

My flight to Manchester was delayed by five hours. Sitting at JFK at midnight, watching concession workers turn off lights and leave the terminal, it all felt strangely normal, part of the routine. It was 12 July, just one month after the triumvirate of exhibitions comprising the Venice Biennale, documenta and Sculpture Projects Muenster opened in Europe, and I was getting used to being late. The forced interlude at the airport started me thinking about the correlation between group shows and the element of time, since the project I was travelling to see, 'Il Tempo del Postino', was billed as a durational exhibition. Curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno under the auspices of the Manchester International Festival 2007, the project took the form of an opera to pose the question: 'What if having an exhibition is not a way to occupy space, but a way to occupy time?' While all exhibitions take time to see and fill time on a calendar, this production appropriated the genre of theatre – complete with proscenium arch – to probe the temporal properties of visual art. Of course, the vital and still ongoing history of contemporary performance – from Marina Abramović to William Pope L. – has used time quite effectively as a medium, but this was somehow different. 'Il Tempo del Postino' was positioned as a 'group exhibition' to be *performed* in front of an audience, with, I suspect, no residual objects, props or documentary relics to commemorate or commodify the event.

I arrived in Manchester just a few hours before the event began, jet-lagged and disoriented: the perfect state, in a way, to experience Parreno's concept of 'postman's time', a slow, steady unfolding of episodes delivered directly to you, the exhibition-viewer-cum-audience-member. Most of the participating artists – Doug Aitken, Matthew Barney, Tacita Dean, Olafur Eliasson, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Koo Jeong-A and Rirkrit Tiravanija – emerged during the early 1990s as part of a generation obsessed with time. Think, for example, of Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), Dean's *Fernsehturm* (2001) or Barney's five-part *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002), which all literally consume time, inviting each viewer to contemplate their slow, inexorable passage. There is also Huyghe's *L'Association des Temps Libérés* (The Association of Freed Time) established in 1995 as a way of extending the scope of an exhibition from a point of culmination to one of production. Incorporating all the participating artists in Gillick and Parreno's 1995 group show 'The Moral Maze' at Le Consortium in Dijon, Huyghe's *Association* was conceived to catalyze new projects and promote other options by sustaining the momentum of the exhibition beyond the set chronology of its presentation. In some ways 'Il Tempo del Postino' can

Time Frame

Politics and entropy in an exhibition about duration by **Nancy Spector**



The curtain falls on 'Il Tempo del Postino', Opera House, Manchester 2007

be seen as an outgrowth of this initiative. Experimental in form, collaborative and entirely unpredictable, the project offered the artists involved (and by extension, the audience) an alternative means to experience their work. It underscored the inherently theatrical nature of their scenario-based practices, giving them the perfect platform to explore other kinds of narrative structures. In our admittedly hackneyed search for the new – how many new art fairs, biennials and degree shows can we endure? – the programme offered a glimpse of still-unexplored territory.

Also, to my mind, 'Il Tempo del Postino' worked toward dispelling recent October-infused criticism that condemns members of this particular constellation of artists for making merely 'feel-good' work premised on interactivity and an aestheticized form of exchange. To the contrary, a number of the artists in question deal with specific world events, albeit through metaphor and allusion. Exploiting the durational nature of the project and the history of its site, the participants conjured complex layers of time that oscillated provocatively between past, present and future. References ranged from the local, Postpunk band Joy Division and the IRA's bombing of Manchester in 1996 to the mythos of ancient Egypt and the absurdist tragedy of reality television. As the intended finale of the program, Gonzalez-Foerster's deadpan dissection of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony (1808) resonated into the

future with chilling implications. As the music was being played, the members of the orchestra slowly left the pit, one by one, climbing the stairs with their respective instruments and exiting in the wings. The melody waned until it became indistinguishable. On its own, the piece could easily symbolize community and its loss, but the fact that Gonzalez-Foerster chose this symphonic passage, which was used in the sci-fi thriller *Soylent Green* (1973), makes the work all the more frighteningly relevant. The film imagines a future in 2022, when the world's resources have become so scarce as a result of climate change and overpopulation that the government encourages a commercialized form of euthanasia. Broken by deprivation, willing victims are able to art-direct their own deaths with choices of music, chromatic effects and footage of what the natural world once looked like. The film's final revelation that the human cadavers were being used to make processed food seems, in retrospect, an unnecessary sensationalist detail, as we look toward our own bleak 2022. Gonzalez-Foerster brilliantly used music to telescope time backwards and forwards in order to make a compelling, politically conscious statement in the midst of a most experimental endeavour.

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