

slowness

François Bucher
Ceal Floyer
Cynthia Lin
Angelika Middendorf
Oscar Muñoz
Keith Sanborn
Wolfgang Staehle
Alex Villar
curated by Mercedes Vicente

23 October – 12 December 2004

There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. Consider this utterly commonplace situation: a man is walking down the street. At a certain moment, he tries to recall something, but the recollection escapes him. Automatically, he slows down. Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time. — Milan Kundera, *Slowness*.¹



Industrialization and technological advances have accelerated the pace of life and brought increased pressure to use time efficiently. The ineluctable utilitarianism of the information age and its worship of speed have prevented us from looking at slowness as a desirable thing. In a world which values efficiency so highly, “slow” has come to mean “less”. Helmut Friedel asks whether the mechanization of time “... has reduced our life with ever greater precision to a series of small units so it cannot any longer be experienced as a whole?”² Although time-saving devices fill our world, they only give us the opportunity to do more work. Today’s familiar complaint of not having enough time speaks of trying to accomplish too much over time. The prevalence of work means that we have effectively given up leisure as an activity. Kundera condemns the way that hedonism has come to denote an “amoral tendency to a life of sensuality, if not an outright vice.” In our world, he writes, “indolence has turned into having nothing to do, which is a completely different thing: a person with nothing to do is frustrated, bored, is constantly searching for the activity he lacks.”³

Could slowness ever be valued positively and sought for its own sake? Rather than lives dictated by efficiency, production and consumption, one could imagine the utopian condition of living according to time-honored human values that would foster general well-being or individual fulfillment. Certainly, there are many imperatives in favour of slowness. We are taught that haste makes waste; that details overlooked or ignored when rushing gain prominence when given enough time; that concentration and attention bring clarity of thought. Despite all that, we derisively dismiss deliberation (“too much time to think”) as the world’s values tilt in favour of action. Action is what moves the world!

Computer technology plays an increasingly influential role in human decision-making and has radically altered our concepts of short and long term. As Paul Virilio observes ““long term” processes (e.g. pollution, global warming) exceed the capacity of monitoring and statistical evaluation, while “short term” decisions have been dramatically accelerated. Memory and continuous time are now relegated to academia where nothing seems urgent. In government, where almost everything is critical and decisions must be made rapidly, “long term” means a week”.⁴ In military terms, the computerization of weaponry capable of instantaneous delivery has so reduced the time for reaction that human intervention is precluded, and so is the pause necessary for reflection and measured decision-making.

These changes in our notions of time itself have induced artists to imagine the experience of slowing time, to examine the pernicious effects of acceleration or to simply adduce real time to grasp its awesome pace. While technology has increased production, efficiency and speed, these artists have contested its side effects in the subjectivation of the individual, in his/her capacity to concentrate and think critically and in retaining a sense of the self. The artistic strategies employed in addressing the broad concept of slowness in this exhibition range from the formal to the conceptual, adhering to acts of illustration, revelation, disclosure or metaphor. Time is “displayed”, “expanded”, “broken”, or “repeated,” becoming the means, the subject or the object.

“While the history book evokes the mental imagery of real or emblematic memories”, writes Virilio, the television monitor “collapses memory’s close-ups and cancels the coherence of our fleeting impressions.”⁵ The sovereign power of television is examined in **François Bucher’s** video installation *Attaining the Body* 2003. The work was inspired by events that occurred during the occupation and curfew of Palestinian villages by Israeli soldiers. The three local television stations were used to broadcast pornographic material, making television the most violent and perverse weapon to penetrate the home and invade the intimacy of its captive audience. Bucher builds upon this incident to examine television as the ideological apparatus that exerts social control over its citizens. In *Attaining the Body*, the set of a living room with a sofa and a TV offers the viewer the phenomenological experience of watching television as if at home. The gray screen of a lost transmission is accompanied by a voice-over narration—an excerpt from the sound track of Stanley Kubrick’s film *A Clockwork Orange* in which the protagonist is forced to watch images of ultra violence while being administered drugs that make him ill, in an attempt to transform him into a “normal” citizen. Once transmission is regained, we see a red screen with headlines of the Palestinian curfew, interrupted by intervals of the lost transmission with voice-over narration, and fleeting flashes of pornographic clips. Relying on film, structuralist strategies and deconstructed, multilayered narration, Bucher breaks the alienating and pacifying effect of television by creating constant interruptions and delaying the dispensing of information.

take of a camera placed still while the tower revolves on itself captures Berlin in a 360° pan. The view of city landscape is intermittently interrupted by a sleek metallic plane (the wall between windows) that sweeps the image horizontally. This visual device acts as a rhythmic structural element (similar to a shutter) that disrupts the viewer’s meditative gaze to the outside and draws his/her attention to its foreground architecture and glass windows that faintly mirror the scene inside, capturing reflections of someone drinking, the restaurant lights or the flashes of tourist cameras. The cyclical movement of the tower fools us into believing that what we are experiencing is a continuous real time projection. However, its 30 minute loop (the time of the tower’s full revolving cycle) freezes this moment in a seemingly endless continuum of time and space, a trick that can only be grasped after a lengthy viewing.

Drawing from Foucault’s concepts of panopticon (a metaphor for state-system control over its citizens through geography and architecture) and heterotopias (the spaces that escape its control such as cinemas or graveyards), the photographic and video work of **Alex Villar** focuses on how the body relates to non-spaces or spaces in-between, public or private, that constitute the “gap” or “instant in an otherwise thoroughly controlled environment, where interruption can be proposed.”⁷ Devoid of any function, these marginalized spaces (e.g. the area between the handrail and the wall of a subway station, or the dead-lot space behind the fence of a building) are paradoxically not marginal, but located in at the center of spaces that we inhabit daily. *Irrational Intervals* 2002-03 chronicles the practice of “smoke breaks”. With smoking turning into an insular activity, a “smoke break” serves as a metonymic interruption that parallels the disruptions of working time with the empty pockets or indentations in the architecture where smokers stand to avoid pedestrian traffic. The looping of sequence after sequence of smoke breaks, triggered by a Brechtian sense of absurd that grows into a crescendo as the spatial choices of the anonymous smoker (the artist himself) grow narrower and more bizarre, suggests that after one cigarette, might come a second, a third and so on, with the smoker never returning to work. *Irrational Intervals* proffers the idea that this small break in the continuum of working time (subjected to the system around which our time is structured), outside the codes and regulations of the normative processes that shape everyday life, carries with it the potential of sabotaging the system from within, for in restricting smoking it has paradoxically bestowed the power of subversion on it.

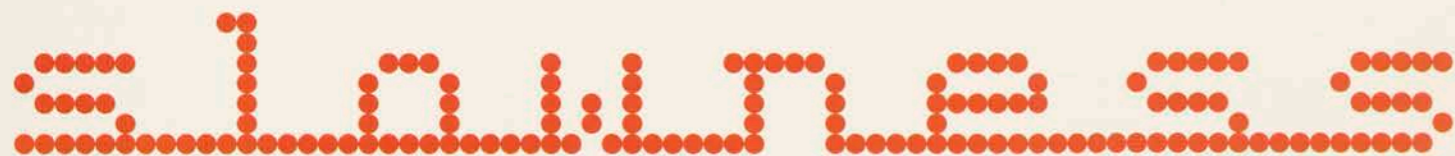
The concept of “slowness” is proposed in this exhibition as a counterpart to the current acceleration and compression of time. *Slowness* presents the work of artists who have taken critical positions around issues of time, reflecting on the pernicious effects of time’s acceleration in our perception of reality and in our memory; examining the way it has been used ideologically by mass media; or by contesting the idea of a global time that disregards or ignores idiosyncratic local times and temporalities.

— Mercedes Vicente, New York City

NOTES

1. Milan Kundera, *Slowness* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p.39.
2. Helmut Friedel, *Moments in Time* (Osildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1999), pp. 11,14.
3. Kundera, *ibid.*, p.3.
4. Paul Virilio, ‘Probable Imminence’ *The Landscape of Events* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 90-96.
5. Virilio, ‘The Avant-garde of Forgetting’ *The Landscape of Events*, p. 12.
6. Artist’s statement.
7. Artist’s statement.

Mercedes Vicente, born Spain 1964, is an independent curator and art critic based in New York. She is a graduate from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and was a Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program, during which she co-curated *Empire/State: Artists Engaging Globalization* 2002. Other recent exhibitions include *This Is What It Is* Center for Curatorial Studies 2000, a survey of American conceptual drawings from the 60s and 70s; and *Un/Ruled, Exhibit A* New York 2001 and *The Sessions of Sweet Silent Thought* Bronx River Arts Center New York 2003, both featured contemporary drawing focusing on ideas of process and time. As the U.S. correspondent for the magazines *EXIT*, *Exitbook* and *Exit Express* and a regular contributor to *Lápiz*, *La Vanguardia* and other publications from Spain since 1994, she has reported art news, written extensive essays on artists such as Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Andrea Fraser and Martha Rosler, as well as interviewed such figures as Harold Bloom, Robert Storr and Rosalind Krauss. She is co-editor of the upcoming anthology of writings by Columbia University art historian Benjamin D. H. Buchloh and is working on an anthology of writings on the subject of curatorial studies and practice to be published in Spain.



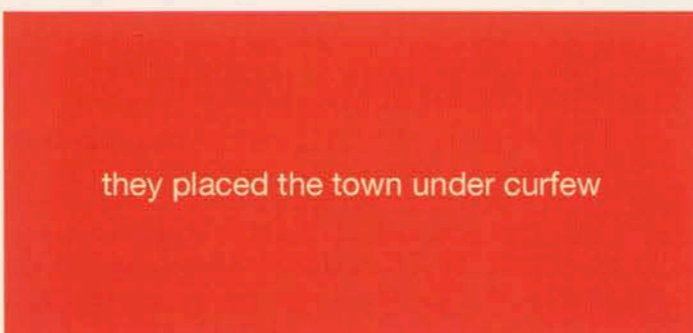
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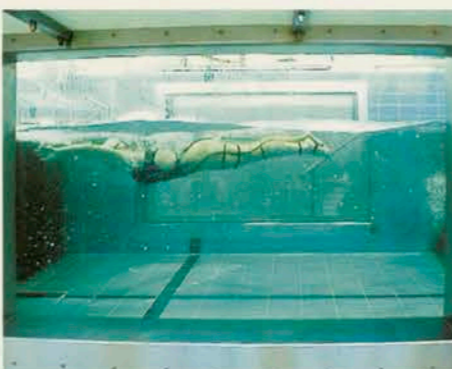
François Bucher *Attaining the Body* 2003



Ceal Floyer *H2O Diptych* 2002



Cynthia Lin *Three Drawn Over Time* 2002-03



Angelika Middendorf *Outer Space* 1999

In **Ceal Floyer’s** *H2O Diptych* 2002 one TV monitor displays a pot of water reaching boiling point, and another, a glass of sparkling mineral water going flat. While the viewer is forced to confront the painstaking time it takes water to boil or to lose its fizz, he/she is challenged to deal with their own personal sense of time; each viewer must decide how much time is worth his/her attention. The triviality of these processes and the almost imperceptible changes that occur over the course of an hour contribute to the feeling of time moving commensurately slower. Only by staying with the video for a long period of time can one apprehend its progression, which is all too easily dismissed in the brief interval required to identify the content of its representation. Viewing Ceal Floyer’s tautological and economical works can likely end in this literal recognition. Yet in giving the work one’s close attention, the viewer might be delighted by its cropped simplicity and by the process of recognition and reevaluation that the work triggers.

However many thoughts arise in looking at a work, there is always something inaccessible to thought, available to the eyes alone in the course of slow, long viewing. In **Cynthia Lin’s** series *Dust Drawings* 2002-03, actual-size drawings of lint, dust and hair, force the artist and the viewer to focus deeply in order to discern the content of the drawing. What appears at first glance to be an all-white minimal work turns slowly into an abstraction. Only on closer examination do we discover its ephemeral representation. In its verisimilitude, the dust depicted in the drawing could be confused with the actual dust that settled on the drawing during its creation (and during its exhibition), blending the real with the representational. Capitalizing on this effect in her triptych *Three Drawn Over Time* 2002-03, the first panel contains fewer particles than the later ones in which she has chronicled the increasing accumulation of dust. Lin’s depiction of the barely perceptible opens a world of suggestions — as Lin writes “microscopic structures trigger macrocosmic connections” — inviting our projection and imagination. She continues, “Intense focus required to identify the minute creates a meditative space that frees minds to wander and wonder. Peculiar and inexplicable musings occur in such moments of privacy.”⁶

In **Angelika Middendorf’s** *Outer Space* 1999, a woman swims against a strong stream in the high-tech training pool of the Sportforum, the Olympic Training Center in Berlin. Despite her vigorous and incessant movement, the swimmer doesn’t move forward, futilely remaining in the same place encapsulated in the tank. Here acceleration abolishes the notion of time as change, in what seems a collision of time, space and movement. Whether seen as a eulogy to or derision of speed enhancing technology, *Outer Space* ambivalently exudes both an allure and demystification of speed. It represents today’s ever-escalating pressure to

conquer velocity as the ultimate goal, beyond human biological capacity, turning the swimmer into an extension of the machine. This body as machine notion is heightened by the artist’s decision to run a cable strapped to the swimmer’s waist, leg and left foot, with a camera buckled on, to monitor the swimmer’s different body parts performance.

Combining video, engraving and sculpture, and the traditional medium of drawing with an unorthodox technique of photo silk-screening charcoal powder over water, **Oscar Muñoz** reproduces in *Narciso* 2000-01 a portrait of himself. A still drawing of the artist’s face floating on the surface of the water contained in a basin appears at the beginning of the video. Soon after and almost imperceptibly, the portrait and its reflected shadow on the bottom of the sink start to distort as the water slowly drains until it disappears, leaving behind only traces of its charcoal powder. By the time the viewer grasps what is happening to the image, the water seems to quickly swirl down dramatically, intensified by the sound of the drainage, making the viewer an eyewitness of its irremediable fate. Employing video to chronicle the disappearance and Narcissus as the myth origin of representation, Muñoz creates a metaphor for the violent reality of Colombia where people customarily disappear, and where their traces fleetly fade from the collective memory of those left behind who have accepted this fate. By making the viewer an eyewitness, and by the myth suggesting his/her own destiny, Muñoz aims at reversing this process of forgetting. Rather than denouncing the erasure of their remembrance, his memorial depicts a dilatory disappearance to leave a mnemonic remnant.

The cognitive process of the apprehension of images in media is also addressed in **Keith Sanborn’s** *Operation Double Trouble* 2003, a re-tooled version of a propaganda film produced by the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Navy to campaign for the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The original film was commercially distributed in theatres and intended to give the military a “human face”. Sanborn in *Operation Double Trouble* simply repeats every shot of the original film twice and adds new titles at the beginning and the end to appropriate the film. By the simple device of presenting each scene twice, Sanborn’s version adds a level of “transparency” absent in the original film. According to the artist, the double takes have a reverberating effect reminiscent of making a long distance call in which every word is echoed after a short delay. Its doubleness heightens our awareness of the content. In the delayed echo, words and images become “visible” and “audible”, ultimately exposing the propagandist manipulative intent. Seen in retrospect, *Operation Double Trouble* brings back memories of the war in Afghanistan, so quickly forgotten under the politically myopic exigencies of today’s media. Given the political stakes of the current war in Iraq, and perhaps at the threshold of another imminent war, the rhetoric of information warfare appears like a *déjà vu*.

Against today’s ever-present sense of real time brought by high-speed, globally transmitted digital images, **Wolfgang Staehle’s** webcam projections of architectural and urban landscapes blur in their stillness the boundaries between photography and video. Taking a step back in the lineage of image making, Staehle reverses this process in his video *Berlin Pan* 2003, as architecture is rendered with motion offering a slow panoramic view of the city of Berlin. Recorded from the top floor of the former East Berlin television tower Fernsehturm, which has a revolving restaurant with windows overlooking the city, the single



Oscar Muñoz *Narciso* 2000-01



Keith Sanborn *Operation Double Trouble* 2003



Wolfgang Staehle *Berlin Pan* 2003



Alex Villar *Irrational Intervals* 2002-03

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery presents *Slowness*, organised by New York based curator Mercedes Vicente, as a reflection of our policy of presenting emerging and new international art to our audiences. Vicente is a graduate of the Whitney Museum of American Art's curatorial training programme and this represents her first major museum exhibition as a curator. *Slowness* includes work by artists from Colombia, the United Kingdom, and the United States that is being exhibited in New Zealand for the first time.

Slowness which examines different elements of speed, duration, and time in relation to the pace of life in the information age has a connection with the acclaimed series of Govett-Brewster thematic exhibitions focused on issues important to contemporary art. The exhibition *Drive: power, progress, desire* 2000 explored aspects of speed and representations of progress in relation to the automobile, highway and the emerging cyber era (the super-highway). The work in *Feature: art, life and cinema* 2001 plumbed notions of time in relation to cinematic elapse and the transformation of movies in the era of virtual reality.

Slowness provides a counterpoint to these exhibitions. The *Slowness* works challenge the viewer to slow down to experience their full effect. And they point to the negative tendencies of constant technological and social acceleration. The exhibition suggests a timely antidote to an increasingly complicated and fast-spinning world.

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery would like to thank Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programmes, New York for permission to reprint Mercedes Vicente's essay. — **Gregory Burke, Director**

works

FRANÇOIS BUCHER

Lives and works in New York City

Attaining the Body 2003

Plywood, DVD, monitor

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

CEAL FLOYER

Lives and works in London and Berlin

H2O Diptych 2002

Edition of 5

Two monitors, DVDs, silent, 60 mins ea.

Courtesy of Lisson Gallery and the artist

CYNTHIA LIN

Lives and works in New York City

Three Drawn Over Time 2002-2003

Graphite pencil on oil enamel on wood

3 panels, 60 x 80 cm ea.

Courtesy of the artist

ANGELIKA MIDDENDORF

Lives and works in Berlin

Outer Space 1999

DVD, colour, sound, 60 mins

Courtesy of the artist

OSCAR MUÑOZ

Lives and works in Cali, Columbia

Narciso 2000-01

DVD, sound, colour, 3'20 mins

Courtesy of Sicardi Gallery, Houston and the artist

WOLFGANG STAEHLE

Lives and works in New York City

Berlin Pan 2001

Digital video, colour, silent, 24 hrs

Courtesy of the artist

KEITH SANBORN

Lives and works in New York City

Operation Double Trouble 2003

DVD, colour, sound, 10'15 mins

Courtesy of the artist

ALEX VILLAR

Lives and works in New York City

Irrational Intervals 2000-03

Video loop on DVD, color, silent, 8 mins

Courtesy of the artist



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Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is a museum that fosters the development and interpretation of contemporary art.



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