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Facing the Real: Timeless Art and Performative Time^{*}

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University of Salamanca

ABSTRACT. This contribution analyzes the uses of time linked to materials in contemporary art practices. In the first part of the argument I consider the significance of the contemporary turning away from the normative idea that time should be external or non-intrinsic to fine or visual artworks. The change in mentality concerning the value of time in these works of art has been especially transforming among artists and opened up new opportunities for their creative work. I am particularly interested in the possibilities of an aesthetic translation of the human experience of time into the so-called spatial artworks through the intervention of changeable, non-permanent or non-lasting materials. When time ceases to be seen as a destructive element whose intervention should be avoided, or as a simple subject that the picture tries to depict, it can then be regarded as any other artistic material or as working inside the artistic materials as an active element that can attain a high impact on the final solution of the artistic process. Consequently, artists, viewers, art conservation institutions and so on ought to acknowledge that the temporal nodes should always count as a significant aesthetic component and that the performative temporal dimension is intimately linked to the amplification of the material possibilities in the creative process. In connection with this, I discuss the blurring of the difference between the real and the representational in art practices and how that affects the very presence of temporal dimensions. The paper concludes with the proposal of a new temporal level in works of art that modifies (our temporal understanding of) the identity of the work.

i. Introduction

The French painter François Perrier traveled to Rome in 1635, as was customary for artists in his day, to study the works of classical antiquity. In an engraving entitled “Time devouring works of art” which he made for

^{*} I would like to thank Javier Gil, who read the first draft of the text and Diane Garvey who helped me greatly with the final English version.

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the cover of *Segmenta Nobil. Signorum et Statuarum quae Roma* of 1638, time appears personified as an old man with wings, with the particularity that he is nibbling on the Belvedere Torso. This torso is actually the remains of a sculpture (a ruin). Its extremities and head are missing, yet it preserves the intense expressiveness and twisting typical of the Hellenistic period.

Even when artists fervently desired to live up to the Hippocratic maxim *ars longa, vita brevis*, the reality is that the ruins and remains of grandiose civilizations such as Greece and Rome revealed to them a force destructive of the treasures of the past. Ovid's motto of time as a devourer of all things *tempus edax rerum* was popular among Perrier's fellow artists. In many cases, a concern with the destructive effects of time can be observed in their choice of themes, but an interpretation as literal as that of "Time devouring works of art" was unusual.

Addressing this same degradation of classical sculptures caused by the passing of time, Marguerite Yourcenar has described, from a contemporary sensibility that makes a lively contrast to Perrier's defeatism, the unique journey that certain works of art have taken that has led them to undergo this process of deterioration. In her text, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, Yourcenar affirms that the day the sculptor finishes his or her work is when the life of the statue begins, that the work of art is autonomous and that, by analogy with the organic growth of human beings, it continues to evolve over time.¹ Instead of viewing the passage of time as a devourer of the uniqueness of the work, which at most can expect to survive only if it maintains its artistic qualities based on certain fine materials, Yourcenar considers that the passing of centuries adds significance to the work, that the work of time and its contingencies confer "personality" on the work of art, in other words, they give it a "biography".

¹ "On the day when a statue is finished, its life, in a certain sense, begins. The first phase, in which it has been brought, by means of the sculptor's efforts, out of the block of stone into human shape, is over; a second phase, stretching along the course of centuries, through alternations of adoration, admiration, love, hatred, and indifference, and successive degrees of erosion and attrition, will bit by bit return it to the state of unformed mineral mass out of which its sculptor had taken it. [...] Those hard objects fashioned in imitation of the forms of organic life, have, in their own way, undergone the equivalent of fatigue, age, and unhappiness. They have changed in the way time changes us". Yourcenar, Marguerite (1992), *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Despite her idealization, the organic references and the anthropocentric metaphor, Yourcenar hits the mark with a trait that seems more typical of certain contemporary works of art which use much less extensive time lapses. I refer to the possibility of understanding time in a creative and self-generating way, and of considering that a work of art can be action, or be carried out actively, deploying its meanings thanks to a process that is essential to it. To do so it is necessary to articulate the idea that time can be just another one of the materials that go into a work of art. This in turn means that we have to see different ways of perceiving the relation between the material and the work of art. The introduction of new materials in the processes of creating works of art has sharpened our awareness of the responsibility the materials themselves have in the final result. We will thus discuss the works of certain artists taking into account their conscious, committed and even metaphorical use of some materials.

2. New Materials and their Meaning

Artists choose materials for their plastic qualities and for how they can be efficiently adapted to the intentionality of the work in question. This choice entails many risks, since materials are neither technically nor ideologically innocuous. The decision to use certain *things* leads to the work being wrapped up in a “balloon of meaning”², since these *things* in themselves contain semantic layers that can call up an additional set of possible meanings. But neither the complicity of the artist with the material chosen nor the qualities or symbolic charge of that material can alone guarantee the efficacy or quality of the work. What is decisive is the way in which these materials are used and how they act in the work in an integrated way.

This idea –the priority of the artistic efficacy of materials superimposed on the pure evidence of their versatility– was what motivated in 1969 one of the most famous exhibitions of the Whitney Museum of American Art de Nueva York: *Anti-Illusion: Procedures / Materials*. In the creative works making up this showing what was most outstanding was the desire

² This term about the rich imagery and many different connotations that a particular material may evoke has been taken from the sculptor Tony Cragg, quoted in Guldemond, J. (1999), “Artificial Respiration”, in Hummelen & Sillé (eds.), *Modern Art: Who Cares?* Amsterdam: The Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, p. 79.

to make works of art using materials outside the artistic tradition, though quite common in everyday life. They showed an intense concern with the perishable, the arbitrary, and what is intrinsic to the material. This signaled a radical change in approach that obliges the spectator to focus attention on the materials and processes, and not on the finished form, the final result.

Eva Hesse was one of the participating artists with the work called *Expanded Expansion*, a large sculpture formed by cloths of gauze impregnated with latex and held up with fiberglass posts. When San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art programmed a retrospective of Eva Hesse in 2002, this work, as well as a few others, could not be shown. Many of her works had deteriorated so much, thirty years after their creation, that they could not be moved owing to their extreme fragility³. We know by way of collaborators close to Hesse that she was well aware that her works might not be lasting, and not only did this circumstance not worry her, but she also may have considered it an attribute⁴.

The vulnerability of works like this one poses large dilemmas for collections and museums responsible for deciding what to do with them. That is why it is becoming more and more frequent for museum preservation departments to work hand in hand with artists in storing, together with the works pertaining to the collections, the necessary information on how to proceed when a work deteriorates in the more or less near future⁵. In the case of ephemeral materials, the objective is to preserve their qualities by protecting the works from light, damp, heat or bacteria, but what happens when these destructive factors actually form an integral part of the work? A special feature of a large number of art works is that they were made with ephemeral materials and that the deterioration resulting from the disintegration inherent to these materials was an essential part of the work itself. This changing condition of the material means that the

³ Sylvia Hochfield (2002), "Sticks and Stones and Lemon Cough Drops", *Artnews*, 101 (8), p.117.

⁴ Arthur Danto (1994), *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, p. 268.

⁵ Some strategies that have been used to tackle the obsolescence of particular artworks in the Guggenheim Collection are explained in the Variable Media Network website: <http://www.variablemedia.net/> (accessed October 1, 2015)

work acquires a specific duration that coincides with the transformation or the final disappearance of the material used. Before verifying in what sense this duration in fact opens up a unique temporal dimension, a kind of *biography* that distinguishes the work itself, we should take into account the levels of temporality operating in the work and some of the principle mechanisms through which the temporal quality of art is evidenced.

3. Time Knots in Works of Art

In any work of art there is a complex knot of temporalities in which many threads cross, mix and superimpose on each other. There have been many attempts to untangle this bundle and they have given rise to some essential references⁶. In essence, a work of art is the sum of a time of production, a time of content and a time of contemplation. These three times can be more or less evident, have more or less responsibility in the work and take on different degrees of relevance in the understanding of the work. Acting separately or together, these levels can evidence the process, demand more attention from the observer, or represent or evoke past, future, or simultaneous moments, supported by the narrativity of the image or the power of its symbols. But there are other devices that permit a temporal expression in the work. The most immediate way to perceive the temporal nature of a work is to observe a transformation in it, an unequivocal sign of the passage of time. One manifestation of change is movement. It is worth remembering that after the first kinetic experiments carried out by the Surrealists, the perception of movement in the plastic arts was considered the most obvious transgression of the polemical separation between the arts of time and the arts of space. After a century of continuous experimenting it can be said, that, in general, the experience of movement in a work of art turns it into *an event* that depends on the observer and on the

⁶ Etienne Souriau (1949), "Time in the Plastic Arts", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 8 (4), pp. 294-307; Micheline Sauvage (1953), "Notes on the Superposition of Temporal Modes in the Works of Art" in: Susanne Langer (ed.), *Reflections on Art: a Source Book of Writings by Artist, Critics and Philosophers*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, pp. 161-173; Christine Ross (2012), *The Past is the Present; It's the Future too. The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, New York: Bloomsbury.

time the observer spends with it⁷.

Another way of perceiving change, and with it, the temporal dimension of art works, consists in making the creative process evident or even in making this process the work itself. The temporal dimension of a work of art is expressed in its evolution: if each work turns out to be either the effect or the sum of all its transformations, then the aesthetic and artistic experience will be mediated by all the marks and traces generated during its development. What is more, the evidence of the process itself can constitute an artistic strategy. For many artists it is common practice to create works that span very long processes, capable of multiplying the object and extending it in a period of time that can be long enough so as to leave open or unfinished works.

The experience of artistic temporality is also provoked, as we have said, by the change in the quality of the material. The use of peremptory materials generates a plane of temporality that, although different from those already mentioned, also integrates –as we shall see– evidence of the process and the experience of an event. It can also be affirmed that, through the fate of their materials, these works “live” their time and are deployed in it⁸. In this experience and in this passing that are inherent to the work itself there is an overlapping of the time of reception and the time of content. But it is not a matter of temporality being simply accommodated in the work as a representation and the evidence of time being delegated to a mere subjective manifestation. Rather, the time installed in the work is physically perceived, and it acts as the one in charge, as the creator, as a necessary collaborator in the work.

4. Biographies

The works of art we are now going to discuss are made with materials that change over time, and the artists chose them for this very reason. All of them also possess the common characteristic of a date when they were made and a date marking their disappearance. Between these two dates,

⁷ Doris Von Drathen (2004), *Vortex of Silence. Proposition for an Art Criticism beyond the Aesthetic Categories*, Milan: Charta, p. 143.

⁸ Mieke Bal, (1999), *Quoting Caravaggio*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 165-76.

all of them underwent a change that substantially altered their appearance and through these successive transformations we can follow a trajectory that could be described as similar to a *biography*. By passing through vicissitudes similar to those of any other living organism, these works embark on a unique journey and experience a process of deterioration; they are not there for us to contemplate in their imperturbable appearance, nor are they mute witnesses to our presence, but rather they share in some way the temporal plane with our own contingency.

Anya Gallaccio is an artist who uses all kinds of natural materials to create installations that come close to being events or to simulating living entities. And the fact that the materials that go into these works change and disintegrate over time has become her personal trademark⁹. The only constant in her work is that there is nothing really constant or permanent in them. On occasion she has said that her works are a *performance* and a collaboration, owing to the unpredictable nature of the everyday materials, which reveal unexpected and surprising results by renewing the potential of that which we commonly consume without paying attention. Her changing and perishable installations not only commit the observer visually, but also bring into play other senses, such as smell and hearing, in order to celebrate the secrets of the ordinary. In her determination to transform everyday things into something transcendent, Gallaccio recreates the cycle of life and death with its changes in form, color and smell¹⁰.

Take for example her work entitled *Whatever*, an enormous candle measuring 1.80 meters high and with a one square meter base that was lit on 22 January 2000 in one of the main squares in Innsbruck, Austria. Passers-by are explicitly invited to light the candle if it happens to be out so that it can always remain lit. The sculpture continuously changes form as the wax gradually melts. Two months later, subjected as it was to this process of change, the candle goes out and stops being a sculpture forever.

Andy Goldsworthy is another artist who works with similar substances taken directly from nature. For this artist, who develops his works starting with an investigation of the surrounding environment, the challenge is not simply to wait and see how things deteriorate or decompose and whether

⁹ Darian Leader (2003), "A Responsibility towards Objects", *Modern Painters*, vol.16 (3), p.73.

¹⁰ Gallaccio & Dean (2002), "A Ship in a Bottle", *Modern Painters*, vol.15 (3), pp. 26-9.

this provides an aesthetic result or not. For him, what is important is to make change an integral part of the work. Thus, the work of time –as material, as event and as process– plays a fundamental role, as he points out in his book, *Time*, in which he refers to these ephemeral and changing works that are not made to last, but rather to interact with nature and become part of its cycles of creation, destruction and renewal¹¹. Over several years this artist created some works in different places entitled *Clay Wall*, large walls of clay that gradually dry out and crack over the time of exhibition. In some cases, as in the *Clay Wall* built in the summer of 1999, the work includes different types of clay with different drying times, so that this difference, indistinguishable at the beginning, would become visible during the process. For Goldsworthy, these works that change their condition over the exhibition period, that dissolve or break up, dry up, crack up, and so on, show the true identity of a world in continuous change. Everything is change, and these works attempt to do justice to this evidence through powerful images of how things are, or better, of how things come to be, and of what the environment in which they are contained is like¹². Nonetheless it must also be said that the work of this artist, though perishable, is systematically recorded in photographs and has also been filmed in *Rivers and Tides*, the documentary made by director Thomas Riedelsheimer.

The last work I would like to discuss in this sense has often served as an example of ephemeral art and of how this type of work should be addressed. I refer to the installation called *Strange Fruit (for David)*, by Zoe Leonard. The work consists of 302 skins from different pieces of fruit that the artist had saved after eating the fruit. The skins or peels were sewn together and zippers, buttons and wires were added in a kind of repairing process. The artist, who began this work after the death of a friend and as a way of grieving, did not think about how to preserve the work until some time later, after it had been shown on many occasions and after the Philadelphia Museum of Art had committed to buying it. After working with German art conservator Christian Scheidemann for two years, they found a way to stop the decaying process of the skins. But then the artist decided that the deteriorated aspect of the skins was not enough, and to

¹¹ Andy Goldsworthy, (2000), *Time*, London: Thames & Hudson, p. 7.

¹² <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag03/june03/goldsworthy/gold2.shtml> (accessed October 1, 2015)

remain faithful to the original idea that an essential part of the work was that it was composed of fragile and perishable elements, she finally took the mindful decision to not preserve them. The metaphor of disappearance was not enough; the work actually had to disappear. The work thus continued to be exhibited as long as possible, eliminating the pieces that could no longer be kept, either because they had been attacked by invasions of insects or because they were totally rotten. The artist considered this damage as part of the process, and the work was still exhibited with an agreement between the artist and the museum that they would jointly decide the moment at which it could no longer be shown. The fact that the work ended up in a museum, something which it was not originally created for, puts into question a series of widespread beliefs, such as the one that holds that museums are places devoted to harboring *intact* works of art. According to Ann Temkin, the curator of exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art de Arte de Philadelphia, the fact that *Strange Fruit* was in a museum made it much more visible than the other works that remained unchanged. This work confronts death, portrays it, and precisely because of this it seems much more alive to the eye of the observer than the objects that remain whole¹³.

5. *Vanitas* (Conclusion)

In the works mentioned earlier we find elements that surprisingly renew the old genre of *vanitas* painting. It is not a matter of chance that one of them, Leonard's *Strange Fruit*, formed part of the exhibition called *Vanitas. Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art*. The showing, which included fourteen contemporary artists, confirms the continued relevance of *vanitas* in art, with an updating of the theme contrasting life and death in relation to current concerns¹⁴.

The Baroque *vanitas* works refer to the fragility of the individual and his world of desires and pleasures, presented as ruins, as something vain,

¹³ Ann Temkin http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/13_2/news1_1.html (accessed October 1, 2015)

¹⁴ John Ravenal (2000), *Vanitas. Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art*, Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, p.13.

empty and provisional. That is why the objects represented have a direct symbolic relation to the measuring and passing of time. These elements with which the pictorial genre alluded to the fleeting nature of life and taught transcendence are again appearing in many works of contemporary artists. But the overripe fruit, the candles that melt, the almost withered flowers, the skulls... now appear having added to their prior symbolic nature the effective presence of the real object. This is also the case with the powerful candle in *Whatever*, which does nothing more than put in the scene something so often represented in the Baroque *vanitas* works, with the difference that in the latter the candles were still and stopped in time. The orchestrated decompositions in this and other works by Anya Gallaccio have been described as explorations of the ephemeral and the unstable, and, the same as the *vanitas* works, they evoke our own disappearance, just like that of all organic matter. But unlike the classical *vanitas* works, the reference to destruction and disappearance is not recreated in the agony of life, but rather in the celebration of life with each and every one of its details. This contrast can also be seen clearly in the public intention of the work, as it enters into a dialogue with people in an open space, abandoning monologue and the darkness of the interiors folded on themselves in the Baroque *vanitas* works. And to the negative view of time as an agent of destruction portrayed in those interiors, they counterpoise the affirmative and creative sense of time through the materials, as in Goldworthy's "new ruins"¹⁵.

The *vanitas* paintings addressed death, but in themselves they were long-lasting objects. A certain aspiration to immortality or a desire to overcome with their works the inevitable transition to disappearance was not lacking in the artists of this genre. This presumed victory over the finite followed the motto *vita brevis, ars longa*, an intention of perpetuation that we still recognize in a good part of modern painting. Nonetheless, as early as the 17th century some painters explicitly renounced this motto, and instead of seeking in art a means to avoid death and thus aspire to a fictitious eternity, they suggested in their very works that even art is changeable,

¹⁵ Thomas F. Reese (1999) "Andy Goldworthy's New Ruins", in: M.A. Corzo (ed.), *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, p. 25.

that art no less than life was transitory and evanescent¹⁶. This transgressive idea found pictorial expression in the representation of the material deterioration of the paintings themselves, a deterioration that was faked using trompe l'oeil. A unique example of this can be found in Cornelius Norbertus Gysbrechts, whose *vanitas* paintings added to the traditional elements of the skull, candles, soap bubbles, and so on, the optical illusion of the deterioration of the material medium of the pictorial image itself. In his paintings, the canvas appears to be torn off the stretcher frame, and the paint surface damaged and with signs of wreckage, a simulation device that serves to recreate the action of time and to attest to the falseness of the claim that art is something eternal. Despite the irony that Cornelius' paintings remain intact three centuries later, we can recognize that this dual intention has been updated and radicalized in the works that we earlier characterized as contemporary rehabilitations of *vanitas*. However, this updating differs in at least two aspects that actually show the conceptual originality of the works made with ephemeral materials and a contemporary mentality.

One of these differences has to do with the status of the works as representational artifacts and as temporal artifacts. As we have suggested, the innovation that Cornelius introduced to the *vanitas* genre is surprising for two reasons. First, because with his moderate attack on the canon he was foreseeing a specific conception of art, close to the current sensibility marked by finitude and contingency, and second, because by resorting to visual sensationalism he seems to reach a reflexive awareness of time, to the extent that not only does he represent the fleeting nature of time typical of the contents of *vanitas* works, but he also figuratively deposits the passing of time on the material and the medium. Nonetheless, Cornelius' paintings still fail to escape the strict frames of pure representation, and the passage of time is limited to being feigned, with no real effectiveness. In other words, they are still only representational artifacts on which time is "deposited"¹⁷. It aspires to be time but is not. In contrast, the versatility

¹⁶ Ivan Gaskell (1999), "The Image of *Vanitas*", in: Lippincott et al., *The Story of Time*, London: Merrel Holberton, p. 186-189.

¹⁷ Louis Marin comments how time is deposited in painted representation as a surface quality, and this is how it is preserved, invisible in its density. Louis Marin (2001), *On Representation*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 285-305.

of the ephemeral materials themselves unblocks this representational paralysis of time and allows it to be a creative agent. The works of art whose biographies we discussed earlier turn into temporal artifacts; they do not feign the passing of time; they implement it materially. These works go beyond pure representation to become generators of activity in which time is no longer just symbolic content, but rather functions as a performative agent that is effectively carrying out the meaning of the work.

The other fundamental difference lies in a divergent appraisal of time. Traditional *vanitas* favors a negative representation of time as a destructive agent of the visible world, despised as vain and superficial, instead extolling an imaginary beyond as what is real and true. Its ultimate intention is doctrinaire and the message implies the religious promise that there is an eternity. In the contemporary works, time is presented as transformative and as the generator of something new. If a position is taken in them favoring eternity or transcendence, it is no longer religious in nature: the eternal is not something that comes after death, but rather the incessant destruction of the now. Change and transformation are the only constants. Time has artistic responsibility because this acceptance of finitude and contingency has become interiorized in the works themselves. Thus, there are no more promises of salvation, but rather a vital and positive invitation to accept our changing nature.

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