Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s, by Pamela Lee

by Daniel Baird

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In acclaimed, Toronto-based new media artist David Rokeby’s “Taken” (2002), visitors to the Oakville Galleries’ high-ceilinged space in suburban Ontario, are tracked by sophisticated and discreetly placed digital surveillance cameras, and the information captured is immediately spun through the software Rokeby himself writes. The images taken and processed are seamlessly projected in real time onto an enormous screen, where, removed from their architectural setting, they accumulate in an indeterminate, almost psychedelic, cloudy orange space. The figures replicate, cluster, layer, and streak in ghostly traces, and occasionally a frame targets and clicks onto one of the faces, copying it into an evolving, archival grid of portraits on an adjoining screen. “Taken” is in part about the sinister capacity of an autonomous machine—a kind of robot—to co-opt a person’s image, transform it into a stream of data, and reconfigure it according to its own principles of type and order. One leaves the gallery with the sense that one’s image, as an array of meanings, is at once abstract, arbitrary, and beyond one’s control. For the beautiful “Machine for Taking Time” (2001-2004), Rokeby mounted a camera overlooking the elegant and fussy Gairloch Gardens on the shore of Lake Ontario. Tilting and panning, the camera recorded millions of images over the course of months, and from the resulting database, Rokeby’s software continuously creates and recreates—different each time—a video which eerily glides between the days and the seasons: snow appears and melts, purple flowers sprout and disappear, long, deep shadows suddenly vanish. In the gallery, the video is projected onto tilted screens above a window looking out on the physical gardens and lake. The real time in “Machine for Taking Time” is not the passing of the seasons, but the internal temporality of the digital processing itself.
Turn the clock back over forty years to the year David Rokeby was born, 1960, when the Swiss kinetic sculptor and mischievous neo-dada conceptualist Jean Tinguely mounted his influential “Hommage to New York” at the Museum of Modern Art. Designed with the assistance of the engineer Billy Kluver, “Hommage to New York” was a clunky, lyrical, and comic self-destructing contraption built out of a wacky array of wheels, saws, tubes, balloons, horns, and even a piano. It was meant to whir and clang and honk until it exploded in front of the exclusive audience of MoMA trustees, curators, critics, and reporters. While David Rokeby’s interactive works demand cutting edge hardware, the real focus of his work is at the more abstract level of the accumulation and manipulation of information; Tinguely’s work is about the machinery itself, its huffing and puffing, its ultimate failure. Tinguely’s kinetic assemblages nod back to Marcel Duchamp’s and Francis Picabia’s sleek renderings of wheels and gears, as well as to the Italian Futurists’ ecstatic tributes to speed and machines; but it is also absurd, mocking, and violent, a darkly comic, post-war allegory of the gruesome failure of the age of science and industry. If the critical subtext of Rokeby’s work is self-consciously ambiguous, Tinguely’s is almost gleefully crude. Both Tinguely and Rokeby, however, raise the issue of time and history: technology functions in time, crucially exists at a time, and is never wholly neutral.

In the first chapter of her excellent second book, Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s (MIT Press, 2004), Pamela Lee writes “Time and technology, I want to argue, are twinned phenomena in that decade; and works of art provide special insight into this relationship as much as they model that relationship in turn.” At least since the Second World War if not much earlier, science, technology, art, capitalism, and time are interrelated in ways as complex as they are ambivalent. In addition, the rapid, indeed ferocious development of technology—industrial, military, informational—has created a sense that time and history have been dramatically accelerated. In a famous 1959 lecture Lee refers to repeatedly, “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” British physicist and writer C.P. Snow described what he regarded as the deepening rift between science and the humanities. “If we forget scientific culture,” Snow asserted, “then the rest of Western intellectuals have never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the industrial revolution, much less accept it. Intellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites.” What Snow implies here is that intellectuals in the humanities (and most likely artists as well) are essentially unable to engage the forces that drive contemporary society, at least in industrialized nations. If science and technology are what fuels our accelerated sense of history, and if their most basic language and culture is incomprehensible to most artists, then how can art relevantly engage modern life, how can it retain a powerful critical role in contemporary society? What role can art, traditionally conceived, play in an advanced technological society that is moving into the future at breakneck speed? These are the questions, I think, which underlie the anxiety about time and technology from which Chronophobia takes its title.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, art and technology collaborations thrived, and Lee, a meticulous and even dogged researcher, surveys them in detail. There was, for instance, the
Experiments in Art and Technology group, which produced the infamous collaboration between Billy Klüver and Robert Rauschenberg, “9 Evenings: Theater and Engineering” (1966), and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Technology programs, which created residencies for artists at places like the Rand Corporation (John Chamberlain) and the Jet Propulsion Lab (Robert Irwin). For the most part, these experiments proved hokey and misguided, and it is one of the deeper insights of Chronophobia to recognize that the relationship between art, technology, and time cannot be addressed by bridging the gap between artists and engineers, or by bringing artists technologically up to speed, but only by reassessing what we want works of art to do, and how they address the viewer. For this reason Lee quickly moves on to a discussion of Michael Fried’s seminal anti-minimalist essay “Art and Objecthood” (1966).

Fried’s polemic against what he regarded as the “theatricality” of minimalist sculpture by artists like Robert Morris, Tony Smith, and Donald Judd is an attack on works of art whose impact is dependent upon their location in endless, open-ended time, making their very boundaries indeterminate. For Fried, the significance of a work of art, its integral features, should ideally be wholly present to the consciousness of the beholder, not diffused through time and space. Given that that epigraph of Fried’s essay is taken from the great New England Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards, the concept of “presentness” at work in “Art and Objecthood” has often been read as transcendent and metaphysical. But for Fried, as for Edwards, who was one of the earliest North American students of John Locke and Isaac Newton, presentness is epistemic: Fried’s vision of Modernism is ultimately directed at creating the conditions for a mode of consciousness. Following James Meyer’s commentary in Minimalism (Yale University Press, 2001), Lee relates Fried’s work to Stanley Cavell’s writings on aesthetics and philosophical skepticism, thereby clarifying Fried’s position, especially for those less familiar with the philosophical tradition as it was understood by analytic philosophers in the 1960s. Lee contraposes Fried’s high and in some ways terminal aesthetic with art that embodies, or is viewed through the lens of, the cybernetics of mathematician Norbert Wiener and the systems theory of Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy. Whether applied to robots, organisms, or social groups, such theories offer abstract, recursive models of adaptation over time, and they are perhaps most closely followed in Hans Haacke’s work of the late 1960s: if minimalist sculptures throw the beholder into the banal endlessness of the ongoing present, then Haacke’s living, growing systems incorporate the passage and process of time as a concrete element of the work itself. Fried’s critique of minimalism is in part that it degrades experience by decentering it, working against a form of focused attention already difficult in modern society; to some extent Haacke’s work allows the art object to expand beyond Fried’s optical parameters without wholly relinquishing the idea of presentness. Nonetheless, going beyond Fried’s
aesthetic requires a more decisive reconsideration of the boundaries of the art object and the ways in which a viewer engages it.

Lee’s detailed and enormously informative chapter on Jean Tinguely and kinetic sculpture, “Allegories of Kinesis,” seems necessary yet regrettably bogs down the momentum of her central argument: though introducing motion and thereby time, artists wedded to the various pre-war avant gardes like Dada, Futurism, and Constructivism still view the issue of technology as one of objects. More to the point is Lee’s far too brief discussion of the multi-media performances of Carolee Schneemann, which she includes at the end of a distracted chapter on Bridget Riley. As Lee sees it, Schneemann’s performances expanded the boundaries of the experience of art away from Fried’s optical model.

One of the most illuminating chapters, however, is “Ultramoderne: Or, How George Kubler Stole The Time In Sixties Art,” which interrelates the work of Robert Smithson, George Kubler’s influential book The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, and the theories of communication developed by cyberneticians like Wiener. Kubler offers a picture of the history of technology that is—like Thomas Kuhn’s account of the history of scientific revolutions—at once historical, context sensitive, and to some extent non-linear, consisting of dramatic misfires, failures, and surges forward rather than continuous, inevitable development. Wiener, on the other hand, provides a vision of communication subject to the law of entropy, where the benefits of technical innovation suffer from diminishing returns. Smithson’s art, according to Lee, is situated between these two poles. His work rejects the idea of technical development being part of the teleology of art history, and he created works that are like futuristic relics in which the processes of time—and entropy—are internal: heaps of shattered glass, mirrors in the jungle reflecting passing clouds, a flow of tar, a long spiral jetty slowly disappearing into a salt lake, then reappearing decades later, encrusted with salt. “The problem,” Lee writes, “is that the fullness of the present is forever at a loss, flagging the crisis of historicity that is a constituent feature of postmodernism. If Kubler, Smithson, and Wiener grappled with this problem as a matter of futurity, perhaps they foreshadowed for us in the present an increasingly accelerated horizon of technological entropy.”

Consider two other works by David Rokeby, both crucially involving interactive audio components. In “Very Nervous Systems” (1986-2004), hidden sensors locate participants’ movements in an empty room and translate them into real-time sounds—clicking, sliding, rustling, rattling. What is uncanny about “Very Nervous System”—what is nervous about it—is the minute level of gesture the sensors register: the smallest movement gives rise to a click, a sonic disturbance. The piece creates a consciousness of one’s restless presence in space, as though one could literally hear one’s body displacing matter. “n-cha(n)t” (2001) consists of seven computer screens suspended in the gallery, each with an image of a mouth or an ear. Voices emanating from each computer generate a poetic incantation that cycles between choral unison and separate voices; when a participant speaks, voice sensors pick up his or her words and incorporate them into the ongoing, concatenated text. “n-cha(n)t”
creates a mesmerizing sense of the generative quality of language, an experience of being inside its cognitive processes.

In his eerily cryptic yet visionary essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” Martin Heidegger insists that questioning technology at its most fundamental level involves addressing, not specific instances of technology, like airplanes or ballistic missiles, but a mode of thinking and a relationship to the world, and it is, I think, this issue which underlies Snow’s “two cultures” lecture. David Rokeby’s work takes one inside the functioning of his machines, so that they have great transparency and presence. But in a society inundated by technical advance, the impact of Rokeby’s work is unstable; eventually the limitations of the machinery will make itself felt. Perhaps the most instructive feature of Lee’s elaborate research and argument in Chronophobia is the articulation of the fraught relationship between art, technology, and time in an era—the 1960s, but the situation has only become more complicated—in which the experience of time had accelerated exponentially. It is appropriate that Lee concludes her book with a meditation on the agonizing durational films of Andy Warhol and the date paintings and books of On Kawara. These works force a slowed and almost pure awareness of time. “For it is in slowness and the capacity to parse one’s own present,” Lee writes, “that one gains ground on what’s coming up next, perhaps restores to the everyday some degree of agency, perhaps some degree of resistance. In slowly taking measure of the endless present, one refuses the teleological end games. Instead one rests with the immanence of being and the potential to act.” Presentness is grace.