with a twinkling field of pixels, each a different color from its neighbor. This chaos changes gradually into slight order: little clumps of three and four squares of the same hue. These aggregations become larger and larger, and soon their outlines suggest the acreage of farms, the boundaries of counties or planned communities, then shifting borders of contentious nation states. Colors begin to be eliminated, swallowed up by the ever-larger, ever-shifting shapes. This process of conglomeration/ annexation continues until only two colors remain. Land and sea? The territories of two vast superpowers? Delineations between good and evil, Marxist and Capitalist, sweet and toxic? After ten seconds of stillness, the two interlocked forms dissolve into a colorful dazzle of individual pixels, and the cycle begins again. But every iteration is unique. Embodying the perfect randomness of nature, Schor's software is a set of operations rather than of specific directions. No matter how many times it forms and dissolves, the map will always be different. Like the jostling, restless molecules of water in Gillette's sequences of images, these little colored pixels never stop moving. Like the present moment—which, as Bergson says, is all we ever really know anyway-- they are as ephemeral as melting snow.

Despite the fact that Schor's piece could be seen as coming out of things like the precession of simulacra, its connections to the radical notions of a different time are worth noting. One of Oppenheim's most important early works, and one of the first earthworks to actually exist as more than a sketch or proposal, was an immense, systematic arrangement of lines of rectangular boards pushed into a slope of sandy dirt. Its title was Landslide. And Schor's sandbox is a kind of 'non-site' that Smithson might have appreciated. Still, Schor's Landslide could only exist in the twenty-first century—not only technologically, but conceptually. Her seductive map's perpetual state of fast-forward is a reminder of not only how rapidly

events take place, but how instantaneously we learn about them, in a play of moving lights that make even the most horrific of events into a kind of entertainment. The act of mapping itself suggests an imposition of culture (language, belief, ownership?? The conceptual??) over a topography. But what happens when the inextricably intertwined topographies of culture and the physical landscape lose their meaning overnight? Such questions are made more poignant by the fact that Shor, who currently lives in San Francisco, was born (grew up??) in Israel.

#### IV.

*Ars longa, vita brevis.*

In a way, all art is about time: how brief a life is, and our desire to prolong our presence in the form of an image or idea. We want to know what happens in the next chapter, and if we can't, we at least want to have some effect on the outcome. A second piece by Oppenheim in the museum's collection gives poetic form to this anxiety about the future. Ground Gel (1972) is a 35 mm slide sequence with an accompanying soundtrack (all of which has now been transferred to DVD). The entire hour-long sequence consists of speed-blurred still images of Oppenheim in the process of swinging his two and a half year old daughter Chandra around him, her body pulled out at a right angle to his by centrifugal force. This *pas de deux* is seen from directly over their heads, creating the sensation that we, too, like Chandra, are suspended in midair in some indefinable location. As the images change at intervals of a second and a half, the direction of the two conjoined figures changes, like the swinging needle on a compass. When they are captured in longer exposures at slower shutter speeds, they melt into complete abstraction, finally disappearing into the mottled floor/ground beneath them. The accompanying soundtrack is Oppenheim's voice, whispering phrases almost indecipherably into a microphone. It's as if he's watching with us as his daughter becomes a circle of fuzzy light : 'I don't want to be able to see you... want you to go past me... want to go out there and touch you... you're going past me soon... you're going to take me past myself... I'm going with you ... I can't see you now...you've taken me past myself....' Chandra, who is both his work of art and his collaborator, is Oppenheim's access to the future. The longing voiced in this piece is familiar -- to be taken past ourselves to a place of omniscience, of *aeviternity*, where time's arrow and cycle are no longer experienced as opposing models because there is no past or future. In different ways, the works of all three of these artists point us towards understanding such a measure of time.

